

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 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.

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"My sheep hear my voice," we heard John's Jesus say. "I know them, and they follow me." From Revelation, John of Patmos gave us an image of Christ as the shepherd and the Lamb guiding a great multitude to springs of the water of life "from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages." Just before that, we prayed what many hold dear as their favorite psalm: "The LORD is my shepherd..."

In all the richness and familiarity of the readings for this Good Shepherd Sunday, one voice gets lost. Or maybe that's not the best way to say it. More accurate to say that one voice is not heard. Luke, the author of Acts, gave us the story of Tabitha, a follower of the Way who was restored to life.

Now, Peter's role in reviving Tabitha is worth our attention. Even so, there is something quietly *more* fascinating about Tabitha herself. Throughout the story, Tabitha remains silent. She opens her eyes, sees Peter, sits up with Peter's help, and then Peter presents her alive again to the saints and widows gathered at her home in Joppa.

Tabitha remains silent. Her life speaks for her.

Luke, a scholar who is typically quite reserved with his praise, describes her with a rare honor. He uses a Greek word that shows up once in all Christian scripture, right here. Tabitha is the only "mathētria," the only "woman disciple," named specifically.

"Now, in Joppa," Luke's story begins, "there was a certain *woman disciple* by the name of Tabitha, which being translated means 'Gazelle'." By giving us both her Aramaic name and her Greek name, Luke positions her in

the steadily blurring boundary-land between Jews and Gentiles. She, herself, remains silent, and yet, if we are attentive, we can notice the voice of Christ speaking from Tabitha's life and coaxing us to follow her example.

If we are looking for facts, Luke gives us very little. If we are seeking Christ, we find a great deal.

We can see that Tabitha must have inspired love and devotion from the other disciples because two of them went to Lydda to search for Peter. Lydda was about a day's journey by foot from Joppa, and so it is possible that Tabitha was dead for three days before her resuscitation. And yet, Peter rose up and went with them in the hopes of reviving her.

When he got there, they all went into the upper room, where they found the widows grieving loudly with the body. Now, in Biblical times, a widow was a woman who had lost more than a husband. If she had no means of financial support, she needed both protection and physical, legal and financial help.

In Jewish communities and in the early Christian church, widows were grouped together with fatherless children and resident aliens, all of whom come under God's protective care. Yet, despite God's insistence that that people who have lost cultural status must never be oppressed or exploited, these folks did not often fair well.

These are the people that Tabitha had devoted her life to. And as noble as that is for her, there is more for us here to learn. Our scripture often uses stories about widows to mark significant teaching moments.

Tabitha acts less like a strict Hebrew and more like a Greco-Roman among the widows of Joppa. She is in charge of a household that is the center of a social group, providing support to the widows who function as official community mourners. Tabitha may have been a widow herself, as Luke mentions no husband.

She appears to be a woman with resources and she may even be independently wealthy, because the home where she waits to be buried seems to be her own and it is large enough to have an upper room. Rather than being a poor woman, her death impoverishes the community financially.

We can assume that she opened her home as a community center for early followers of the Way of Christ. From there, it's not much of a stretch to imagine that she presided over a house church in her home. At the very least,

her home was likely a drop-off point for donations. Standing next to Peter, the women that Tabitha supported show him the tunics and clothing she made for them.

It is their weeping that reveals the hospitality and generosity that Tabitha gave them, along with a place of sanctuary, a warm heart and a listening ear. The widows' mourning is as deep as the love Tabitha extended to them.

Using her Aramaic name, Peter bids Tabitha to rise. It seems to me appropriate for Peter to use healing commands in Aramaic, the language of Jesus. Because it isn't Peter's skill or willpower that brings life to her. Peter acts in trust and the *Risen Christ* raises her.

Peter's words are woven with the silent, magnetizing call of Christ, the good shepherd, that radiates from the life God returns to Tabitha. Together, they show us that faith is less about what *we* can do, and more about what *Christ* can do *through* us.

Luke allows the presence of Christ in the story of Tabitha and Peter to have the last word, the voice of the good shepherd speaking in the language of silence. Peter says nothing about his experience with Tabitha and moves on to visit the centurion Cornelius in Caesarea. Tabitha says nothing about her three-day long experience and we never hear from her again.

Even so, by attuning ourselves to Tabitha's life and the way she chose to live it, we encounter the living Risen Christ in whom Tabitha has died and risen. Instead of explaining the mechanics of the event or describing Tabitha's new life, Luke turns our hearing to the responses of the people of Joppa.

As soon as Peter presents the newly revived Tabitha to the widows that she served, Luke tells us that her story "came to be known throughout the whole of Joppa, and many had faith in the LORD."

Tabitha's is not a story about a spectacular display of supernatural wizardry. The people of Joppa were surely impressed by the healing, but what drew them to the faith was what Tabitha *did* with the new life God granted her – a life rooted in hope and in trust. A life, that is, in Christ.

Newly alive in the life of the Risen Christ, Tabitha, a "certain woman disciple", carries on living into her vocation. Renewed, she continues standing in solidarity with widows suffering through no fault of their own. Rather than

drawing attention to herself, she goes on using her personal resources and her truest nature as a follower of Christ to care for and enable marginalized people to fend for themselves.

Tabitha's story is not about who gets into heaven, but who heaven gets into and how. Instead of *telling* us, her story *shows* us how God's realm comes not so much in fiery chariots and fury. Far more often, God's heavenly realm enters first into human hearts and lives. And then those lives "from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages" become springs of the water of life spilling out the love of Christ for others.

Our trust, you see, our *own* trust is not in our individual worthiness or skills. Our trust and faith, like Tabitha's, is in the Risen Christ who speaks silently through human lives. Listen then. And follow the voice of the shepherd drawing all people to wipe away every tear from their eyes and raise them into life eternal.

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