

4 Easter Yr C, 12/05/2019
Acts 9:36-43
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“The story of Tabitha-Dorcas, a disciple of Jesus”

Every year on the 4th Sunday of Easter we always read the twenty-third Psalm, which pictures God as our Shepherd. The appointed gospel also often on the 4th Sunday of Easter is selected from one of the passages that picture Jesus as the Good Shepherd—therefore this particular Sunday is also referred to as Shepherd or Good Shepherd Sunday. However today in addition to being the 4th Sunday of Easter, and Shepherd or Good Shepherd Sunday, it is also, in the secular calendar, Mother’s Day. So Happy Mother’s Day to all of you who are mothers and grandmothers! That reminds me of the following humorous story that I came across as told by that famous person named Anonymous, and written by an eight-year-old boy, defining a grandmother. It goes like this:

A grandmother is a woman who has no children of her own, and therefore loves boys and girls of other people. Grandmothers have nothing to do; they only have to be there. If they take us for a walk they go slowly past beautiful leaves and caterpillars. They never say ‘Come along quickly’ or ‘Hurry up for goodness sake.’ They are usually fat, but not too fat to tie up our shoelaces. They wear spectacles and sometimes take out their teeth. They can answer every question such as why dogs hate cats and why God is not married. When they read to us they do not leave anything out, and they do not mind if it is always the same story. Everyone should try to have a grandmother. They are the only adults who always have plenty of time. 😊

In a more serious vein, since it is Mother's Day today, rather than preach on Psalm 23 or our passage from John's Gospel, our passage from Acts is most appropriate. This is quite a remarkable story about a woman whose name was in Aramaic Tabitha, and in Greek Dorcas. Now Luke likely gives his readers the name Dorcas because he is trying to write his gospel for the Gentiles, many, if not most of who would be speaking and reading Greek, the language of choice at that time. However, since at this time most of the followers of Jesus were still Jews, who lived in the Holy Land, and most likely spoke Aramaic, I prefer the name Tabitha.

Furthermore, Luke tells us where this story takes place, in Joppa, modern day Jaffa. In 2014, Pastor Julianna and I travelled to the Holy Land and we visited Joppa/Jaffa. Ancient Joppa dates back at least 3,000 years, and is located just outside modern-day Tel Aviv. The city is along the Mediterranean Sea, and once was a famous port city, where King Solomon brought in cedars from Lebanon. Ancient Joppa was the place where the prophet Jonah came to board a ship headed for Tarshish—thought by some scholars to be modern day Spain—in his attempt to run away from God and his call from the LORD to go and preach repentance to the people of Nineveh. Immediately after our story of Tabitha, Peter was in Joppa when he was given a divine vision in which God revealed to him the mission of preaching the Gospel to the Gentiles. Today, there is a lighthouse where it is believed that marks the spot of Peter's vision. There is also a St. Peter Church in modern day Jaffa. In addition to this, modern day Jaffa is also known for its delicious oranges, which are exported to various countries, including occasionally here in Canada.

Now back to our story of the disciple Tabitha. First of all, Luke tells us that she “was a disciple.” Now why would he give her this title? By calling her a disciple, Luke may be communicating that she was a leader in the church at Joppa. According to one biblical scholar, Dr. Gail O’Day, [Tabitha] is the only woman explicitly identified as a disciple in Acts, and 9:36 is the only occurrence of the feminine form of “disciple” (*mathetria*) anywhere in the New Testament.¹ So for Luke to give Tabitha this title in this particular and unique way, seems to be an indication that she was a person of importance in the community of faith in Joppa.

Luke goes on to tell us that: “She was *devoted* to good works and acts of charity.” Notice that Luke again employs another word for emphasis—here he does not simply say, “she did good works.” No. Rather, Luke tells us: “She was *devoted* to good works.” For Tabitha to be *devoted* to good works suggests that she was a person of commitment, a person who cared deeply for others, a person who also had gifts, resources, talents and skills of some kind that made it possible for her to be *devoted* to good works for the benefit of others.

I think that this was true of her because Luke continues by saying: “She was devoted to good works *and acts of charity*.” Again according to Dr. Gail O’Day: The expression “acts of charity” is more accurately translated as “almsdeeds,” that is, almsgiving, and neither this expression nor “good works” are used to describe anyone else’s service in Acts.²

If that is the case, then truly Tabitha was a very influential person in the Joppa faith community as well as a woman of means. Perhaps she was a businesswoman, a professional, someone who had enough wealth to be a

benefactor, a philanthropist—generously sharing her wealth with others in need.

