

Acts 9:36-43

The Fourth Sunday of Easter

May 8, 2022

This story of grief and loss from Acts echoes with other Biblical stories of grief and loss. In 1 Kings, Elijah is staying with an impoverished widow, and her son. The son falls ill and dies, and she demands to know why God and Elijah have permitted this. Likewise in 2 Kings, Elijah's successor Elisha announces to a woman that she will bear a son. She does so, but later the son falls ill and dies. This woman likewise demands to know why God and Elisha would torment her like this.

Fast forward to New Testament times, in the Gospel According to Luke. Jesus encounters a widow who has lost her only son, and a leader of the synagogue who has lost his only daughter. Not only are these people grieving the loss of a child, but also in the case of the widows, their only means of support.

Today's story is a little different: the dead person is not a child but a woman, Tabitha. Tabitha is a disciple: the only woman identified as such, in fact, in the entire New Testament.¹ Rather than being powerless and dependent, she is known throughout the city of Joppa for her acts of charity. She is a weaver, possibly by trade, and also provides for the many widows who belong to the church there. Tabitha lives out her

¹ Robert W. Wall, "Acts 9:36-43, Exegetical Perspective," in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C*, vol. 2, Edited by David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 429.

Gospel faith; she is a pillar of the congregation, if not *the* pillar. Her death puts the survival of these widows, and perhaps the congregation, into doubt.

And so, like the other widows and parents in these stories, the widows and disciples of Joppa pour out their grief and call for God to act. Will God act through Elijah? Or Elisha? Or Jesus? Or Peter? Will they answer the call of the faithful?

I wish I didn't hear echoes of this story in our congregation, but I do. Beloved pillars of our congregation have died. Some are ill: some of them terminally, some of them...possibly so. Some of our losses are more private, our grief not shared by our siblings in Christ, though they comfort us as best they are able. We wonder: how can we go on? Can we go on with our personal lives, when the person who anchored so much of it is gone? Can we go on with our congregational lives, with our ministries, when the person who founded or energized or organized them has passed on?

It is natural and even helpful to withdraw inward, to process our grief. But at some point we need to ask whether we will stay withdrawn - or will we, like those mothers and fathers and siblings in Christ, dare to seek or even demand a response from God? Will we, like Tabitha's congregation and fellow disciples, share our grief and our hope for healing with each other?

The answer has consequences beyond our private grief.

Tabitha has been washed, as one does with corpses, but not annointed with perfume for burial. This suggests that they have faith in the power of God to return Tabitha to them. So when they hear that Peter is nearby, they send for him. When Peter arrives, he finds the house full of those whom Tabitha has helped with her weaving. Like Elijah, Elisha, and Jesus before him, Peter sends people out of the room, and then raises her up and restores her to her community.

Usually when Peter heals someone in Acts, he gives a little mini-sermon, making it clear that it is not his personal power, but the power of Jesus working in him, that makes the healing possible. But here, he says nothing.² Why not? Maybe because here, he knows he is among his fellow Christians. Maybe the faith and work of Tabitha, maybe the faith and tears of the widows and disciples, are already a more eloquent sermon than Peter could possible utter.

The news spreads quickly throughout Joppa, as well it might. But the people are not just excited by this wondrous act: they come to faith. Tabitha is a public figure for her philanthropy, so her return to life is instant news. And her congregation makes it known that it is the power of Jesus Christ that has done so. Their public witness transforms Peter's miraculous healing into an act of evangelism throughout Joppa; many come to believe.

² Lewis S. Mudge, "Theological Perspective," *Feasting*, 430.

The name of Joppa also echoes through the Bible. Joppa is a seaport. In Old Testament times, it is in the hands of the Philistines: frequent opponents of the Israelites. God calls the prophet Jonah to leave the land of his people and go to preach repentance in Nineveh: the city of the Assyrians, powerful oppressors of the Israelites. Jonah famously refuses, and instead flees from God's command by taking a ship in Joppa.³

Hundreds of years later, Joppa is still full of non-Jews: Greeks, this time. Once again, a prophet will receive a call from God there. Peter will be called to Caesarea, further up the coast, to a preach to a Roman centurion. Previously Jonah was called to preach to Israel's Assyrian oppressors; now Peter is called to preach to Israel's Roman oppressors. Jonah refuses; Peter accepts.

What makes the difference? Perhaps it is the faith of Tabitha's community, which lifts and surrounds Peter and sends him on his way.

What would have happened if they had not had enough faith to call for Peter? Would Tabitha's ministry to widows die with her? Would the Gospel still spread in Joppa? Would Peter still dare to preach to Romans in Caesarea if he had not first found success among the Greeks of Joppa?

And what might we accomplish, if we dare to live our faith out loud? If we proclaim our faith by daring to lament out loud, and to call for and to expect God to come to us?

³ Noted in the *Jewish Annotated New Testament*, accessed through *Bibleworks 13*.

Perhaps we might not only be comforted in our grief at the loss of loved ones, loved friends, loved siblings in Christ, loved ministries of the Church. Perhaps we might also, in living grief, discover and also *preach* grace to others. Perhaps we might inspire others to likewise say "Yes" to God's possibilities.