

TABITHA

Acts 9:36-43

A sermon by Larry R. Hayward on the Fourth Sunday of Easter, May 1, 2022, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

SCRIPTURE

Acts 9:36-43

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. ³⁷At that time she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs.

³⁸Since 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.’

³⁹So 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. ⁴⁰Peter 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.

⁴¹He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive.

⁴²This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. ⁴³Meanwhile he stayed in Joppa for some time with a certain Simon, a tanner.

As many of you know, the official name of the Book of Acts is “The Acts of the Apostles.”

- The Apostles were the people who carried on the work of Christ in the aftermath of his death, resurrection, and ascension.
- If Jesus was the “movement” that burst upon the scene of human history, the early church consisted of those who picked up the mantle of that movement, took it from village to town, from city to nation, from nation to civilization.

We live as the continuance of the Acts of the Apostles. We are their successors. We are their heirs.

- When Roman Catholics use the phrase “Apostolic Succession,” they are tracing a direct lineage from the Apostles to and through the Popes.
- We Protestants use the phrase to speak of the saints and martyrs, sinners and ordinary people on whose shoulders of faith we stand as we bear witness to Christ’s words and deeds, as we continue his work, as we seek to implement his will corporately and individually in *our* own day and time just as the Apostles did in *their* day and time.

A sweet hymn from a hundred years ago bears witness to the vast array of *ordinary* people who constitute Apostles throughout history.

*I sing a song of the saints of God,
patient and brave and true,
who toiled and fought and lived and died
for the Lord they loved and knew.*

*You can meet them in school, or in lanes, or at sea,
in church, or in trains, or in shops, or at tea;*

*for the saints of God are just folk like me,
and I mean to be one too.¹*

¹ Lesbia Scott, “I Sing A Song of the Saints of God,” (1929), in *Glory to God: The Presbyterian Hymnal* #730.

I.

In today's passage, we meet two saints of God – Peter and Tabitha – as well as some widows who benefited from Tabitha's compassion. Together they walk across the stage in a One-Act play with five short scenes:

In Scene One:

We are introduced to a female disciple whose name is Tabatha in the Aramaic in which Jesus spoke; Dorcas, in the Greek into which the message of Christianity was traveling. Tabitha lives in Joppa, about thirty-five miles Northwest of Jerusalem, outside of which the death and resurrection of Christ have occurred.

We are told, though we do not yet see, that Tabitha was devoted to good works and acts of charity. We are also told that she becomes ill and dies. Members of her community wash her body, as was the custom of the day, and lay her in a room upstairs.

Scene II begins immediately thereafter:

Members of the community learn (or already know) that one of their primary leaders, Peter, is only ten miles away, in Lydda. They send two people to him. *"Please come to us without delay," they ask.*

Whenever we watch a play or read a text of scripture, it helps if we are aware that every word matters. Notice in this passage the words "to us." *"Come to us without delay."* The request was not that Peter come "to Tabitha." She had already passed away. The request was that Peter come to the members of the community, who were left behind *after* Tabitha's death. *"Come to us," they ask. "To us."*

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In July of 2008, Westminster had been served by an Associate Pastor named Karen Blomberg, who for eighteen years, had worked with the Board of Deacons, provided a strong spiritual presence in pastoral care, and had led dozens of members and friends of the church through a program of small groups entitled "Authenticity."

On a Thursday Karen left for a retreat that involved strenuous physical effort for which she had been training. On a Monday morning a family member called the office to say that a few hours earlier she had passed away on the retreat as she and fellow campers began their morning in the mountains of Northern California. She was in her early fifties.

Within minutes of an email going out from our office announcing her death, people started gathering:

- A pastor from another church who knew some of us just showed up in the hallways of our clergy offices upstairs.
- Two pastors from a church in the city – whom none of us had ever met – came over.
- Members of the congregation gathered in the chapel later that afternoon and evening.

The following Sunday, the sanctuary was filled for a worship service that drew people from all over the city and all walks of her life.

When a respected, beloved member of the community dies, the community gathers. Without delay. To honor the member. To remember the member. But as much as anything else the community gathers *to be together*. We gather for the sake of our communal bonds – something that has been sorely missed and missing during COVID but is coming back, bit by bit, as we gain more confidence. “Please come *to us*” – the Apostles say – “without delay.” “*To us.*” “*In person.*”

In Scene Three, when Peter is asked to go with the messengers from Joppa, he gets up and goes. When he arrives to where the community has gathered, no words are spoken; Peter is simply taken to the room upstairs where the body of Tabitha has been respectfully laid and prepared for burial.

Additional members of the community gather around her body as it lies in repose. They are “widows,” – a term which would later become an official designation of women who had lost husbands and who were thrown into poverty because there was no inheritance and no safety net. These widows approach Peter, weeping, and they show him tunics and other clothing that Tabitha as tailor has made while she was with them.

It is not uncommon when someone with whom we are close passes away, we hold *in our hands* something of theirs that soon becomes dear to us:

- a pendant we wear for the rest of our lives
- a ring we keep safely and bring out for special occasions
- a pair of cuff links.

