

FROM LYDDA TO JOPPA

Acts 9:31-43

Lydda...

Lydda rhymes with Ida,
who like Eddie Canter's mom,...
was sweet as apple "cida."

I had an Aunt Ida once who was also...
sweet as she could be.
Ida's a good name to help me think of Lydda
even if my Aunt Ida
had nothing whatever to do
with the Middle Eastern city of Lydda
except, of course, for the happy coincidence
that her name rhymes with its name
which fact helps me remember
that ancient *place*...
that ancient *place* of good cheer...
that ancient *place* of renewed hope.

Strange, isn't it, how certain *places*
take on meaning of their own...
how *places* come to symbolize what happened there once.

You know how it goes.
Just mention the name of certain places
and it brings to mind and emotion
the flavor and impact
of what happened there once:

Independence Hall;
Concord;
Harper's Ferry;
Yalta;
Ellis Island;

Lydda.

The people of God ought never forget
what happened once at Lydda.

Lydda was the place of welcome
for hundreds of Jews
returning from the Babylonian Captivity...
a place of repatriation...
a place of return to the promise of God...
a place of restored hope.¹

Luke tells us that after the resurrection of our Lord
Peter and the others
were going here and there
to and fro
doing this and that.

Luke was telling the story
in no great detail...
just the story of the church being the church
when the church is doing it right;

but then,
when Peter got to *the place* called Lydda
Luke thought to tell us in finest detail
of something that happened there...
it happened in that *place*...
in that *place* named Lydda.

It was like saying,
Peter and the others were going here and there
to and fro
doing this and that
and when they came to a certain place called
Ellis Island
a remarkable thing happened.

If Ellis Island had been *the place*
in which the story was set,
it would have gotten our attention
and focused our attention
in a particular
and unmistakable
direction.

Lydda was a place like Ellis Island...
a place of freedom and of hope and of big, big dreams.

This analogy,
like many analogies,
will soon fall apart;
but you get my drift.

It was there,
in the name of Jesus
Peter healed a man.
His name was Aeneas.
There's great significance to that name too,
but that was the subject of last Sunday's sermon
on this same remarkable text.
Today we're talking about place.

Hold that thought.

Joppa...

rhymes with Pappa;
but Pappa is happy a name
and Joppa is no happy place;
so Joppa will just have to be on its own
when it comes to remembering that unhappy place.

Joppa is an ancient city
just a few miles down the road from Lydda.
Joppa is now overrun
by the modern city of Tel Aviv
like Rock Hill and Fort Mill
and running together as Charlotte pushes southward into South Carolina.
Still, at one time,
Joppa had quite an identity of its very own.

Not only that,
like Lydda,
Joppa is another of those places
whose very name brings to mind and emotion
a certain clear and unmistakable focus,
only, unlike Lydda,
the focus of Joppa is the focus of a sinister place...
like:

Wounded Knee;
The Alamo;
Pearl Harbor;
Hiroshima;
Oklahoma City;
The World Trade Center;

Joppa.

Just down the road from the city of hope
lies the city of despair.
It is often the case.

Joppa was built by Solomon
as a beautiful seaport city
to serve as the port city for Jerusalem;

but Joppa soon became a blood soaked city to be destroyed,
rebuilt,
destroyed,
rebuilt and destroyed
countless times over.²

In Luke's accounting of things,
it would have been as though
when telling the story of Peter and the others
Luke said,
they were going here and there

to and fro
doing this and that
telling the resurrection story,
just doing what the church does
when the church is getting it right; and,
when they finished on Ellis Island
they were called to Ground Zero
and in the ruins of the World Trade Center,
in the name of Jesus,
Peter raised a woman from the dead.
The woman's name was Dorcas which means gazelle.
Like Aeneas, the name was important,
but that's from last week's sermon.

Today we're talking about place
and the place gives the event
a particular focus.

Like using Ellis Island
as an analogy for Lydda,
using World Trade Center
as an analogy for Joppa
will not long work,
but you get the point.

The text's use of place
is not to be missed.

Luke not only used name and place to make his gospel point,
he also appears to have used gender.

That should likely be saved for another sermon,
but it won't hurt to touch it briefly.

Gail O'Day,

is an important New Testament Scholar at Emory.

She and others have noticed how Luke liked to pair miracle stories
with first a man as the recipient
followed by a woman as the recipient.³

In the first century that was quite shocking.

Remember now,

this was long, long, long before anyone ever thought
it's important to be politically correct,
or, more appropriately,
simply to be correct
in recognizing the role of women.

I guess we have come a long way,

because today we don't even notice the detail;
but in the first century alternating men and women
in the miracle stories would not have been missed.

In that,

the whole community would be put on notice
that the church is not like everyone else;
but today we're not mostly talking about name or gender,
we're talking about place.

Of all the New Testament writers,
place seems to have been particularly important to Luke.

Luke, you may remember,
wrote a two-part invention...
a two-act drama...
a two-volume set:

The first volume is,
of course,
the Gospel of Luke
which is Luke's story of the birth,
the life,
the death,
and the resurrection of one Jesus of Nazareth.

