

Healing Faith

Acts 9:32-42

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As Peter traveled about the country, he went to visit the Lord's people who lived in Lydda. There he found a man named Aeneas, who was paralyzed and had been bedridden for eight years. "Aeneas," Peter said to him, "Jesus Christ heals you. Get up and roll up your mat." Immediately Aeneas got up. All those who lived in Lydda and Sharon saw him and turned to the Lord.

In Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha (in Greek her name is Dorcas); she was always doing good and helping the poor. About that time, she became sick and died, and her body was washed and placed in an upstairs room. Lydda was near Joppa; so when the disciples heard that Peter was in Lydda, they sent two men to him and urged him, "Please come at once!"

Peter went with them, and when he arrived, he was taken upstairs to the room. All the widows stood around him, crying and showing him the robes and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was still with them.

Peter sent them all out of the room; then he got down on his knees and prayed. Turning toward the dead woman, he said, "Tabitha, get up." She opened her eyes, and seeing Peter she sat up. He took her by the hand and helped her to her feet. Then he called for the believers, especially the widows, and presented her to them alive. This became known all over Joppa, and many people believed in the Lord. (Acts 9:32-42, NIV)

Those widows, they're not new to grief.

No, they would tell you, they've been here before.

They know the rituals, and so they simply did what needed to be done.

They gathered together, they washed the body, and they placed it upstairs.

But all of that, it doesn't really help if you're still in shock, does it?

When faced with a death for which we are not prepared,

we join those widows in their struggle to comprehend it,

to know that it is true what they know is true.

That is, Tabitha is dead, but she can't be dead.

Her body is lying there,

but she was just here.

She was talking, she was laughing, she was being too loud.

She always sits in that chair.

She drinks from this ugly chipped cup, her favorite.

Her sandals are right over there.

Her cloak hangs on that hook.

Her perfume, it's still in the air.

Look, Peter.

You see this?

This is the shawl that Tabitha wove when I was sick.

This is the tunic that Tabitha gave my son three years ago when we had nothing;
he still wears it even though he has long outgrown it.

Do you see this needlework?

This is the gown my daughter wore on her wedding day;
Tabitha stitched it.

And this, this is a blanket that Tabitha made.

I swaddled my Rachel in it,
I brought her to my breast in it,
she slept in it . . .
as I dried my tears in it. (Pause)

Look, Peter, do you see this?

This is the body of the one who shows us, who tells us,
“You may have lost a husband,
but I am here, and so you are not alone.”

And those women, those widows, they stand around Tabitha’s body,
telling stories, weeping, struggling to comprehend it all,
to know that it is true what they know is true.

They’re remembering a friend
that they don’t want to confine to memory.

So let’s join them, let’s remember Tabitha.

Oh, Luke, the author of Acts,
doesn’t tell us a whole lot about her,
but we do know some things.

First, she lived in Joppa.

Joppa was a seaport city that is now a part of present-day Tel Aviv.

It had long been the shipping capital of Palestine,
and it contained people from many different countries and cultures.

But this is not the first time that the Bible mentions Joppa.

In the Old Testament, Joppa is where Jonah ran away and boarded a boat
when he didn’t want to deliver
God’s word to the people of Nineveh.

It seems to me that Joppa is a city where events take place that show
the breadth of God’s mercy and the strength of God’s passion
for people who others would rather leave to fend for themselves.

Joppa provides a screen for people to know and understand God’s vision --
Joppa is where Peter slept on a rooftop and saw that vision. (Just read on.)

And so maybe it’s no surprise that Luke gives us Tabitha’s name
in both Aramaic and Greek.

I find it particularly interesting that Luke quotes Peter

as referring to her as Tabitha,
using Aramaic, the language that first century Palestinian Jews used.
But when he describes her relationship with the widows,
he uses her Greek name, Dorcas.
Given the diversity of people in Joppa,
and given how Luke tells this story,
I think those widows were, unlike Peter, Greek-speaking Jews
who had adopted Greek culture and ideas
but who had found in Jesus a life
that that would not be defined, dominated or defeated by death.

Finally, and I think most importantly,
did you notice how Luke introduces Tabitha to us?
It wasn't by her name, it was by her title:

“Now, in Joppa, there was a disciple. . .” (v. 36)

Disciple. That's how Luke introduces her.

Oh, there were many women disciples in the early church, without a doubt --
you need only read the scriptures to know that.

But Tabitha is the only woman in the New Testament
who is explicitly named as such,
and this verse is the only time where the feminine form
of the Greek word for “disciple” is used.

Given the patriarchal nature of first century Palestine,
it's almost as if the Christ-like way
in which Tabitha and her community lived out their faith
gave Luke no other choice but to name her as she truly was:
a disciple, nothing less.

In Christian terms, a disciple is someone who identifies themselves with Jesus
and is committed to following Jesus
by living according to his teachings and example.

And so, there's no such thing as an accidental disciple.

After all, you're not following if you're not being led.

Disciples are disciples because they intend to be.

And there's no such thing as a solitary disciple.

That's because disciples grow toward maturity by surrounding themselves
with other disciples who care for them, encourage them,
support them, and hold them accountable
to live as they say they intend.