The morning after my father passed away when I was in college, my ever-practical mom took me to the closet in his bedroom, opened the door, and said, “Take any of these sport coats that fit you.” I know that I wore one of them for ten or twelve years: long after it went after style. The touch of an object owned by someone we love who has passed away is the closest thing we have to touching them again, to holding them dear, to hanging on to the bonds of community we share with them when they still walk the face of the earth.

All the widows stood beside [Peter], weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them.

The women clutch tunics Tabitha has made not only because of the poignancy of such touch, but also because they know she will never be able to provide such clothing for them again. They know that what they hold in their hands will turn out to be the last garment she has made for them. They will have to find some other way of having their basic need for clothing met. They experience both grief and impoverishment; impoverishment and grief.

In Scene Four, Peter “puts” all of them outside. “Asking” may not have worked. He has to lead to the door both those who have brought him upstairs and the widows weeping and holding tunics.

Once everyone else has left the room, Peter “kneels down and prays.” We do not know the words Peter prays, how long the prayer lasts, or what if anything Peter may have heard directly from God in response to his prayer. But in contrast to Christ who did *not* pray before he healed people, Peter kneels down and prays.

Peter then turns toward the body and says: “*Tabitha, get up.*”

Then Tabitha

- Opens her eyes
- Sees Peter
- Sits up

And Peter:

- Gives her his hand
- And helps her up.

Peter then calls all the “saints and widows” and shows her to be alive.

The voice of the narrator – who is Luke – then announces: As w

*This became known throughout Joppa,
and many believed in the Lord*

As the curtain falls, we applaud.

II.

I know that many of us are drawn and attracted to the teachings of Jesus. We love the prayerful and musical language of the psalms. We love the wisdom of the Old Testament and some of its stories, at least those that are not too bloody or violent.

The truth is we can love all these things about scripture, but still feel uncomfortable, doubtful, skeptical about Jesus performing a miracle such as the raising of Tabitha from the dead. We can be even *more* skeptical about an *ordinary* human being – in this case Peter – performing such a miracle.

That skepticism can be a stumbling block for many of us. It can hinder us

- from believing in God
- from believing that Jesus was anything more than a great teacher
- from believing that Jesus was the Son of God.

It can also lead us to believe that while the Bible is *great literature*, at points it is filled with *wishful thinking* when it speaks of things like resurrection from the dead or miraculous healings.

I can only offer two ways to deal with the question of miracles and its impact on our faith.

(a)

First, I have always felt – at least as a young person forward – that the existence of God is *in itself* a miracle. It is something beyond us, something larger than us, something that we cannot control, something we cannot verify, something we can only trust.

And I have always reasoned that if I give myself over to the trust that God exists, then it *makes sense* to me that God *could* have created the world, that God *could* be active in the world he created, that God *could* come to the world in the form of a human being, and that God *could* cause beautiful things like miracles, healings, resurrection to happen.

As a person of faith, I think it is possible that miracles occur. I think this simply because *the prior miracle* is the existence of God, which I trust.

(b)

And second: Notice it is *not* actually Peter who raises Tabitha from the dead. Peter simply kneels and prays and tells Tabitha to get up. Whatever it is that leads Tabitha to open her eyes and get up comes from a source *beyond Peter*. Peter is simply the *agent* of the source. I believe that source and power of Tabitha's being raised is God. Peter is simply an *agent* through whom *God* works.

In that sense Peter is no different than Tabitha, whose tunics and clothing are God's agents of beauty, compassion, and protection for people who have no other way of clothing themselves.

In that sense Peter is no different from you and me as well: "a doctor, a queen, a shepherdess," who serve as God's agents in all we seek to do. In the community of faith, there are a lot of God's agents. In fact, all of us are like Peter. All of us are like Tabitha. We are people used by God for the advancement, the enactment, of God's will. In healing. In providing the needs of people who lack the means of clothing themselves. It may seem like Peter raises the dead, that Tabitha clothes the town's widows, but in reality, both are simply agents of the work God does.

III.

The one thing the play doesn't include is what happens to Tabitha after the story. Acts provides more information about Peter, but his prominence in the church will give way to Paul's in a few chapters. Presumably both Peter and Tabitha pass away, though the Bible does not narrate either's death.

But the work that *both* do – *praying* for healing, *knitting* of tunics for the poor – doesn't pass away. It continues. For centuries. For millennia. Through those who follow Peter and Tabitha. It continues through you. Through me. We are God's agents, just like Tabitha and Peter. We continue their work, God's work, in our day and time, just as they did in their day and time.

*I sing a song of the saints of God,
patient and brave and true,
who toiled and fought and lived and died
for the Lord they loved and knew.*

*And one was a soldier, and one was a priest,
and one was slain by a fierce wild beast...
for the saints of God are just folk like me,
and I mean to be one too.²*

Amen.

² Lesbia Scott, "I Sing A Song of the Saints of God," (1929), in *Glory to God: The Presbyterian Hymnal* #730.