

Sermon on Acts 9:36-43  
CCRC, 11 May 2025  
Rev. Tom Bomhof  
“Resurrected to Compassion”

Dear Friends of God,

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I think you know who Tabitha is. Tabitha is:

- the cancer survivor knitting afghans for people going through chemo because she knows how cold it can feel
- the woman who shows up at your door with a big pot of stew the day after your mom dies
- the student teacher in an impoverished inner-city school collecting coats and socks for students
- the woman who joins the Knifty Knitters on Thursdays to make blankets, sweaters and clothing for orphans in Zambia—adding each day to the hundreds and thousands that they have made over the years.
- the young adult knitting hats for babies in the neonatal intensive care ward
- the 50-something guy who doesn’t mind being called a hippy because he’s growing his hair long and donating it for wigs for cancer patients
- the 20-year volunteer at Habitat for Humanity, helping people find stable living space
- the teenage mother in the Philippines who receives a \$100 micro-loan so she could buy a sewing machine and eventually builds a business that employs 24 other vulnerable women

Tabitha is the kind, compassionate, behind-the-scenes, unassuming, salt-of-the-earth willing worker in the church. You know Tabitha. Your faith has been shaped by Tabitha’s love and concern. We love Tabitha. We are all made better by Tabitha’s love.

That’s what the early church in Joppa experienced.

In Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha (in Greek her name is Dorcas); she was always doing good and helping the poor.

As the story unfolds, we learn that Tabitha was a seamstress who made robes and clothing for widows. Widows were especially marginalized back then. Not all of them, but many of them, when their husbands died, lost their identity and purpose, becoming a ‘non-person’ who had to hope that another man would come along and marry them, or that their son would take care of them. But if she didn’t remarry and had no sons, a widow might end her days on the streets with no support networks. It was a vulnerable existence.

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But among them there was Tabitha, who had been transformed by the resurrection power of Jesus. Tabitha created a place for them, a space of love and concern, a network of resources

and stability. She used her skills with the first-century equivalent of a sewing machine, and mended and made clothes for them. They were not forgotten or cast off. She valued them.

Tabitha brought as much "shalom" as possible to those on the margins. She was also known as Dorcas, a Greek name that means the same thing as Tabitha, which meant she was known among the Gentiles by the same actions. No matter who you were—Jewish, Gentile, orphan, widow, poor, refugee—Tabitha would do what she could to help you. Tabitha may have been wealthy, like another worker with cloth named Lydia who we meet later in the Book of Acts. She used what power she had — her wealth, her skills, her voice, her standing in society — for the benefit of those with less power in society: the widows, the hungry, the oppressed, marginalized, and overlooked.

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Tabitha was a disciple. In the Bible, this is only one time when the word "disciple" is found in a feminine form. Except for this one time, the word "disciple" is always in masculine form. But here it is used to describe Tabitha. She was a disciple, a follower of Jesus, a student of Jesus, known in her community as someone who loved, someone who cared, someone who helped because Jesus was in her heart. Her heart was broken by the same things that broke the heart of Jesus.

Tabitha was yet another illustration that a new transforming power has been released in the world. The power of resurrection. The power of Jesus. It had changed Paul from a brutal persecutor of the church to a stalwart preacher of Jesus. It had moved Peter to continue the ministry of Jesus through signs and wonders such as the healing of a paralytic in Lydda.

It moved Tabitha to small acts with great compassion. It didn't move her into the places of prestige, power, or the spotlight. It moved her to live into Christ's act of emptying himself and becoming a servant. Tabitha was much more than a nice person; much more than someone who was kind and generous. The power of Christ's resurrection transformed her so that she fulfilled the requirements of a godly life as described by Micah: doing justice, loving mercy, walking humbly with God. She did it among people overlooked by society, among nobodies, emptying herself in the form of a servant, in the manner of Jesus, who did precisely that, even unto death. That's what disciples do.

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The shock came when Tabitha died. The people were beside themselves with grief. They did not know what to do. This wasn't supposed to happen to someone like this. Their shock is evidence that Tabitha wasn't old. If she had lived a full, rich life, people would have responded differently. Tabitha probably would not have made it into the Bible.

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But as it was, the early church was shocked and deeply troubled at this loss. One thing they thought to do was to call upon Peter to come. Peter was 24 kilometres away in the town of Lydda, about as far as St. Jacobs is from here. They immediately dispatched two men to go get him. They placed the body of Tabitha in an upper room and waited for Peter to arrive. We don't hear that they anointed her body for burial, it was just washed.

Why did they call Peter to come? The quickest he could be there was eight hours. What did they think he could do? Why the sense of urgency? Maybe they needed someone to preside over a funeral service and why not the primary bishop of the church who was nearby? That would be fitting for a woman such as Tabitha. Peter, don't move on before you come to Joppa for this funeral.

Or maybe they had heard of Peter's healing of a paralyzed man in Lydda and thought he could also raise a dead person. If he was carrying on the work of Jesus, why couldn't Peter raise the dead like Jesus had?

We are not told why they called Peter. We do notice that they didn't ask him to do anything. Just come at once. Just be near. Just join us in our grief and be a source of compassion and encouragement. 90% of helping is just showing up, so just show up. And he did. He showed up. As soon as he got there they gave him a quick fashion show, showing him all the robes and other clothing she had made for them. Everyone there had a story about how her life had touched theirs, some selfless act of devotion that she had performed for them. Among the tears of grief, love, and gratitude, Peter got the message: this person worked hard for us and blessed us through her acts of compassion. We have lost a true disciple of Jesus who has had a profound impact on our village.

