

On Walking the Talk with Tabitha

Sunday, May 8, 2022
The Fourth Sunday of Easter
The Reverend Jay Sanderford

Psalm 23

Acts 9: 36-43

The story of Tabitha is one of my favorite Biblical accounts. It's a window into an authentic, grounded life of faith and service told without fanfare or self-promotion. Tabitha, also known as Dorcas, walks the talk and talks the walk of Christian discipleship; everything about her life of faith is congruent. She is dedicated to helping others—and not just at certain times, the way we might hit the homeless shelters around Thanksgiving and Christmas and dash off an Instagram post. Her life, even in the fragments we gain in this story, hangs together beautifully as one woman devoted to helping vulnerable people, especially widows.

Tabitha's unfailing compassion for her community makes an impact on the lives of those around her. When Tabitha dies suddenly, her community of believers is wracked by the void left in their world. But the widows of her congregation don't just cry out for her; they also display her good works for everyone to see. In death, her great love for serving God's people speaks for her.

While the story revolves around Tabitha, it's likewise a story about Peter. When Tabitha dies, the disciples send word to Peter that he should hustle the ten miles from Lydda to Joppa without delay. She is already dead, yet it's an urgent call. Is the call for Peter to come pay his respects and mourn with the community before they lay this faithful servant to rest? Or . . . have the disciples heard about the other miracles which he has performed? Are they expecting a miracle? We don't know, but it's clear that Peter's presence is important.

Peter walked and talked with Jesus; he witnessed the healing miracles of the master. Peter is the one who addressed a multicultural crowd at Pentecost, and the word of God was spread throughout the land. So if the disciples were to call anyone during a grave and urgent moment, it would be Peter. Peter's presence in Joppa declares an unmistakable truth: women matter. This woman, Tabitha, matters, and the work she does for the vulnerable widows matters. It matters so much that God will not allow death the last word. "Tabitha, get up" (Acts 9:40), Peter intones, channeling Jesus, opening the way to a mysterious, holy rebirth. Tabitha is an activist who lives again in the power of the resurrection. Her body has been quickened by the Spirit and her eyes are opened to see a new day. She has work to do and joy to give. And as theologian Willie Jennings says, "it is no accident that the first disciple to have a taste of the resurrection is a woman, because it was a woman who gave birth to the resurrection."¹

¹ Jennings, Willie James. *Acts*. (Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 2017), p. 101.

Many in Joppa and the surrounding communities who heard about Tabitha's venture to and return from the other side of life believed in God's wildest power of restoration, some because it was a miraculous event. Or perhaps they believed because of what the event revealed about God and God's deep and unwavering care for vulnerable people, including women, widows, children. The widows would not be abandoned. God would not allow it.

Southwest of Guatemala City, a road leads to the barrio of La Esperanza. The poorly graded dirt road challenges even four-wheel-drive vehicles. At the edges, the street just falls off—eroded away in gullies cut by rain and sewage. Tiny houses built wall-to-wall are made of scrap lumber, sheet metal, cardboard, blue tarps, concrete blocks. Women, children and an occasional man linger in doorways to catch the elusive breeze. Bone-thin dogs roam the pathways.

When the Guatemalan government unleashed its wave of terror against the indigenous, largely illiterate farm worker population, 25,000 men, women and children were killed in five years' time. Thousands of men were abducted from their homes and disappeared. In the early 1980s, and then again in the early 2000's, the widows of the "disappeared" left the farms and went to the city for refuge and work. Some formed the community of La Esperanza, which means "hope."

The widows came together in their desire to survive and to see their children grow up. They worshiped and worked together. They refused charity, but accepted funds from a Presbyterian program that helped them construct one durable building in the center of the community. The building houses a day-care center, a preschool, a health clinic and a weaving cooperative. The women care for each other's children. Some have been trained as dental hygienists and nurse practitioners. Some sew clothing for others or sell weaving in the market. Compared to begging and gleaning, it is a dignified life.

Because Tabitha lived, the widows of Joppa were not left alone. But there is another truth to which her rebirth bears witness. If death is not the final word, then reality is not bound to what has been. Reality is bound to God's promise that all things are made new. In God's new world order, it is possible to be a widow and prosperous rather than poor. It is possible to be self-possessed rather than powerless. It is possible to be an agent of ministry instead of an object of ministry.

Wherever we turn today, we read about the demise of church. Numbers are down after the pandemic. More people are religiously unaffiliated than ever before. Church buildings, including our own, are deteriorating. Earlier this year, our Presbytery of Detroit voted to close four congregations in acrimonious debate. Leadership scandals dampen trust. Even the metaphors of the church are unattractive: the church as a ship carrying the faithful people through the dark and stormy seas has become the church as the Titanic.

