

New Life

Fourth Sunday of Easter

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. ³⁷ At that time she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs. ³⁸ Since 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." ³⁹ So 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. ⁴⁰ Peter 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. ⁴¹ He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive. ⁴² This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. ⁴³ Meanwhile he stayed in Joppa for some time with a certain Simon, a tanner.

Our scripture is from the Book of Acts of the Apostles. Just before our reading we have the very familiar story of the conversion of Saul or Paul. The scene then shifts to Peter, who is another strong witness to the power God let loose in the world in the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the sending of the Holy Spirit. In the verses just before those assigned for today, a paralyzed man named Aeneas was healed when Peter announced, "Jesus Christ heals you." With this radical proclamation, Aeneas rose, becoming a witness to the power of God who led many to the Lord. Peter used that earlier occasion to preach a sermon containing most of the main themes of the early apostolic message. That healing, Peter said, was not performed by the apostles in their own power as human beings, but by the power of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and in the name of the crucified Jesus Christ, the "Holy and Righteous One" (3:14). The sermon went on to show how all had been foretold by the prophet. **Lewis S. Mudge**

If you find that event strange or even embarrassing, just wait for Peter to raise Tabitha from the dead! Luke wants to make sure we get the message. The God who created the world and raised Jesus from the dead is still active in the world, bringing healing to the diseased, hope to those in despair, and life where death seems to reign.

Resurrection stories don't fit easily into our contemporary worldview. Most of us have adjusted our lives to the go-along and get-along ways of the world. As Charles Taylor says in his excellent book, *A Secular Age*, almost everyone would agree that we live in a secular world. This is a world in which belief in God cannot be taken for granted. We live and move and have our being in communities inhabited by people we know and respect who do not share our faith claims. In such a context it is not easy for us to sustain our faith.

To enter into the world described in Acts, we do not need to leave our minds at the door, but it is necessary for us to accept the assumption that God is still working through God's Spirit in the lives of people and in human society to restore this broken world.

Today's story about a woman being raised from the dead challenges our assumption that we are left to our own devices to fix our predicaments—or, more to the point, that our predicaments are not fixable at all. We live in a world where the familiar nursery rhyme about Humpty Dumpty has tremendous influence. Humpty Dumpty is broken, and the common assumption is that putting him back together again is an impossible task. That is just the way it is—but not according to Acts.

Acts tells us that those who belonged to the Way (9:2) were empowered to "turn the world upside down" (17:6). So in Acts we keep reading stories about conversions, healings, and life after death. This community empowered by the Holy Spirit was not content with the status quo.

During periods of racial oppression in the United States when African Americans and Asian Americans suffered the indignities of injustice, they came together to worship God. In the black and Asian churches, people who lived in a society that questioned their value were free to imagine a world where God was at work to set them free from oppression and valued them as children of God. After long years of suffering, the vision sharpened as the God of Moses and Jesus began to create a new reality. Hearing the stories of that

era in church, along with the biblical stories that inspired them, not only challenges our worldview; it begins to transform it and encourage us to live into a new reality.

Tabitha was a disciple, a leader in the congregation at Joppa. Tabitha was a woman who may have been a widow. In her day, women were not valued by the culture at large, and widows had no one to stand up for them, so they lived on the margins of society. The story says that Tabitha was a do-gooder, "devoted to good works and acts of charity" (v. 36). She was a woman who served others, and then she died. "Too bad, but that is the way it is in this world, right?"

Wrong! The disciples sent for Peter. Without telling him why, they requested his presence, "Please come to us right away!" What did he find upon arrival? A dead widow woman surrounded by mourning widows who—like the women who went to the tomb of Jesus—were preparing her for burial. Peter entered the room and knelt to pray. Then he told Tabitha to get up, and she did!

The Spirit of God who raised Jesus from the dead brought back to life this faithful woman whose acts of compassion were central to the new reality of God's reign. This is a strange turn of events according to our standards, but God has a different value system. It should not surprise us if we have been listening to Mary's song about how God "lifted up the lowly" (Luke 1:52). Later Paul described a new distribution of power where God uses what is lowly and despised in the world to bring about a new reality (1 Cor. 1:26-31).