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Peter sends everyone out of the room and he prays. He asks for the miracle of resurrection, for restoration to life on earth again. His actions mirror Jesus in Mark 5 and the raising of Jairus' daughter, a miracle that Peter had witnessed. In Mark 5, Jesus says, "Talitha, coumi," which is Aramaic for "Little girl, get up." Here in Acts 9, Peter says "Tabitha, get up." With all the authority of Jesus, Peter doesn't ask, he directs her to get up. And miraculously she does.

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I wonder why God chose to raise Tabitha from the dead. It wasn't a common practice. Peter was around when Stephen was stoned to death, and he was not led to pray for resurrection, nor did it happen. And Stephen was a man full of God's grace and power, who performed great wonders and signs among the people. Surely he was as deserving of resurrection as Tabitha. Why didn't God raise Stephen if that power was available to Peter?

We don't know the answer to that question. We know that Peter did not have a regular ministry of raising people from the dead. It was a power that was given to him once in his ministry. This was the only recorded resurrection attributed to Peter.

So why did Peter raise Tabitha from the dead? Was it because she was a great teacher that could never be replaced? Was she a huge financial contributor? Was she a miracle worker? Because she was so full of God's grace and power and had performed great wonders and signs among the people? No. She had just done the homely acts of small things done with great love. She had just put a human face on the compassion of Jesus among the people of her village.

So why was she raised from the dead? Some commentators say it's because her work was too important to die. Others say it was that God does not want compassion to die in the church.

Willie James Jennings says in his commentary on Acts,

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This woman matters, and the work she does for widows matters to God. It matters so much that God will not allow death the last word. . . . Tabitha is an activist who lives again in resurrection power. - Willie James Jennings

I love that thought. I love the idea that she was such an excellent model of compassion, faith, and servanthood, such an asset to the community, such a blessing to those who needed blessing, that God raised her from the dead so she could keep on doing it.

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But the Bible doesn't say why God raised Tabitha to life again.

Yet it does declare the message of the gospel. This miracle says the same thing as the resurrection of Jesus: that death doesn't have the last word for Christians. There is something new and powerful on the loose and the dismal, hopelessness of death has been turned around. And even though we may not physically come back to life now, one day God will raise all of God's children back to life. Nothing in heaven or earth, not even the last enemy that is death can finally resist God's loving sovereignty. This miracle is a foretaste of that reality.

The Bible the does say what happened as a result.

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.

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This was a miracle given to encourage the believers in Joppa. Peter called for the believers to come and see what happened. Especially the widows. Especially those who were so totally bereft without Tabitha, who had had the fragile rug they were on pulled out from under them. Look at this. God, whose power is at work among you, has seen your desperate plight and has done something about it.

As Beth Scibienski puts it:

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And then calling the saints and widows - Peter showed them Tabitha. Not the work of her hands but the work of God's hand, the work of the Spirit to resurrect, to give life, to re-create, to lift up. Peter showed them God's handiwork. - Beth Scibienski

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God's handiwork is not just eternal life, it is eternal life now. It is life of love and compassion now, shown here so beautifully in Tabitha. He has made sure that compassion would still mark the church. He has made sure that there would be hearts and hands to watch out for them.

This miracle was for the people of Joppa and the whole world. They heard the story and many believed. Many saw that there was a power among these people that they could not find anywhere else. There was power that engaged them, moved them, transformed them. It was a power toward compassion, that moved people to help each other, that moved toward the people on the margins, that did not overlook anyone. And it was a power that gave life in this world and hope of eternal life in the next. In a world of despair and death, where life was cheap, where and all you could count on was a life that was brutish, miserable and short, here was something new, something hopeful and empowering. Here was dignity, worth, value. Here was living compassion, living hope, living faith.

Through this miracle the church saw first hand that the miraculous power of Jesus has passed on to the leaders of Christ's church and that the resurrection was now at work in the life of the communities of believers.

Walter Brueggemann says of this miracle:

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Now the whole body of saints and widows, attached to the narrative, is invited to live that life with her, close to Jesus, agents and recipients of new life! - Walter Brueggemann

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We who come after this story can rely on the same power to transform us. In the power of Jesus, Peter raised Tabitha up and enabled her to keep on with her acts of compassion and service. He gave oxygen to that counter-intuitive, counter-cultural life of Christ in this world.

Peter showed us that Tabitha's mission is the church's mission. We sometimes struggle to discover what mission might look like in our own situation.

Some people today think that the mission of God's people is to keep the church powerful. They say our mission is to win the culture war, by whatever means. They long for the days when the church had moral sway over the world, able to influence proper behaviour. We hear calls to win the battle for morality and truth against the forces of secularism and relativism. We are seeing the rise of Christian nationalism, a form of religious nationalism that focuses on promoting the Christian views of its followers, in order to achieve prominence or dominance in political, cultural, and social life. It often incorporates racism and ideas to exclude others, particularly with respect to immigration and minority groups.

Jesus' power resurrected Tabitha to show us what that mission will look like: acts of compassion, reaching out to the ones who have less power, who don't have a voice, who are on the margins. Being in community with the little people is still very much the living heart of the mission of Christ in this world. Those who make it their ministry to bless them in are very dear to God's loving heart.

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