The second volume is,
of course,
the Acts of the Apostles
which is Luke's story of the birth,
the struggle,
the spread,
and the hope of the church of Jesus of Nazareth.

Today we're in the second volume
of Luke's two-volume set.

The early chapters of the Book of Acts
focus on the ministry of Simon Peter.

Then, abruptly,
with the dramatic conversion of Paul,
the focus shifts to the ministry of Paul.

After that,
almost all of the book is about the adventures of Paul...

except...
except for this one brief return

to the ministry of Simon Peter.

The story follows immediately on the heels of Paul's conversion.

It tells what happened

while Paul was being prepared for his missionary ventures.

After his conversion,

Paul was getting a crash course in Sunday School,
confirmation class

and seminary all rolled into one

before he was sent out on his mission

the end result of which is Oakland Avenue Presbyterian Church
in Rock Hill, South Carolina...

well,

not just the Oakland Avenue Presbyterian Church.

First there was the early church,
then there was the Roman Church,

then there was the Orthodox Church,
then there was the Protestant Reformation,
then there was the Church of Scotland,
then there was the Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia,
and then there was the Oakland Avenue Presbyterian Church

but you get my drift:

This book...

 this book of the Acts of the Apostles is about us.

This is our book.

The church was just on the verge...

 just on the threshold...

 just on the very edge of *moving*...

 moving to the big, big world.

The whole infant church

 was focusing on what God was calling the church to do next.

Like for Oakland Avenue Church today

 where all across the congregation folks are beginning to focus

 on what God's next call to this faithful congregation might be.

Like at Oakland Avenue Presbyterian Church today,

 exciting new things were just on the near horizon for the early church,

and

 while Paul was in training...

 getting ready for the really big events.,

 kind of like William is off getting ready,

 while Paul was in training

 getting ready for what ever was going to be next,

 Peter and the others

 were going here and there,

 to and fro

 doing this and that...

 doing what the church mostly does

 when the church is mostly doing it right...

 no details are told...

 just routine business;

but

 when they got to a *place* called Lydda...

 (or was it Ellis Island)

 in the name of Jesus

 they healed a man...

and then

when they were called to a *place* named Joppa...
(or was it the World Trade Center)
in the name of Jesus,
they raised a woman from the dead.

Just think what we do with the names of places.

Just think of the places

where the mention of their names
brings a certain perspective into focus:

Geneva;
Niagara Falls;
Bali Hai;
Ellis Island;

Lydda...

places of great hope and new beginning.

But just down the road...

always just down the road...
never very far away
there are other places
whose names bring certain other perspectives into focus:

Normandy;
Mekong Delta;
The grassy knoll;
Columbine;
Ground Zero;

Joppa...

places of great despair.

That's it, isn't it?

That really is it.

The very groundwork for the foundation of the church
is laid in those places of greatest hope
and just down the road
in the places of greatest despair
as the church goes to and fro
here and there
doing this and that.

This, then, is what we must do...

each one of us
and all of us together:

Let us gather those places of our greatest hope...
those places where babies are born and loved...
those places where young people are filled with promise...

those places where adults are strong and fruitful...
those places where old people are full of wisdom and good cheer...
those places where truth is spoken and lived...
those places where there is dancing and laughter...
those places where people fall in love...
those places where love mellows with age...
those places where people join God in creation...
those places where generosity is stronger than greed...
those places of life and health...

let us bring them together
in this one place called the church of Jesus Christ;
let us bring those places of our greatest to this communion table;
let us bring them to the baptismal font;
and let us bring them to this pulpit of truth
because in all such places,
the story of our Lord
brings confirmation of our ultimate hope.

Then, if we must...

and we must...

we shall do the other:

Let us gather those places of our greatest despair...
those places where children are born and abused and bombed...
those places where young people are filled with anger and hate...
those places where adults are depressed and fearful...
those places where old people are lonely and grouching...
those places where lies are spoken and lived...
those places where people fall out of love...
those places where love is swallowed up in lust...
those places where people destroy what God is making...
those places where greed overshadows generosity...
those places of war and disease and death...

let us bring them together...
let us bring them not in hopelessness
but in great and eager expectation...
let us bring all of the places of our greatest despair
to this one place called the church of Jesus Christ;
let us bring them to the communion table;
let us bring them to the baptismal font;
and let us bring them to this pulpit of truth
because in all places of deep despair,
the story of our Lord
brings the possibility of new life...

no...no...

more than that and much more important...

in what we do today...

in what we do every Lord's Day,
the story of the resurrection of our Lord
brings the certainty of new life.

Having been so nourished in the faith
we can then return to the revel in the places of our greatest hope
and to be hopeful in the places of our greatest despair.

James S. Lowry
Oakland Avenue Presbyterian Church
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END NOTES

¹

. *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (K-Q). 148

². *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, (E-J). 970 ff

³. *The Women's Bible Commentary*, Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, eds., Westminster/John Knox, 1992. 309