

“The More Loving One” Rev. Michele Ward Psalm 23, Acts 9:36-43
May 8, 2022 Good Shepherd Sunday
Mother’s Day, Fourth Sunday of Eastertide, Year C
Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church Baltimore, MD

NEW TESTAMENT READING Acts 9:36-43 Rev. Michele Ward

The New Testament reading this morning comes from the Book of Acts. Listen now for a word from God.

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.

At that time she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs.

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.’

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 (Tabitha) had made while she was with them.

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. He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive.

This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. Meanwhile he stayed in Joppa for some time with a certain Simon, a tanner.

One: Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

All: Thanks be to God.

“The More Loving One” Rev. Michele Ward Psalm 23, Acts 9:36-43
May 8, 2022 Good Shepherd Sunday
Mother’s Day, Fourth Sunday of Eastertide, Year C
Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church Baltimore, MD

*“How should we like it were stars to burn
With a passion for us we could not return?
If equal affection cannot be,
Let the more loving one be me.”*

W. H. Auden

We are still in the season of Eastertide, and the signs of resurrection are all around us. They are in the stories of the Gospels and the early church. They are outside, with the exception of this weekend. Last week, Jesus visited Peter and the disciples on the beach, and this morning Peter pays someone else a visit. A dead disciple by the name of Tabitha is the person he rushes off to see without a moment’s delay. The miracle Peter performs in this story is astounding. He brings Tabitha back from the dead, restores her to her community, and Peter decides to stay for a while in her hometown, Joppa.

Seems fairly straightforward, doesn’t it, as far as plot development goes, right? The author of Acts sets the stage for us - Tabitha, a disciple, devotes her life to the service of others. Her death is sudden and surprising, sending her friends and family into deep grief. They prepare her body for burial, but they still send for Peter, hoping against hope that he can perform a miracle for Tabitha. Peter arrives and encounters the widows of the church waiting for him. They show him all of the clothing that Tabitha made for them. They weep in front of him, clearly grieving the death of their leader and friend. God’s healing power fills Peter, and Tabitha comes back to life. Her resurrection leads to the conversion of many people and restores her as a disciple in Joppa. This story has all of the parts we need to feel satisfied with it: plot development, back story, a crisis to solve, resolution. I must tell you that I felt dissatisfied at the end of this story. And not because of the plot, because it is riveting, but because I wanted Tabitha to tell her story herself.

I wanted her to speak. I wanted to know the first thing she said when she came back to life. Instead, she is acted upon throughout the narrative. The actions that happen to her are positive ones. Her body is cared for by her friends and loved ones, Peter resurrects, the widows proclaim her good deeds and virtue, and she continues on in ministry in her community.

Tabitha may not have been a poor widow. She may have been a business woman. According to biblical scholar Teresa Jeanne Calpino, Tabitha’s context was a wealthy merchant city known for its textiles and fabrics.¹ We do not know that she was in the same social class as the widows who mourn for her. It is entirely possible that Tabitha is more like Lydia, another prominent Christian woman in the book of Acts. The assumption that she must be poor and needy because of all of the things that happen to her is something that I

¹ Calpino, Teresa Jeanne. *The Lord Opened Her Heart: Women, Work, and Leadership in Acts of the Apostles*. Chicago: Loyola University, 2012.

“The More Loving One” Rev. Michele Ward Psalm 23, Acts 9:36-43

May 8, 2022 Good Shepherd Sunday

Mother’s Day, Fourth Sunday of Eastertide, Year C

Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church Baltimore, MD

find really fascinating. It is equally possible that she is poor, like the women she supports. Perhaps she scraped together the resources to financially provide for all of the materials for these women. Perhaps she had abundant free time to create garments out of these textiles for the women in her church.

Stepping in to resurrect her is a way to resurrect Christian ministry in Joppa. It seems entirely plausible that she was in a higher social class above the widows who mourn her death. It's also entirely possible that Tabitha is a little bit more like the other disciple Lydia who we also hear about in the Book of Acts. Lydia is another prominent Christian woman who was a founder of a home church in her community. The assumption that she must be poor and needy because others act on her behalf is a patriarchal one. Yes, it is equally possible that she was a poor widow just like these women and she scraped together the ability to purchase all of these fabrics. Then she spends all of her time making clothes for other people is how the story goes. That seems less likely when widows are in charge of finding ways to source their own income. It's hard for me to imagine Tabitha as a poor woman who didn't have resources. Due to the expensive nature of fabrics and the expertise it would take to make all of those garments, how did she do this simply out of the goodness of her heart?

According to Rick Strelan, Tabitha’s name has the same meaning in Hebrew and Aramaic - gazelle, an animal known for its beauty, grace, which rabbinic scholars referring to the *gazelle* as “the most beloved by God.”² This is a reference we, as readers, often miss because we do not speak ancient Near Eastern languages, though I imagine not many of us want to take on that task! Her name displays characteristics of who she is and what she personifies in the world. She was known for her graciousness and mercy, her kindness and spiritual leadership. Losing her was a significant loss for the early church, so Peter brought her back to life.

