



**Iowa IPL Earth Words Sermon Contest
First Prize Winner**

“Stories of Transformation: From to Death of Life”

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Acts 9:36-42

³⁶ Now in Joppa there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas. She was devoted to good works and acts of charity. ³⁷ At that time she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs. ³⁸ Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, who heard that Peter was there, sent two men to him with the request, “Please come to us without delay.” ³⁹ So Peter got up and went with them; and when he arrived, they took him to the room upstairs. All the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them. ⁴⁰ Peter put all of them outside, and then he knelt down and prayed. He turned to the body and said, “Tabitha, get up.” Then she opened her eyes, and seeing Peter, she sat up. ⁴¹ He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive. ⁴² This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord.

In this Easter season, we are focusing our attention on stories of transformation. How is it that we experience new life? If we are people who believe that Christ is alive and working in and through us, what does that look like? What difference does that make in the way we see the world, in the way we act, in what matters to us? These stories of transformation are the stories of how real people like you and me have changed when we allow Christ to live in us.

Today our story from scripture is about Peter and Tabitha. Tabitha was a beloved follower of Jesus, “devoted to good works and acts of charity,” but she has died, and Peter is called in. Instead of saying, “well sorry, there’s nothing I can do”, he goes to her, prays, and participates with God in a transformation from death to life. Rather than get caught up in whether this did or even could have happened, let’s take a look at the message of this story. Those who follow Jesus, those who allow the spirit of Christ to live in them, care about and participate in life-giving action. Even if it seems futile, we participate with God to care for and enhance life.

One of the stories of transformation I received is a wonderful illustration of this passion to not give up even if all seems lost, but rather to care for and nurture the life within another. Chase was a small dog

who had been abused by its owner for three years. It was a mess. By all appearances, there was no hope. In fact, this dog was scheduled to be euthanized the day that it's soon to be new owner rescued Chase. Chase was shaking terribly, and afraid, unable to handle normal attempts at affection. But this person decided to help transform this little dog from death to life through acts of kindness and love. Once in a new, safe environment, Chase began to walk better, and eat, and shake a little less. With each passing day, the shaking was less noticeable, and the life within this tortured animal began to shine through. After only a few days Chase was like a new creature. No more shaking; responsive to affection; feisty when playing with a toy or the owner's hand.

Caring for life, even in the shadow of death and devastation is possible when we allow the spirit of Christ to live in and through us. It is amazing what can happen and how hope can return. Ten years ago I took my son, Sam with me to be part of a church delegation to Guatemala. There we learned of the great hardship of the many people who live in poverty and whose lives were torn apart because of systematic killing of the indigenous people there. One of the churches we visited while we were there had a horrific story of death to life. In the height of the killings of innocent people, there was a village of many of Mayan descent. One day, the soldiers arrived in the village and rounded up the people, locked them in the church, took their machine guns and gunned them down with no chance of escape. Sam and I were in the church and the sanctuary where this massacre happened. As I sat there, I imagined the horror and hopelessness that surely was with these unarmed, innocent people as they experienced such violence, suffering and death. And I wondered about those who lived to tell the story. How could those who survived worship in this, what must have felt like a "God-forsaken" place?

The local priest took us through a back door in the church and out into a beautiful courtyard thick with orange and lemon trees that were lush and full with fruit. He told us that death and violence could not have the last word. He wanted us to know that the spirit of Christ filled those survivors of this terror and gave them the strength to bury their loved ones in the courtyard of the church and in honor of life, to plant fruit trees that would be fed by the bodies and lives of those who had gone before. There in that courtyard was a living testimony to their lives that would literally feed and nourish the people in hope. That small group of survivors transformed that church from a place of death to a place teeming with life. That is the power of the gospel at work in real and concrete ways that make a difference.

Stories of transformation – from death to life. Today we honor and celebrate Earth Stewardship Sunday. On this day, we remind ourselves of the joy and blessing of creation. And we remember that we humans were given the responsibility to care for this tremendous blessing. If God gave us a report card on the job we're doing with our responsibility, what grade do you think we'd get? In the last century and a half, we have made incredible technological advances. But with those have come a never before seen ability on our part to pollute and destroy so much of what God has blessed us with. Care of creation has become more difficult, in part, because we often don't even see or understand the effects of our behaviors and practices on the environment. Because of the advances, we don't have to relate to our habitat in the same way humans once did, which has allowed us to see ourselves as separate from the world around us. And that sense of separation so often brings carelessness and destruction.

When we hear Jesus' words from the gospel of John, "I am the resurrection and the life..." we may think of life after death, but Jesus' own life and ministry and teachings suggest that he was talking about the stream of life that begins now and continues on into eternity. Resurrection, new life in Christ, doesn't wait until we die to take shape. Rather it is a way of living that involves passion and compassion, love and care; it sees the unceasing connection of oneself to God and all that God created. The writer of Acts records the Apostle Paul saying, "The God who made the world and everything in it, the one who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands... indeed God is not far from us, for

in God we live and move and have our being...” The God who created the heavens and the earth is not separate from creation, but is the force of life within creation itself. Reformation leader, Martin Luther put it this way, “Do you think God is sleeping on a pillow in heaven?...God is wholly present in all creation, in every corner, behind you and before you.” 13th Century Christian mystic, Meister Eckhart says, “This is salvation: when we marvel at the beauty of created things and praise the beautiful providence of their Creator or when we purchase heavenly goods by our compassion for the works of creation.” When we invite Christ – the one who in scripture is referred to as “the resurrection and the life”, to live in us, we become aware of our connection with God and the web of life in need of healing and care to transform the places of death into life, just like Peter in our story from scripture this morning.

Caring for creation is an expression of our love of God who is above all and in all and through all. Caring for creation is an expression of faith in the God of life. In your bulletin, there is a lime green insert. On one side of that insert is an expression of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) view of our responsibility as people of faith to take care of that which we have been blessed with in creation. This is not new. It was brought to the General Assembly of the Christian Church in 1981 – nearly 30 years ago. It declares that since God created the world and gave us stewardship of the earth, we, as followers of Jesus, shall change our lifestyle to reduce pollution and waste, and to search for more sustainable ways both personally and as a society. The earth simply cannot support the kind of lifestyle we have become accustomed to for all of its inhabitants. And so we need to think differently, and change our behaviors, and care about how we live on this earth God gave us that we might participate with God in transforming death into life.

We have begun doing small things around here at First Christian Church – like using fewer paper or Styrofoam cups, adding insulation to the attic of our building, using fewer toxic cleaning products. We are doing some recycling and trying to reduce paper usage where we can. And, we are encouraging each other to take a look at our own lifestyle and discover ways to reduce waste and pollution by taking small, but significant steps. There’s a group meeting this afternoon at 4:00 pm in the parlor. The group is just beginning the Low Carbon Diet, trying to lose 5,000 lbs. of carbon this year. You’re welcome to come and check it out and see if there are ways you can contribute to transforming the earth that we not only live on, but are intricately connected to. These may seem like small, even insignificant steps, but when acted on in faith, and on behalf of the God of life, transformation happens both within us and in creation.

Nineteenth century writer, Dostoevsky once said, “Love all God’s creation, the whole of it and every grain of sand. Love every leaf, every ray of God’s light! Love the animals, love the plants, love everything. If you love everything, you will perceive the divine mystery in things. And once you have perceived it, you will begin to comprehend it ceaselessly, more and more every day. And you will at last come to love the whole world with and abiding, universal love.” May it be so. Amen.