I think this could be an accurate description of Tabitha in light of what Luke goes on to tell us in this story. He tells us that she got sick and then died. After she died, her body was treated with respect by carrying out the traditional Jewish custom of washing the body and then laying her body in state as it were in a room upstairs. Now again it is important to pay attention to details in the story. By mentioning that her body was laid in a room upstairs we learn that the house may very well have been a fairly large one. The houses of poorer citizens most likely were small and did not have rooms on a second level. If that is the case, then the house here may have been Tabitha's and, since there is an upstairs with at least one room, it could have been a fairly large house, reflecting again that Tabitha was a wealthy person.

So, following Tabitha's death, the washing of her body, and placing her in a room upstairs, the story continues with the sending of two men to Peter who was in nearby Lydda at the time. The two men came to Peter with the following request: "Please come to us without delay." Peter seems to have responded to their request immediately, as Luke tells us: "So Peter got up and went with them." Here Luke emphasises the faithfulness of Peter. There was no sense of hesitation on Peter's part, he went with the two men right away—that is an indication of Peter's obedience and faith in serving Jesus. Would that we too have such faith and obedience to what Jesus asks of us through the requests of others in their times of need!

Once Peter arrives on the scene, he discovers a room full of widows mourning the death of Tabitha. Luke tells us that: "they were weeping and

showing tunics and other clothing that [Tabitha] had made while she was with them.” Obviously Tabitha had a ministry among all of these widows. Widows in biblical times could be very vulnerable and live a life of poverty if there were no men around in their families to support them. So mention of “All the widows” here and that “they were weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that [Tabitha] had made while she was with them” emphasises how much these widows loved and respected Tabitha. I think it also emphasises again Tabitha’s wealth as a professional seamstress, who created high quality clothing. Furthermore, I think this information that Luke provides us with in the story communicates the faithfulness of Tabitha. She loved these widows and provided for them with her gifts, skills, resources and wealth, and most likely her friendship.

What follows next in this story, actually has a couple of similar parallels as Jesus’ raising of Jairus’ daughter in Mark chapter five. For example, in the Mark story, the mourners are put outside just like in our story, and Jesus went into the room, took her hand and said: “Talitha cum,” which means, “Little girl, get up!” And immediately she did get up. In our story, Peter also puts the widows outside the room, then he knelt down, prayed, and said: “Tabitha, get up.” She too sat up right away and he helped her to get up by taking her hand. So, perhaps Peter in observing Jesus’ raising of Jairus’ daughter remembered and learned from Jesus and was inspired to follow his example as he prayed to the Lord to bring Tabitha back to life.

The most important point here in the raising of Tabitha back to life is not that Peter had the power to raise her. No. Rather, through Peter’s faithfulness and prayer, the Lord heard him and the Lord raised Tabitha back to life again. I think Luke makes this point by telling us the response to

the raising of Tabitha back to life, he says: “This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord.” Notice that Luke does not say: “many believed in Peter.” NO! Rather, he says: “many believed in the Lord” to emphasise the One who had the power over death and raised Tabitha back to life.

May we be inspired by the love, service and faith of the Tabithas and Peters in our midst. May we, like they, be ever grateful to Jesus for the gift of life that he gives us.

Now, another story: In 1972 a two year old Chinese boy, Hu Jen-chuan, fell from a table and went into a coma. When he woke up after six days he was not able to talk or move. Like any parent, his mother, was terribly distressed. Yet her distress was multiplied by the fact that she could not afford to place him in a nursing home.

Instead, she cared for Hu Jen-chuan herself, and her care has shown unfathomable depth of her mother-love. You see, because he was unable to move Hu Jen-huan was liable to get terrible bed-sores. So for some thirty plus years his mother did the unbelievable—she carried her son on her back. When Liu Kuei-lan was 65 years old she weighed 40 kilograms. Her son by then was a grown man, and weighed 82 kg. On many occasions Liu fell and fractured bones while carrying her son. Yet she continued to carry him. When asked how she could do it her reply was simple: “He ain’t heavy, he’s my son.”³

Since this is Mother’s Day, I’d like to leave you with a bit of homework. Try to remember one or more examples of how your mother or grandmother has made a difference in your life, how she has taught you, inspired you, influenced you, loved you. If she is still alive, share how much

she means to you. If she has passed on, give thanks to the Lord for her.
Amen.

¹ Gail R. O'Day, in: Carol A. Newsom & Sharon H. Ringe, Editors, *The Women's Bible Commentary* (London: SPCK & Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), p. 309.

² *Ibid.*, p. 309.

³ *Taipei Times*, May 11, 2002.