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# “BUT WAIT – THERE’S MORE”

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*Acts 9:36-43*



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The other day I was out with Mindy; we were walking along, minding our own business, when suddenly a light appeared in the sky. It was so bright it just about blinded me, and it took a minute to figure out what was happening. Suddenly, I could clearly see the bright light was actually coming from a huge space ship. I couldn't believe my eyes! Mindy and I just stood there like a couple of dummies, as the ship landed in the field behind the fire station.

You'll never believe what happened then: a couple of small greenish creatures got out, snapped a selfie with us, got back in the ship and took off.

You don't believe me... Or you're waiting for the punch line? Or I've been working too hard and I've finally snapped? My guess is that there's nothing I can say to get you to believe that little green men landed in Carbondale to take a picture with my dog and me – which is kind of a relief, frankly, because if you'll believe that, you'll believe anything.

It's interesting, though, that nobody will believe I had an encounter with aliens, but we all suspend our disbelief when it's a story from the Bible. Or do we?

Take today's lesson from the Book of Acts. A remarkable story about Peter raising a disciple named Tabitha from the dead. Now, we all know that when someone is dead, that's it, right? You can pray over them all you want but they're never going to sit up like Tabitha, let alone stand. There's about as much chance as a dead person standing up as there is a space ship landing in the street out there.

Maybe you want to give Luke the benefit of the doubt: like, "It could happen – maybe she wasn't really dead." OK, maybe Tabitha's friends got it wrong. The story says Tabitha died, and her friends washed her body and laid her out in an upper room. Then, the disciples sent 2 messengers to fetch Peter, who was in Lydda -- about 10 miles from Joppa. That's a 20 mile round trip on foot. At an average of 3 miles an hour, that's about 20 hours for Peter to get back to Tabitha. I'm pretty sure she was dead. So Peter sends everyone out of the room, kneels, prays, and then says, "Tabitha, Stand up!"

This is one of those stories that we wouldn't believe for second if it weren't in the Bible. But when it comes to Bible stories, do we all really believe that they happened exactly the way the Bible says they did?

Stories like this make many of us uncomfortable. They complicate our faith. According to Biblical scholar Marcus Borg: “In the last half century, more Christians have left the church because of the Bible than for any other single reason.”

Despite popular opinion, Biblical literalism is a fairly modern approach to scripture, not an ancient one. One problem is that biblical literalism paints the believer into a corner, and the only way out is to reject the bible as a source of wisdom altogether.

From the very beginning, the Scriptures have been understood to be a complex mix of historical, metaphorical, allegorical, and symbolic writings that reflect the relationship between the Creator and creation. The idea that the bible has to be accepted as the literal factual historical truth only developed in the last couple hundred years.

When it comes to sinking the beliefs of the faithful, the stories of creation in the book of Genesis are only the tip of the iceberg. Christians who are unable – or unwilling – to leave their brains at the door simply refuse to set foot in a church; never mind trying to relate to these archaic stories, written by and for those people – back then.

Biblical literalism leaves too many people desperately clinging to the Bible – afraid that if one little section isn’t the literal factual truth, then, everything they believe in will come tumbling down like a house of cards, and their whole faith will be worthless.

This preoccupation with the “literal-ness” of scripture becomes such a distraction that many people don’t even bother to explore the more-than-literal truth. The wonders of metaphor, allegory, and symbolism have been lost to all but a few brave disciples who dare to ask, not “Did it happen?” but, “Is it true?”

When we limit this story by narrowing it down to a choice of whether Peter actually raised Tabitha from the dead or not, we limit our vision -- blinding ourselves to the truth that the text reveals.

So let’s forget about factual, historical reality for a moment. I don’t mean to put your brain on hold and just white-knuckle believe, But what truths can we uncover in the more-than-factual, more-than-literal meanings in the story? Let’s engage our brains to explore the story more deeply.

The story begins in Joppa. Today Joppa is the cosmopolitan city of Jaffa on the Mediterranean coast. At the time Acts was written, Joppa was every bit as

cosmopolitan as it is today. The first century audience would immediately recognize that the disciples had ventured out beyond the predominantly Jewish city of Jerusalem. There were lots of Gentiles in Joppa, and Jews and Gentiles just didn't mix.

Joppa was the city where Jonah tried to run away from God, and so the name Joppa, likely conjured up images of Joppa as a city on the edge – the boundary of the Jewish faith. But I'll come back to boundaries in a bit.

Now, I may have mentioned before that in literature, ancient or contemporary, sacred or secular, names matter. I'll never forget my HS English teacher claiming that Miss Havisham's name in *Great Expectations*, means "to have is a sham."

Adam literally means 'earth' or dirt; Abraham literally means 'Father of Nations. Jesus, from Joshua, literally means YAHWEH – so names are important.