There is more at stake, though, in Tabitha's restoration than in Aeneas's prior case, as the details of her résumé make clear to us: she is renowned for "good works and charity." The widows of her congregation cried out to Peter, showing him the clothes she had made for them (v. 39b). The widows were actually wearing clothes made for them by Tabitha, who also distributed them among the most needy of the community in keeping with the community's principle of shared goods (see 2:42-47; 4:32-35). Her loss was felt more severely, then, and her resuscitation was desired more keenly, because of the community's responsibility for its needy widows (cf. 6:1-2).

Perhaps her importance to the congregation in Joppa explains why it sends two witnesses of her demise to Peter, with the extraordinary appeal to "come to us without delay" (v. 38b). Peter's widespread reputation as a healer, coupled with biblical accounts of dramatic healings that Luke's narrative echoes, have cultivated an optimism of grace that believes even a dead woman already prepared for burial—"they had washed her and laid her out" (v. 37)—can be resuscitated by the apostle. The fact that Luke does *not* mention that her body was "anointed" with burial salts, as expected by Jewish convention, may well indicate the community's confidence in her imminent resuscitation.

Against this background, her healing bears an additional witness to the importance of the community of shared goods. Peter "sends them all out of the room" (v. 40). We wonder how he will respond to the weeping widows, given the earlier failure of the Twelve to respond adequately to the welfare of Hellenist widows. In his ministry beyond Jerusalem, Peter's response was more direct and empathetic than before: he heard the widows' lamentation, prayed, and then resuscitated Tabitha (vv. 40-41).

Peter's command, "Tabitha, get up" (*anastēthi*), and "he presented her to them alive," recalls the resurrection of Jesus (see 1:3). Peter's power to heal is not an exercise of magic but a function of his close communion with the Lord of glory. As a result of this healing, "many people believed in the Lord" (9:42b; see 9:35). This gave Peter an opportunity to preach the gospel so people could "turn to the Lord" (v. 35) and "believe in the Lord" (v. 42) in response to the proclamation of the gospel.

The impression left by the final verse of this passage is one of pause in preparation for the story's next episode. Two details are important in this regard. First, Peter "stayed in Joppa." Peter, "son of Jonah" is where Peter's ancestor tried to go to hide from God's call to preach the people of Nineveh. So Peter was just where God needed him for God to call him to preach to Cornelius, the first Roman conversion to Christ (10:6, 17, 32). Peter, "son of Jonah" (Matt. 16:17), departs from Joppa as did the OT Jonah before him, both on missions to Gentiles that resulted in their surprising salvation. Second, Peter stayed

"with a certain Simon, a tanner" (9:43). Luke's keen interest in what is kosher or not in his telling of Cornelius's story (10:14) is introduced here by reference to Simon's trade, since a tanner carries the odors and blood of animals that would make him unclean.

Robert W. Wall

Have you ever met Tabitha? I have known her in every church I have ever visited. She has no wealth or power except her deep and abiding commitment to give expression to God's compassion for those in need. She is tenacious about practicing her faith by serving others. She prays a simple prayer: "Lord, help us to help those in need, and make us sensitive to what they really need." Tabitha's work is too important to die, and I am grateful that the story records God's agreement as well, by empowering Peter to keep her alive. Tabitha is still alive in almost every church I know. **Joseph S. Harvard**

I think we learn some things from Tabitha's story. First, new life in Christ gives each of us a ministry. It is true that others may be able to do the ministry you have been assigned, but no one can do that ministry exactly the way God would have you do it! Find your call and be faithful. Second, new life changes the rules. People who we think should be gone are given new purpose and given another opportunity to serve. Third, new life in Christ affects the whole community and opens the church to ministry among those who were formerly excluded from faith and worship.

God offers each of us new life in Christ!

Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year C, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide.