

Sermon, Fourth Sunday of Easter, May 8, 2022, Acts 9:36-43 (Elizabeth Felicetti)

I am bivocational, working here at St. David's thirty hours a week and spending multiple hours each week writing. I turned in the book manuscript I'm writing for Eerdmans last Monday and thought of one of the nonfiction characters in it this week when reading about Peter raising Dorcas-slash-Tabitha.

Dorcas/Tabitha made me think of Sister Helen Prejean, a Catholic activist best known for her work with death row inmates as portrayed in the movie *Dead Man Walking*, based on a book she wrote. In that book and another memoir, readers learn that social justice was not what drew Sister Helen to ministry.

After she had been for a nun for almost twenty years, her community was experiencing some division about whether their call was to be more contemplative or more activist. Sister Helen was solidly on the side of contemplation until 1980, when she went to a social justice gathering and heard another nun presenting about how Jesus preaching good news to the poor meant *that the poor would be poor no longer*.

This shook Sister Helen, who had never thought of that before, presumably instead thinking of Jesus making that comment "the poor will always be with you" when Judas disses Mary for using expensive nard to anoint Jesus' feet instead of selling it and giving money to the poor.

Sister Helen changed her life after this revelation about how offering good news to the poor meant they were to be poor no longer, moving to the projects of New Orleans to live among poor people. That's where she was when she was first invited to correspond with a man on Death Row, and she has been a faithful advocate against the death penalty ever since. Dorcas/Tabitha made me think of Helen because she worked among the poor and might have been poor herself.

The story we heard in Acts this morning is slight, and while some think Dorcas-Tabitha—by the way, those names mean "gazelle" in both Aramaic and Greek, and that she has two names means she was likely multicultural—Dorcas/Tabitha must have been a privileged woman who shared garments she made with oppressed widows, others posit that she may have been an oppressed widow herself and that the gifts the widows showed Peter that Dorcas/Tabitha had made for them were sacrificial gifts that were costly for her.

Regardless, it was hard to be a widow in those times and in that culture. Widows were poor, and Dorcas had shared good news with them, and made a big impression on them. That these widows were sharing with Peter clothing Dorcas made suggests that she knew the people for whom she supplied clothing, following Jesus' commandment "I was naked and you clothed me."

Like Sister Helen, she was *living* among the poor, not sending money to Haiti like some of us, like me, do when we give. Tabitha improved the lives of these women, and they loved her, and now she was dead, and they mourned her.

Notice that she is not restored to life as a reward for being such a great disciple—Tabitha is the only female in the New Testament for whom that particular word is used—but she is restored to her community to glorify Jesus in this new community. I have avoided preaching on this passage in the past because it can lead to a theology that if we just had enough faith or love, we too could restore the dead to life, but that is not the point of this story.

The power here isn't Peter's or Tabitha's. She does not come back to life because she was such a nice person or because Peter was a super disciple. The power belongs to Jesus. This is an act of Jesus after Easter, through Peter, and through this act we get to know something about Tabitha-Dorcas, like last week we got to know something about Ananias when Saul was knocked to the ground and blinded by a light on the road to Damascus.

Peter and Paul may seem like the stars of the Book of Acts, but we get to meet other members of the early church like Ananias and Dorcas/Tabitha. We can find inspiration from them as members of this church, St. David's.

The Holy Spirit moved in that early church, and the Holy Spirit is moving here as the church is remade following the pandemic. We don't look like we did five years ago or ten years ago or twenty years ago. We may be coming to grips with needing to let go of some things. Maybe some of this helps us to focus on what is essential: Jesus. Because just like Peter and Paul are not the stars of the book of Acts, neither are any of the quieter disciples who made a big impact, like Ananias and Tabitha/Dorcas.

This also makes me think of Thomas Merton, whom we talked about last Thursday night at our book club meeting with Sophronia Scott, author of *The Seeker and the Monk*. (We have two copies of the book in our church library if you didn't get a chance to read it.) Thomas Merton was kind of a celebrity monk at the Abbey of Gethsemani monastery where he lived in Kentucky, but many other monks lived there over the years. Monks who did not publish bestsellers and become famous stars. Monks who just lived quiet monk lives.

None of those monks, neither the ones whose names we've never heard nor Thomas Merton, are stars of Gethsemani, just like Peter and Paul and Ananias and Tabitha are not stars of the book of Acts. For Christians, Jesus is our only star. All stars point to him.

Notice that after Tabitha gets up like Peter commanded, we don't hear that Peter then gained his own disciples. We don't hear that a bunch of people immediately joined The Church of Peter. Instead, because of this Act of Christ *through* Peter, "many believed in the Lord." In last week's reading that new Jesus movement was called the Way. In those early days of Christianity disciples didn't have rectors and mortgages and monasteries: they had the Way. Jesus.

And they also had beloved saints like Dorcas, who aligned herself with widows and created clothing for them and was devoted to good works and acts of charity.

We have so many saints here at St. David's who are devoted to good works and acts of charity. We have people who are devoted to this place, to making it beautiful and inviting and a place where we can meet Jesus on the way. I know the Spirit is blowing us along as we try to figure out what's next for us as a church after all of the changes not only of the past two years but the last fifty years. This is not something limited to St. David's: churches and monasteries across the country are praying like we are to learn how to continue to follow the Way when so much has changed.

Where do you see yourself in this story? How is the Holy Spirit trying to use you? What can you do to glorify Jesus?