For example: the unknown father of Jesus is called Joseph, reminding the reader of Old Testament Joseph who was also a dreamer who ran away to Egypt, but don't worry because out of Egypt will come the mighty savior Moses (which literally means 'deliverer') who was privy to the very name YAHWEH, which literally means "I am Who I am." It's all in a name, and in case we forget, the author of Acts spells it out for us in both Aramaic and Greek when he introduces us to Tabitha – Dorcas in Greek – which literally means 'Gazelle.' Gazelle comes from an older Arabic word *ghazal*, which means love.

We don't see too many gazelles in Colorado, but they're not uncommon in the Middle East, particularly the species known as *gazella dorcas*, literally, the 'gazelle gazelle,' or 'love, love.'

But wait – there's more! The author and his listeners knew full well that the mere mention of the dorcas antelope would have conjured up images of religious controversy. Gazelles are part of a weird sort of boundary when it comes to Jewish dietary laws. They're a four-footed, cloven hoofed, animal that chews its cud. This makes it 'clean.' But it's not a domesticated animal -- hunt it, eat it, but you can't sacrifice it or offer it up in the temple.

See if this makes sense: The early followers of Jesus were in a quandary as to how to deal with the gentile converts. Are the uncircumcised welcome at the table? If they eat with them they could risk ritual impurity. Disagreements as to who can and cannot come to the banquet go way back.

But who else is called LOVE in the Bible? In addition to provoking issues of ritual purity, the gazelle would also have provoked images of something – or someone – even more important to the Jewish listener. Who else was called LOVE? God is love – right! In Jewish art the gazelle is often used as a symbol for Yahweh, and Yahweh’s life-giving aspect.

So the writer seems determined that we, his audience, not miss the part about “Tabitha – Dorcas in Greek,” is named for Yahweh, who occupies the boundaries of the Jewish faith. By giving the name in both Aramaic and Greek, the author practically hits us over the head with the fact that this woman symbolizes something far greater than we can even begin to imagine.

So if you limit her to being just an actual living breathing – or not – woman that you could go back in time and take a picture with so you can say, “There she is,” you’re going to limit yourself and your understanding to the literal truth. You will fail to see the more-than-literal truth that this story holds, The author is setting up his listeners for a story that expresses more than words can tell.

We learned a while back that ‘metaphor’ comes from, *meta* = beyond, and *phor* = words; so, ‘beyond words.’ So here’s a metaphor about Joppa, a town on the boundaries of Judaism where Jews and Gentiles mix, and the lead character is Tabitha – Dorcas in Greek, who is by her very name an Aramaic/Greek combination, a product of the mixing of race and religion. Her very name represents a creature that lives on the fringes of civilization, simultaneously clean and unclean, acceptable and unacceptable, whose name symbolizes Yahweh, who is love.

One author goes so far as to say that antelopes use their horns to dig for water. Water is life. Jesus is the living water.

Tabitha – Dorcas in Greek is described as a disciple who never tired of doing kind things or giving to charity. She represents Gentile converts to Christianity, who inhabited the fringes of the early Christian communities. So Peter is called to raise this woman from the dead, at the very time when Christian communities were busy debating what to do with these gentiles.

To demonstrate how valuable she was to the community, the townspeople – mostly widows– showed Peter (whose name literally means ‘rock’ indicating that he is to be the foundation of the church) -- The women showed Peter the fruits of Tabitha’s faith. In the garments that Tabitha wove and sewed Peter sees all the evidence he needs and so he sends everyone out, kneels, and prays.

“Tabitha, stand up,” he says. These words are as familiar to me as they were to Luke’s audience. Anyone remember an earlier story where Jesus said, “*Tilitha cum*” which literally means “little girl, stand up.” And this is really interesting: The Greek word that gets translated as stand up – *anistēmi* – is the same word that gets translated as resurrect.

Lo and behold the gazelle – Yahweh, love – opens her eyes. She’s alive! This story is about more than just the resurrection of an individual. Divine life is restored to this Gentile convert. It’s a story about divine life being restored beyond the boundaries of the Jewish faith tradition.

And just in case we missed it, the author gives us one last clue: “Meanwhile [Peter] stayed in Joppa for some time with a certain Simon, a tanner.” Simon was Peter’s name before Jesus gave him the name Peter. And this Simon is a leather tanner which, as any self-respecting Jew knew, makes you ritually unclean because tanning requires touching corpses – a big no-no.

And that is how the author sets us up for the next story about Cornelius, and Peter’s dilemma about what followers of the Way can and cannot eat, and with whom. Remember Peter’s vision? Well, suffice it to say Love wins out – for everyone.

Love, antelope, gazelle, Tabitha – Dorcas in Greek, Yahweh, all intimately and divinely intertwined to reveal the very nature of our creator who breaks down all our man-made boundaries; so that we can dwell in love with all our neighbors.

And that, dear friends, is the more-than-literal truth about the raising of Tabitha. I’ve said it before (but Marcus Borg said it first), “I don’t know if this story actually happened this way, but I do know that it’s absolutely true.” God is love, and love breaks down barriers and boundaries.

And if you happen to run into any little green men showing off selfies from their earth vacation, invite them to church! Let love triumph over the boundaries of your imagination.

Amen – which literally means ‘so be it,’ or in today’s vernacular, “True that!”