

Easter 4C (5/12/2019)

Acts 9:36-43

Psalm 23

Revelation 7:9-17

John 10:22-30

We cling to the things a person has left behind, especially those things that are beautiful and meaningful. In the case of saints whose lives we admire, their surviving works are testaments to their faith, and thus inspire us to live faithfully.

I was ironing shirts last Saturday when Bethany relayed the news that Rachel Held Evans had died. I dropped my hands to my knees, struck by that sinking feeling that suddenly relegates everything else to secondary importance. How could it be? Rachel had been hospitalized for several days to treat an infection and an allergic reaction to medication, so I knew her condition was serious. But I, like many others, had expected her to recover. I refused to consider that death could be so cruel as to snatch a brilliant woman of faith at such a young age from her many devotees, her spouse, and especially her two young children. For goodness' sake, Rachel Held Evans and I were born the same year.

Her death now colors the way I hear the story of Tabitha's resurrection in our first reading from Acts. Tabitha is the only woman in the New Testament who is explicitly called a "disciple" of Jesus. She is "devoted to good works and acts of charity" among a community of widows, women who are severely marginalized in the ancient world. And, she is clearly loved. Following her death, the disciples send specifically for Peter, the most renowned of Jesus' followers.

And, when he arrives, he finds Tabitha's body surrounded by widows, weeping and clutching the clothing she had made.

What a striking and honest portrayal of grief. In the wake of a loved one's death, we cling to the things they have left behind, especially those things that are beautiful and meaningful. A grandmother's afghan, a father's cookware, a child's artwork – they're just material things, but they're indelibly attached to memories of the person's gifts and commitments and joys. **Tabitha's handmade clothing is a lasting sign of her devotion to the widows of Joppa, a manifestation of love for Christ and his sheep. The garments the women hold out to Peter are testaments to Tabitha's faith, and thus inspire others to live faithfully.**

Maybe this is why I find myself holding Rachel Held Evans' books a little more gently now. They're just paper and ink, but they're emblems of the hope she gave to others, especially those on the margins of the church. Countless strangers have expressed surprise at how deeply they've mourned her loss on account of how deeply she moved them with her words. So, let me read you one of my favorite passages of Rachel's, shared in a spirit of grief, but also a spirit of trust – trust in the Good Shepherd who knows his sheep and accompanies them even through the valley of the shadow of death, trust in the one whose story Rachel said she was “still willing to risk being wrong about.”¹

[“Ash,” *Searching for Sunday*, 43-6]

¹ *Inspired*, 164.