Tabitha's name had meaning in both Hebrew and Aramaic. Her name means *gazelle* - an animal known for its grace. Rabbinic scholars refer to the *gazelle* as the most beloved creature by God. The only other time I often see that reference is in the Song of Solomon in the wisdom literature. For us to know that her name means something so beautiful, holy and pure is important because it speaks to the kind of person that she was. It speaks to the symbolism of her life and ministry. Tabitha spread beauty and grace wherever she went. This is a reference that we often miss because most of us don't speak Aramaic, Hebrew or Greek anymore. I imagine many of us may not want to take up that task! Her name shows us a hint of who she is, the power of naming someone, the power of her grace and mercy. Losing her was a

² Strelan, Rick. “Tabitha: The Gazelle of Joppa (Acts IX,36-41).” *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, vol. 39, no. 2, May 2009, pp. 77–86. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=CPLI0000492868&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

“The More Loving One” Rev. Michele Ward Psalm 23, Acts 9:36-43

May 8, 2022 Good Shepherd Sunday

Mother’s Day, Fourth Sunday of Eastertide, Year C

Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church Baltimore, MD

significant loss for the early church so Peter stepping in to resurrect her is a way to resurrect Christian ministry in Joppa.

When I think of Tabitha, I think of women, trans people and non-binary people who have power today. Instead of using that power to pursue their own interests, they turn towards those on the margins. They know what it feels like to be overlooked or to be consistently acted upon by others. It's notable that Tabitha turns to the widows in the community to provide for and minister to them. She is given the title disciple which is typically reserved for men more frequently in the biblical text. That's important, too. She could have spent her time doing other things with other people in Joppa. She could have spent her time with people in her social class and expanded her business. She could have spent time with people who made her look good and feel better about herself, but that's not what she did.

She did not turn away from the widows and her community with the power that she had. Tabitha directed that power towards them in order for them to understand that they had power themselves. The beautiful thing about Tabitha's resurrection story is that she would not have lived again if the people around her didn't use their power to go ask for what they needed. She is no longer there to guide them, love them, and nurture them. Two men on her behalf leave town to ask for her life back. Two men who could have replaced her with another man, who might have had more access to social power and structural power in that community without Tabitha present.

They believe her life is so important that they are willing to travel, find Peter, and ask for her life back. If they did not believe in the power of the resurrection, the power of God or the power within themselves, they would not have made that trip. They would not have taken the care they took as a group of widows to make sure that her body was well tended. They were always preparing for her death, but hoping for life. Living in both. Living in both.

What kind of legacy do people leave for us? How does the way that they love us compel us into action? Her gift of fabric is a beautiful symbol of what that looks like for us in our own lives. If that was the only gift that she had—if she was only a successful textile merchant or seamstress—this story would not be in the Bible. It would not be in this account of the early church. We wouldn't know her name or who she was. I'm sure that there were dozens of women like her who were talented at the textile industry, the most common industry in the town that she lived in. Being someone bringing up someone who is in an ordinary profession like someone who was the best baker but had an awful personality that no one liked but they made incredible bread you know

Tabitha's notoriety was due to the kind of person that she was. It was her love and her ministry that made her remarkable. It was her care and her grace that made her memorable. These are the reasons why her story is part of the lectionary and why we preach about her thousands of years later. These reasons underscore the deep, deep power of love. I wonder what you are doing to show that kind of love in your life. What you do with the power that you

“The More Loving One” Rev. Michele Ward Psalm 23, Acts 9:36-43

May 8, 2022 Good Shepherd Sunday

Mother’s Day, Fourth Sunday of Eastertide, Year C

Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church Baltimore, MD

have? Each of us has it, whether we're comfortable with that notion or not. Each of us has power and has a responsibility to use it. Will you use it like Tabitha to lift up those around you? How will you use that power to display greater love?

I would be remiss, of course, in a story that's all about women and bodies to not say anything about this week and the potential threat to Roe v. Wade. I have been thinking deeply about the bodies of women and non-binary people and trans people who are worthy of resurrection just like Tabitha was. They are worthy of protection just like the widows were. It's often that kind of ministry that's happening on the margins, perhaps even outside of the walls of the church, and in the streets of our cities, where people like Tabitha are at work right now. They are doing the work of centering the voices that often do not receive centering.

In a time when we do not know what is ahead it can often feel precarious. I think of the loved ones of Tabitha who prepared her body for burial ‘just in case.’ I have felt that feeling of ‘just in case.’ What if abortion is no longer protected by Roe v. Wade? What do I need to do to prepare for death, prepare for some kind of moment where I will need to be more ready to defend myself as a woman?

I think of the deep power that the disciples carried inside of them. They felt so strongly that Tabitha's life mattered enough to ask for it back. They didn't need to accept her death as a given. They didn't need to sit down and mourn her. They could prepare for it, which is wise, but it doesn't mean they have to give up hope that she is gone forever.

The beauty of her story is that she reveals to us what it could be like to believe in something beyond what we see. To believe in a power greater than ourselves, to believe in the power that we create together. Keep your eyes open for the things that you cannot see. Hold on to the hope that something different could come. Believe that resurrection is possible, that those we love can walk through those doors, that your journey from Joppa to Lydda to find Peter. To ask for what you need could very well be worth it.