

Scriptures: John 10:22-30; Acts 9:36-43

Witnesses

Since Easter, we've been talking about the early followers of Jesus – and us still today – being witnesses of Jesus Christ and all the great things He has done. That's what the world needs to hear from the Church today – that Jesus is still active, still present, still in the miracle-working business. He's still healing the sick, making the lame walk, giving the blind sight, and still raising the dead to life – figuratively speaking, in our case, where we were dead in sin, and He's washed us clean and given us new life – and literally, which we'll read of an instance in Scripture momentarily.

Just to be clear, there are events which occur today, which defy explanation. There are accounts of people in Africa, China, India, and other places being medically examined, and confirmed dead. They start prepping them for burial, and followers of Jesus come along, pray for the person to revive, and Christ raises them back to life. Professor Craig Keener, from Asbury Theological Seminary in Kentucky wrote a book about it last fall, titled, "Miracles Today: The Supernatural Work of God in the Modern World." Sounds like a great gift for Father's Day – or a late gift for the moms or mother figures here in our church family!

On this Mother's Day Sunday, when we remember and honor all our moms, all those ladies who have made, and continue to make an impact on us, we're going to read a Scripture about another lady of the Church, who also had a very caring, motherly disposition named Tabitha, or Dorcas. She was quite a gal! Something happens to her, and through her, which shows just how important she is as a witness of who Jesus is. If you have your Bible or a Bible app handy, turn with me to Acts 9:36-43. **Read Acts 9:36-43.**

A Disciple Named Tabitha

Luke, the writer of the Book of Acts, tells us "In Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha (which, when translated, is Dorcas), who was always doing good and helping the poor," (Acts 9:36). I just want to give a couple quick pieces of background information on this to clarify. First, the town of Joppa is still around today. It's a seaport on the Mediterranean coast of Israel. Since the days when Acts was written, Joppa has grown into a metropolis, merging with the city to its north, and is known as Tel Aviv-Jaffa. It's a center of trade and tourism today, and was a center of trade in those days as well.

The other piece of information, for clarification, is this lady's name. In Aramaic, the language most people spoke in that part of the world, they called her Tabitha, while in Greek, her name was Dorcas. Both words translate as gazelle. I'm not sure if it was

a nickname, or her real name, but I'm glad people use the Aramaic version of the name today, and give nicknames such as "Tabby." Could you imagine what a nickname might be if they used the Greek version, Dorcas? It just doesn't sound very nice, does it?

Luke says she's a disciple. I want to make sure we're all on the same page here with this, because I've heard people say before she's an apostle. That's not how the term is used in the original Greek. She's a disciple in the sense that there are lots of disciples – followers – of Jesus Christ. The word used in the original Greek text is equivalent to "student," or "pupil." She's not an apostle – she's not been commissioned by Jesus Christ to serve in that capacity. Notice what Tabitha does – how she's a "student," or a follower – of Jesus Christ. According to Luke, she "was always doing good and helping the poor."

Putting Faith Into Action

That's a key thing for us to apply today right there. All of Jesus' followers, in whatever land and era they find themselves ought to be going about and doing good works and helping the poor. That's putting their faith into action – it's what He's called His followers to do in every time, and in every place. And of course, as sometimes happens, people become sick, and pass away. Luke records, "About that time she became sick and died, and her body was washed and placed in an upstairs room," (verse 37).

This is part of a larger story about Peter traveling through that part of the Holy Land visiting with the saints. At the time when Tabitha died, Peter was in a town called Lydda. Lydda was about twelve miles up the road from Joppa going towards Jerusalem. "When the disciples heard that Peter was in Lydda, they sent two men to him and urged him, 'Please come at once!'" (verse 38).

We don't know the reason behind the believers in Joppa sending for Peter. They may have expected a miracle to happen – which we know did – or they may have simply wanted an apostle of the Church to be there to console the community. It's pretty clear though, that they want him to come before Tabitha is buried. So what's Peter do? He goes with them.

When we have Christian friends – brothers and sisters – and they are grieving, what do we do? Or what should we do? We should be with them. That's being part of the beloved community. Loving and caring for each other. We put our faith into action. So Peter goes with them, "and when he arrived he was taken upstairs to the room," (verse 39a). Now he's with Tabitha's dead body.

Peter Is Being Changed

Being a follower of Jesus Christ is changing Peter, too. Peter was also a Jew, and being around a dead body was a big-time no-no. If you touched a dead body of an

animal or a person, you'd be "ceremonially unclean." You'd not be able to worship, or interact with other people for a set number of days, and then only after you'd bathed and washed all your clothing, too.

