

<sup>36</sup> 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. <sup>37</sup> At that time, she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her out in a room upstairs. <sup>38</sup> 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." <sup>39</sup> 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 Tabitha had made while she was with them. <sup>40</sup> 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. <sup>41</sup> He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive. <sup>42</sup> This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. <sup>43</sup> Meanwhile, Peter stayed in Joppa for some time with a certain man named Simon, a tanner.

**Response to the Word**

One: This is the Word of God for the people of God

**All: Thanks be to God!**

Acts 9:36-43

05/11/2025 – Saginaw First U.M.C.

"Life in An Upper Room"

Rev. Amy Terhune

I'd like to begin this morning in a similar vein to a David Letterman Top Ten list. Someone has compiled a list of the top ten things Mom would never say. See if this rings true:

10. "Don't bother wearing a jacket – the wind-chill is bound to improve."
9. "Yeah, I used to skip school a lot, too."
8. "I don't have a tissue with me...just use your sleeve."
7. "The curfew is just a general time to shoot for. It's not like I'm running a prison here."
6. "Go ahead and keep that stray dog, honey. I'll be glad to feed and walk him every day."
5. "Just leave all the lights on...it makes the house look more homey."
4. "Well, if Timmy's mom says it's okay, that's good enough for me."
3. "How on earth can you see the TV sitting so far back? Move closer—get right up to it!"
2. "Let me smell that shirt: Yeah, it's good for another week."
1. "I just love your messy room—it's such a creative way to express your individuality!" [adapted from [http://www.crainium.net/jdjArchives/2007/05/things\\_your\\_mother\\_would\\_never.html](http://www.crainium.net/jdjArchives/2007/05/things_your_mother_would_never.html)]

So, I'm going to make a confession to you. I have actually said one of the things on that list. It's #10: Don't bother wearing a jacket. But it wasn't because I thought the wind-chill was bound to improve. It was because I'd been telling them to get in the car for 20 minutes, and at that juncture, I was beginning to think that lack of a jacket or shoes or anything else they could find would teach them to be ready to go when I said so next time.

In his book, *It Was on Fire When I Lay Down On It*, (pp. 100), author Robert Fulghum tells about the dilemma ministers face on Mother's Day. He was approached by a more outspoken woman in the church who said, "I am bringing my mother to church on Mother's Day, Reverend. You can talk about anything you want, but it had better include MOTHER, and it had better be GOOD!"

No pressure. The problem, of course, is that not everyone is bringing Mother to church, and not everyone looks forward to this day as one of good memories and positive moments. For many, today is a difficult day, and I want to be sensitive to that reality.

Yet, I also want to celebrate all the amazing women in my life who have touched my life and graced me with their gifts across the years. Women in my family – my mother, my grandmothers, my daughters, my aunts, my cousins, my mother-in-law, all of my sisters-in-law – they love me unconditionally. Friends and lay women across the years who have mentored me and shared their stories and cared for me. Clergy mentors who have helped me live into this calling that claims my life. This past fall, one of those clergy mentors – the Rev. Karen Poole – went on to eternity. She was appointed to my home church when I was in college – the first woman my home church had ever had. She was so gifted at understanding and articulating complex issues of social justice and theology. She had a way of connecting with children that affirmed their sacred worth. She had a heart for the marginalized and neglected, and the sacred courage to see them and speak on their behalf even when it was inconvenient. Tender and strong all at once, she drew out my own gifts and empowered me to use them in more publicly. She could incite my fears and calm them in the same sentence.

In our scripture lesson today, I wonder if Tabitha resembled my friend. As stories go, it's relatively short, tucked in between two longer and more detailed stories about the conversion story of Paul on the way to Damascus, and Cornelius, the first gentile named as a convert to Christianity.

"The setting for this passage is Joppa – a coastal town with a prominent port on the Mediterranean just south of what is now Tel Aviv. The modern name is Jaffa. Those of you who know your Bible will recognize Joppa as the town where the large cedars were brought in by boat to be used by Solomon to build the first temple. Joppa is also the port city from which Jonah found a ship going to Tarshish, as he tried to flee from God, only to be swallowed up by a whale. It remains a thriving town in Israel to this day." [From Rev. Alex Evans, <https://www.2presrichmond.org/sermons/2017/8/13/dorcas-acts-936-43>.]

It was Philip who originally built a small Christian enclave there in Joppa – one that grows and thrives as the Holy Spirit moves through the people following the first Pentecost. Peter is ministering in Lydda. He has given mobility to a man named Aeneas, who was paralyzed for eight years, when word comes to him that Tabitha, also known as Dorcas, has died very unexpectedly. There's some debate among scholars as to why Peter is summoned. It's not clear that he knew Tabitha at all, and it's not clear what the church in Joppa wants from him.

But what is clear is that Tabitha is a disciple. This is the only place in the entirety of scripture where a woman is specifically named as a disciple of Jesus. There were others whom we may presume bore that title – Mary Magdalene, Mary and Martha, Joanna, Salome, and others. But Tabitha alone bears the designation "disciple".

We know, too, that she is one who did a lot of good in her community, and in particular, had a special ministry with the poor. The fact that Luke introduced both her Hebrew and her Greek name suggests that she is a bridgebuilder in her community. Earlier, in the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter of Acts, there's quite a bit of dissention between the Jewish widows and the Hellenistic widows in Jerusalem, and the Hellenistic widows claim neglect from church leadership, which is how the office of Deacon comes to be established in the early church. Joppa doesn't seem to be plagued by that dissention. Tabitha ministers to anyone in need, it would seem, and a variety of women may have found refuge in her home.

