



“When in Joppa”

Preaching Text: Acts 9:36-43

21 April 2013: 4th Sunday of Easter

First United Methodist Church, Arlington, Texas

Easter is not only a day of resurrection, it is the season of resurrection and chapter nine of Acts certainly has several elements of transformation. In fact, the ultimate transformation according to the Christian faith is resurrection—Easter is wholly about resurrection. And Acts 9 is wholly about transformation.

First, chapter 9 tells us about how Paul was converted from persecutor of the church to its greatest evangelist. Second, we read about Peter who found a man named Aeneas, bedridden for eight years and paralyzed. Peter calls on the name of Jesus and Aeneas immediately gets up—and the “residents of Lydda and Sharon saw him and turned to the Lord.” Then comes the story of the raising of Tabitha/Aramaic, or Dorcas/Greek for gazelle . . . which follows Luke’s pattern. Luke often pairs stories with male and female characters; for example, we see this in the story in chapter 9 where the man is the central character and is both brief and less colorful than Tabitha story. Each story has a similar function, they portray Peter as a miracle worker.

Acts shares about the life and struggles of the early church. It is the first document of Christian history, and full of early Christian stories about how they built up communities, shared faith, responded to challenges, and encouraged each other. Acts is also about resurrection and to experience resurrection faith one must flirt with the edges of death, darkness, and despair in ways that are foreign to some of us, but certainly not all. This is why our lesson today about Tabitha/Dorcas is a powerful story of one who has received and given new life. She was not one of the original twelve, but a disciple even so. Hear our morning lesson:

[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 (Acts 9:36-43).

Note that the text gives ample attention to Tabitha’s good works. The widows even parade the garments in front of Peter. This is highly unusual. We do not read a tribute, for example, to the personal character or economic output of Lazarus before Jesus brings him back from the dead (John 11—*Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide, my paraphrase). Dorcas was a remarkable woman because not only was she a female disciple, but she was also a widow. Despite being a widow, she helped other widows out of their own poverty by hiring them, training them in sewing, and giving them dignity through the ability to support themselves. Widows in the New Testament times rarely had financial security. Customarily, their financial security was tied directly to a male relative. Thus, for these widows, Dorcas/Tabitha gave them the extravagant gift of financial liberation. It was for this reason and for her discipleship that the widows devotedly mourned for her.

Luke does not here suggest any kind of “works-righteousness.” Luke does not mean that if we do enough good deeds then we will somehow sway God’s judgment of us. Rather Luke tells us that those who follow the master and those who offer compassion to others reflect the types of spirit and stewardship that reside within them.

Works righteousness is a doctrine that says that our good works will get us into heaven. According to a poll a couple of decades ago, 88% of Catholics and a majority of Presbyterian and Methodist evangelizers believe that “if people are generally good, or do enough good things for others during their lives, they will earn a place in heaven” (*National & International Religion Report*, August 23, 1993). Of course, we know from scripture that it is God that saves us and not our good works. Yet good works often indicate the depth



and application of our faith.

In a former parish, a high school student in our congregation asked me how to respond to his friends who were convinced that Jews, Muslims, and all other non-Christians are going to hell. He explained that he had been invited to a Bible study group in which they were told that only Christians were going to heaven and he was concerned because he has a lot of Jewish friends. How would you respond to his question?

I shared with him that Jesus once said in the Sermon on the Mount:
“Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye” (Mt 7:1-3)?

It seems to me that Jesus made it abundantly clear that we are not the judges of other people’s eternal salvation. Nowhere in scripture does Jesus assign us the responsibility of deciding who is going to heaven and who is going to hell. In fact, Jesus’ greatest condemnation is for the Pharisees in his time who made judgments about who was going to be saved and who wasn’t. On one occasion Jesus said to some rather self-righteous Pharisees: “Woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and herbs of all kinds, and neglect justice and the love of God; it is these you ought to have practiced, without neglecting the others” (Luke 11:42). In other words, they practiced their religion to prove how righteous they were but they neglected the more important matters of justice for all people and sharing God’s love for all people.

In reality, when Jesus talked about life’s final judgment, he made it clear that God is the judge and not us. In Matthew 25:31-46, Jesus said the final evaluation of our lives would be like a shepherd separating his sheep from his goats: putting the sheep at his right hand and the goats at his left. He would then bless those on his right hand and the King will condemn those at his left hand who did not care for the needs of people around them.

One of the most beautiful aspects of this story is that the righteous are



surprised that they are blessed by God. In other words, they were not doing good deeds to earn God's love; they had already experienced God's love in their lives and it overflowed into loving others as they had first been loved by God.

It seems to me that our role is to bear witness to the love of God we have experienced in Jesus Christ and let God be God and not make personal judgments on the eternal salvation of others.

So we remember Tabitha/Dorcas and admire her good works and acts of charity toward her neighbors and widows. We also paraphrase James Lane Allen's quotation, "Adversity does not build character, it reveals it." We might even say that "Good works do not save us, but merely reveal our state of faithfulness." Amen.

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