Tabitha. Disciple.

She was devoted to good works and acts of charity, Luke says,
and she did so among one of the most vulnerable groups of all.

Tabitha's community. Disciples. All of them, including those widows.

But who were they?

In the ancient world, the definition of “widow” was pretty broad.

It could be used to designate any woman
who lived outside the normal social structures
in which women lived under the care and protection of men.¹

And so, the term “widow” could refer to a woman whose husband had died, of course,
but it also could refer to a woman who had been divorced,
or who no longer had her father’s protection.²

Throughout the Bible, providing for widows, orphans, and immigrants,
were ways by which God’s righteousness and justice were demonstrated.
That’s because these groups were often neglected or treated so poorly.

And it was no different in the first century Roman Empire:
women without men topped the list of the most vulnerable populations;
they had few avenues for economic security;

In fact, if you turn just a few pages back in Acts, to chapter 6,
you’ll read the story about how there was an argument
about how widows were being neglected even in the church,
and, particularly, among Hellenistic widows, like Tabitha’s community.

To address that problem,
the apostles created the office of deacon.

Not surprisingly, though, seven *men* were chosen as the first deacons.

Do you see the implications here?

The church, at that point, found ways to express God’s love, care,
and inclusion of widows,
but . . . but it stopped short of imagining them
as being free from their dependence on men, both in life and in ministry.

That will change,
and I see the beginnings of this change in those widows
standing before the body of their beloved disciple, Dorcas,
the one who, apparently out of her own resources,
cared for them in the one of the most practical ways:
she clothed them.

When it comes to mission,
when it comes to the church’s care for the poor,
the marginalized, and the oppressed,
there is a big difference between giving to and sharing with,
ministering to and ministering with.

Don’t get me wrong, there’s sometimes a place for both,
but the first requires much less than the second.

¹ “Widow”, The Oxford Companion to the Bible.

² Carol Myers (ed.), *Women in Scripture: A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2000).

The first requires a person with means and a person in need, a transaction.
The latter requires a partnership, a relationship.
The first does not touch the systems that created the inequalities in the first place,
the latter requires justice.
The first expresses a desire to help the needy -- sympathy,
the latter expresses a willingness to suffer with, compassion.
The first looks like kindness, like generosity,
The latter looks like Christ, like a disciple of Jesus.

When Tabitha died,
it was such a significant loss for this small Christian community
that the other disciples in Joppa sent for Peter.
And when Peter got there, he entered the upper room.
The widows stood beside him,
weeping and showing him the clothing
that Tabitha made while she was with them.

Look, Peter.
You see this?
This is the shawl that Dorcas wove,
this is the tunic that Dorcas gave,
this is the gown that Dorcas stitched,
this is the blanket that Dorcas made.

Look, Peter, do you see this?
This is the body of the one who cared for us,
who shared with us,
who suffered with us.
This is the body of a disciple.
A disciple who, in the name of Jesus,
showed us, told us,
"You may have lost a husband,
but I am here, and you are not alone."

Alone with the body,
Peter prayed and then he said, "Tabitha, get up."
Then she opened her eyes, and, taking Peter's hand,
she stood up.

And now, my favorite, from verse 42:
*"Then [Peter] called for the believers, especially the widows,
and presented her to them alive."*

This became known all over Joppa,
and many people believed in the Lord.

In some ways, to me, the miracle is the least interesting part of this story.
In my mind, Tabitha's life testified to the resurrection
long before Peter was involved.

She lived her life showing those widows that death, their husband's deaths,
would not be their final word.
She lived, they lived, and we live with the God who is making all things new.
In God's new world order,
it is possible to be a widow and to flourish,
It is possible to be empowered rather than powerless,
It is possible to be an agent of Christ's mission rather than an object of it.
It is possible to be a woman and a disciple of Jesus.
It is possible to be a an orphan, an immigrant, a refugee and be a disciple.
It is possible to be gay, lesbian, or transgender and be a disciple.
it is possible for you, even you, to be a disciple,
committed to following Jesus among other disciples,
and living a life that
that will not be defined by, dominated by or defeated by death.

Look, do you see these?

This is shawl that Connie Bauman made.

This is a shawl that Judy Miller made.

This is a shawl that Laverne Nafziger made.

This is a shawl that Nancy Yoder made.

This is a shawl, that Margaret Stoltzfus made.

This is a shawl that Ruth Hathaway made.

And this is a shawl that Sharon Baker made.

Well, I'm not sure I matched the names with the shawls,
but all of the them have made shawls like these.

Have any of you received one of them?

These shawls are given to people who are sick, grieving, dying, worried, or weary.

They are given to people in need of prayer, you know, people like us,
people who need to be shown, to be told,
"You may have lost a husband,
you may have lost a wife, a child, a parent,
you may have lost a friend, a job,
a dream, an opportunity, a relationship,
you may have lost any of these things or others,
but we are here, and you are not alone."

Who do you know or know of that needs to be told this, to be shown this?

Who right here needs to be told this, to be shown this?

Look, here is the body of Christ.

The power that rose Jesus from the grave
is the same power that rose his disciple Tabitha
and is the same power that dwells among us.

And so, let's get up and walk.

Together.