But in these days after Easter, we are people of resurrection, and because of that energy, we are people of innovation. New forms of religious communities are emerging like green shoots from dead tree stumps, while others shimmer on a distant horizon that are hard to see clearly. Existing churches are pivoting to creative modes of engagement for worship, formation and forging relationships with exciting results. Meanwhile, as I follow the

shifting shape and substance of the church community before my eyes I am excited. And what I see does not discourage me in the least.

A diverse group of pastors and thought-leaders gathered in Scotland to talk about the evolving nature of the church a while back. One of the presenters observed that too often we ask this question: Does the church have a future? It's a question that has been in my thinking and teaching and mentoring for some time. Admittedly, it's a worrisome institutional question, a question about survival and perseverance. But what if we asked an altogether different question: does the future have a church? Now that's a question worth pondering.

If the future has a church, I believe it will be shaped by Tabitha. And Rosa Parks. And Katie Cannon. And Letty Russell and Margaret Farley. And Reneisha Warfield Powell, Denise Anderson, Charon Barcony and Jan Edmiston. And Mary Baine Rudolph, Carolyn C. Brown, Debbie MacVey and Beca Torres-Davenport. And Amy Gillispie, Tina Cox and Downing Miller. And Melissa Anne Rogers, Kristin Riegel, Lindsay Conrad, Angela Ryo, Dorothy Piatt, Megan Berry and Hannah Lundberg. And Meg Brown, Ginny Bell, Helena Prince, Ginny Rezmierski, Carol Smith, Jean Song, Deanne Woodruff, Sue Cares and ... and ... and...well, you fill out your list of women, and men, too, who are capable of shaping and leading and sustaining a church for the future that is capable of bearing the mercy and justice of God to this community and world.

The late, prescient Rachel Held Evans saw this matter about our future clearly in *Wholehearted Faith*, a volume published posthumously: "Some days and some nights I am too tired, too discouraged and too overwhelmed by the beauty and all the evil of this world." On those days and nights, she continued, "my most honest answer to the question 'Why are you still a Christian?' is just 'I don't know. Why not?'" That might seem like a pale and paltry version of 'Yes,' but it is a yes nonetheless."²

Evans goes on to explain her "Yes." It was the people of the Bible whose "yes" made her and kept her as a person of faith: it was Mary and Mary's cousin Elizabeth and Hagar and the women at the foot of the cross. "I am a Christian because of women who knew a thing or two about what it means to be vulnerable, to suffer, to work within systems that were bent against their flourishing, to endure systems that were designed to forestall their triumph." "I am a Christian because of women who showed up," Evans writes. "I am a Christian because of women who said yes."³ Like Tabitha.

² Evans, Rachel Held. *Wholehearted Faith*. (Harper Collins, New York, 2021), p. 7.

³ Ibid.

Like Tabitha who bore an uncanny ability to put herself in the place of those vulnerable widows. That is, by the way, the definition of compassion (in Latin, *cum patior*) which means to suffer with, to put yourself in the place of another, to enter into their experience. It is the primary characteristic of incarnation. It is what God was doing in Christ when God reconciled the world to God's self (2 Corinthians 5:19). It is much more than kindness, far more radical than simply being nice. It is fulfilling the requirements of a godly life as described by Micah and illustrated by Tabitha: doing justice, loving mercy, walking humbly with God, and doing all in a way that is almost imperceptible except for the compassion of it. It is to take to oneself the sufferings of another so deeply that you empty yourself and take the form of a servant, in the manner of Jesus, who did precisely that, even unto death, and then to lead us back to life through resurrection.

A church without men and women who are willing to follow the example of Tabitha, of Dorcas, is an impoverished church. The creeds may be perfectly recited, the prayers eloquently prayed week after week, the anthems perfectly performed on Sunday morning, but these are not enough to fashion a church for the future unless the church also has a few gazelles taking care of children and vulnerable widows as Tabitha did: driving elderly members to church, sending cards to shut-ins on their birthdays, baking communion bread for Sunday morning and tying fleece blankets for patients at the University Hospital. It is not enough unless the church has many souls who show up to work at the overnight shelter and build safe, dry and affordable shelter for our neighbors. It is not enough if a team doesn't come together to create safe and welcoming space for young people and college students can come and gather and discover the compassionate God. It is not enough unless there are some stubborn advocates working for racial justice in our county or a group working on the existential crisis of climate change. It is not enough unless you...