While he's there in the room, "all the widows stood around him, crying and showing him the robes and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was still with them," (verse 39). This lady had really done a lot to help people out – especially the widows of her local church. Apparently she was quite the seamstress. Tabitha's motherly instinct of caring for all of them was something they'd miss tremendously. They appreciated everything she'd done for them.

Tabitha's concern and care for others was definitely putting her faith in Jesus Christ as her Lord and Savior into action. It's what the Church is called to do today. And it's also important for us to show our moms and mother-figures how much we appreciate them while we can! If you're able to, I hope you'll do something for those ladies in your lives who've made an impact on you, today.

Get Up

Notice what happens next. I'd imagine this wasn't the expected outcome of the believers in Joppa that day. "Peter sent them all out of the room; then he got down on his knees and prayed. Turning toward the dead woman, he said, 'Tabitha, get up.' She opened her eyes, and seeing Peter she sat up," (verse 40). Here we have a record of a miracle involving a dead person – she's literally dead, no heartbeat, no breathing, everything has stopped for her physically – and she's resurrected! Look friends, the text doesn't record this, but Peter's not the one who works the miracle. See what he did here? "He got down on his knees and prayed!" Prayer is our communication pathway with Jesus Christ. Jesus is the One who works the miracle – Peter's simply the conduit for it to happen.

Like Saul of Tarsus' sight being restored last week in the first part of Acts 9. Jesus Christ restored Saul's sight, Ananias was simply the vessel through which Jesus did the healing. Now don't think that "oh well, Jesus does the work, so His followers don't really have to do anything." That'd be a huge misunderstanding of this. Ananias last week, and Peter this week, they're willing to go where He calls them to, and to do what He calls them to do. That's something that we need to keep in the forefront of our minds today. He still calls us to go where He needs us to go, and to do what He needs us to do, to make Him known, for the transformation of the world.

Peter kneels in prayer, calls Tabitha back to life, and then, "He took her by the hand and helped her to her feet. Then he called the believers and the widows and presented her to them alive," (verse 41). See, the crowd who witnesses this expands beyond just Tabitha, or just her close friends, or just the widows in the local church.

Now the believers see what's happened. Can you imagine something like that happening in our day?

Awestruck By the Testimony

People would be amazed. Awestruck. They'd be praising God for the great things He's done, and keeps on doing! They'd not be able to contain the news – they'd rush to tell everyone they know. And that's exactly what the church in Joppa did. "This became known all over Joppa, and many people believed in the Lord," (verse 42), Luke tells us. How many people do you think would turn their lives around, and truly follow Jesus Christ if they could come face-to-face with a person they knew who had literally, physically died, and then been brought back to life by Jesus? I think it'd be a wake-up call for most people.

When I was about 11 or 12, I heard the testimony one Sunday morning from a guy who had died, and been brought back to life by Jesus Christ, and it was amazing. His name was Warren Souders, and at the time he was the owner of Souder's Funeral Home on Main Street in Sidney. He's since gone home to be with the Lord, but the building is still there – it's now the Shelby County Historical Society. In the 1960's or 1970's, he was on the top balcony of the funeral home doing some painting, and lost his balance. He fell head-first onto the sidewalk below.

The impact crushed the vertebrae in his neck, cracked his skull open, broke several other bones, resulted in a six month long hospital stay, and left him in a coma for three months. He even died at one point, and saw Jesus. When Warren came out of the coma, he became involved in reading the Bible, being active in the church, and doing what he could to help other people. The rest of his life was filled with lingering pain from his accident, but he said it was worth it if it helped other people come to know Jesus Christ.

Simon the Tanner

That's faith in action. That's what we see with Tabitha in the Scripture today. It's what we see in Peter, as well. "Peter stayed in Joppa for some time with a tanner named Simon," (verse 43), our last verse says. That's quite a statement.

This is the only mentioning of this particular man in Scripture, and the event of Peter going to stay at his house is so sandwiched between other events in the text that we might almost miss it. Does anyone know what a tanner does? I had heard of it, but didn't know what they did until earlier this week, when I was doing some research for this sermon. A tanner was involved in treating the skins of dead animals. They made leather. They also made parchment paper – a lot of the scrolls written on during the Middle Ages were treated and stretched animal skins.

Why is it significant that Peter would stay with a tanner? Well, remember how we talked earlier about Peter being a Jew, and being around dead bodies in that culture made you “ceremonially unclean?” A tanner would have been looked down on by most Jews. Peter’s decision to stay with Simon already shows a willingness to follow where Christ leads without regard to the cultural prejudices which were prevalent in his day – and – it’s a foreshadowing of what we’ll be talking about next week!

Prayer: Living God, long ago, faithful women proclaimed the Good News of Jesus’ resurrection, and the world was changed forever. Teach us to keep faith with them, that our witness may be as bold, our love as deep, and our faith as true. Amen.