Peter turned to the body and said, “Tabitha, get up.”

Our first reading today from the book of Acts takes us to the town of Joppa, to a small church community, torn apart by death. Not the grand death of the great and the good, not the spectacular death of a martyr like Stephen, stoned by a mob, but the small and intimate death of a faithful Christian, called Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas. “She was devoted to good works and acts of charity” (Acts 9:36), sewing clothes for the widows of the town but became ill and died.

In this poignant little vignette, St Luke takes us to the heart of the church’s mourning: their careful washing of the body and laying Tabitha out in an upper room; their tear-filled reminiscences; the bringing out of the tunics and other clothing that Tabitha had faithfully made for the widows of her community, evidence of love made real in service. It’s a scene all too familiar to many of us in ministry, as we’re called in to a house of grief, to hear stories, share memories.

I don’t know what those first disciples had in mind when they sent for St Peter, urging him to ‘come to us without delay’. Perhaps even Peter himself did not know at first as he first sent everyone else from the room and then knelt and prayed. But in that moment he is moved by the Spirit to turn to the body and say, ‘Tabitha, anastēthi’ (Acts 9:40) – literally, ‘Get up’, but so much more than that; for it is the same root as resurrection, ‘anastasis’.

Luke had told us in the Gospel that Peter was there at the raising of Jairus’ daughter (Lk. 8:51-56), when Jesus himself had sent away everyone except for Peter, James and John and the girl’s parents. That he had seen his Lord take the little girl’s lifeless body by the hand and call out, ‘Child, get up!’ And he may well have been there earlier at the raising of the widow of Nain’s son (Lk. 7:13-15) when Jesus out of compassion interrupted a funeral to
touch the bier and say, ‘Young man, I say to you, rise!’ – a miracle that itself echoed and surpassed the Spirit at work in Elijah and Elisha (1 Kings 17:17-24; 2 Kings 4:18-37). And so it was that Peter copied his Lord and Saviour and God answered his prayer. Tabitha sat up and Peter took her by the hand and helped her up to restore her to the saints and widows (Acts 9:41).

It’s a powerful and moving scene but it’s one that’s easy to misread. For this is not primarily a tale about one woman’s simple faith and the reward for her good works and acts of charity; nor is it even really about Peter’s growth in prayer and mission, following in the footsteps and faith of his Master. Rather Luke is trying to unpack the meaning of Christ’s resurrection.

Stories of great heroes returning from death were just as common in the myths and legends of the ancient world as they are in books, TV and film today. Figures like Hercules and Orpheus descended into Hades and returned triumphant through their power or their cunning, their wisdom or their song. Yet just as much as Jon Snow in TV’s current flavour of the day, Game of Thrones, these triumphs over death were only ever individual feats, deserving of fame and renown, marking out a great destiny but with no real consequence for others around them. Orpheus could not even save his beloved Eurydice, let alone the vast multitudes of lost souls in Tartarus.

Luke and the other evangelists tell us Christ’s resurrection from the dead is different. It has fundamentally changed the universe. “As in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive” (1 Cor. 15:20). In our Gospel St John has Jesus spell it out even before his death, “My sheep hear my voice. I know them and they follow me, I give them eternal life and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand” (Jn. 10:27-28). When Jesus is raised, death is not simply deceived but defeated. Death is no more.

Easter is not just good news for Jesus but for all the world and Tabitha’s resurrection is proof of that. She is raised to life again as a foretaste of her true resurrection to eternal life and, as her story became known throughout Joppa, ‘many believed in the Lord’ (Lk. 9:42), not in Peter, not in Tabitha but in Christ – for his resurrection made all things possible.

And Luke has another point here – not just that Easter is good news for the world, but that the Church is all about Easter. Archbishop Ramsay used to say, “We are an Easter people and Alleluia is our song”. This does not simply mean rejoicing in the good news
of Jesus’ resurrection but working to bring that resurrection into every part of our life and the lives of those around us.

Most of us will not be called to a house with a body, far fewer moved by the Spirit to kneel and pray and call that person back to life. But each and every one of us is charged to work for resurrection and new life; to bring hope where there is despair; light where there is darkness; joy where there is sorrow. We are not simply to accept the way things appear to be, as we walk through the valley of the shadow, but to trust in the truth that Jesus’ resurrection has changed everything and that we are called to be channels and instruments of that change in the world.

Here in the Cathedral we are hoping to begin services of healing and prayer over the coming months: opportunities to live out the resurrection through laying on of hands, anointing with holy and oil and prayer in the Spirit. But this is not simply a task for clergy and cathedrals. The great Reformation theologian, Martin Luther, talked about the hope of resurrection being “written in every leaf in springtime” but it needs to be written just as deeply in us: in our words and in our deeds, in our lives and in our relationships. Not just a distant hope but a lived reality that we can share with others.

So this morning as we reflect on this beautiful vignette from the early church in Joppa, let us be as Tabitha and claim Christ’s triumph over death as our own, putting all our faith in him; and let us also be as Peter, bringing that resurrection to others, saying with our whole being, ‘Get up’, ‘Anastēthi’, ‘Be resurrected!’