It's unclear exactly what role she played, but it does seem clear that many widows, in particular, benefited from her ministry. Understand something here: widows and orphans at that time and place were nearly powerless. In a patriarchal society, a woman without a husband or male family member to

look out for her had little opportunity for income or employment. She depended on the charity of others, as did her children. This is why the Hebrew Scriptures stress over and over again the need to care for the widow, the orphan, and the foreigner in the land. Tabitha takes that to heart. Given that there is no mention of a husband or other family in her home, it is possible Tabitha is a widow herself. But she appears to either have resources of her own, or have the trust of the Christian Community in Joppa, because her home operates as a haven to others. Out of it, she runs a homeless shelter, soup kitchen, and clothing pantry. She provides a place of community and safety for women and children that would otherwise be destitute.

But very unexpectedly, she has died, and her death could well mean the death of many she was helping, particularly if her home was a shelter or a place of refuge. So when witnesses from Joppa bring word to Peter in Lydda of Tabitha's death and ask him to come, he does. He makes the trip. He meets the widows. He hears their stories and sees the treasures they hold up as memories of Tabitha's work among them. These are not the tears of professional mourners. These are not the flowery speeches of dignitaries and leaders. As we read of what Peter encounters in Joppa, we're given a brief, fleeting glance at the real dynamics of ministry on the ground in Joppa – there's emotion and connection and love. You can identify with this story because we still do the same thing when a loved one goes on to eternity – we share our memories; we touch the things they've left us. My guess is that in addition to works of charity – meals and clothes and beds and safety – Tabitha has been a listening ear, offering hugs and friendship and advice and understanding. No wonder they grieve.

The respect is further evident in the fact that they've laid her out in an upstairs room, caring for her just as the women cared for Jesus' body following the crucifixion. But here's a little hint to what's happening. Common things happen on the lower level. That's where meals are cooked and animals are housed and work is done. But upper rooms are where miracles may happen. It's in an upper room that the prophet Elijah raises to life the son of the widow of Zarephath in I Kings 17. It's in an upper room where Jesus eats a final meal with his disciples. It's in an upper room where Jesus passes through locked doors in order for Thomas to touch his hands and side. It's in an upper room where the Holy Spirit is poured out on Jesus' disciples at Pentecost, and they speak in every language and are set ablaze with the zeal of the gospel.

They've laid Tabitha out in an upper room. Which may suggest something about their faith and what they want of Peter. They expect God to move. And when Peter has heard the stories and seen the memories and shared the tears, he then puts everyone out of the room. I love what David J. Kalas says about that.

He writes, "...As a pastor, I have seen a number of occasions when a loved one has wanted to be alone with the body of the deceased. They wanted an opportunity to say a personal and a private good-bye; to say some things that ought not have an audience.

"But this was not Peter's circumstance. He was not among the bereft. He didn't know Tabitha; at least, not well. Why, then, would he send everyone away? Why would he seek to clear the room and be alone with the body?

"Because that's what he had seen Jesus do.

"Years before, when Peter and the rest of the twelve had accompanied Jesus all along the dusty roads of Galilee, Peter had been in a similar bedroom. The twelve-year-old daughter of Jairus had died, and the house was full of mourners. But Jesus sent them out of the room. And then, accompanied only by a select few disciples and the grieving parents themselves, Jesus spoke to the little girl. And in speaking to her, he raised her to life. [4 ¶s from "The Good Works We Leave Behind" by David J. Kalas, [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com).]

Tabitha has spent her days learning and living the ways of Jesus. So, now, Peter does the same. Two disciples who have each imitated their master in various ways. He prays. He calls her back to life, using almost exactly the same words Jesus used those many months before, and he presents her alive.

We've been saying all along that the scriptures stop and dwell on Easter. We've moved on from Easter Day, but not from Easter's theme. As Jesus Christ lives and breathes, so the mission of God lives and breathes.

Rev. Rodney Thomas Smothe explains the meaning like this: "Faith in the promise of God to raise those who died in Christ to new life again, and faith is the power of resurrection in life's everyday disappointments. While our lesson tells of the personal resurrection of Tabitha, it also reveals the communal resurrections for the widows, once the down-trodden of the community, now a diverse, strong, thriving oasis of hope and new life. The resurrection of Tabitha represented hope in the midst of despair, faith in the midst of failure, victory in the midst of defeat...."

"This miracle of resurrection became known all over the region of Joppa, and many people believed in the Lord. Some have said that a picture is worth a thousand words. Tabitha became a visible picture; a living witness of the resurrection power of God. Tabitha became a living witness, not only of divine power over sickness and death, but also to the healing that God can bring to the brokenness in our lives and societies... Today, we are being challenged to become living witnesses by acts of compassion and love. We are challenged to let the picture of our lives tell a story of grace and healing. [2 ¶s adapted from "A Living Witness" by Rodney Thomas Smothe, [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com).]

So let me close with a story from Rev. Dr. Barbara K. Lundblad, who is a professor of preaching at Union Theological Seminary in New York City.

She writes, "A few years ago, I talked with a friend of mine who's a pastor in New England. "How's your building program going?" I asked.

"Oh, we ran out of money before we got to the worship space," she said.

"I thought to myself, "What could be more important than the worship space?" But I kept my thoughts to myself.

"My friend continued, "we renovated the basement. You know, we have a shelter down there for homeless. We put in new showers and renovated the old kitchen. The basement was so drab, and the showers—well, there was only one shower and it was lousy. On the Sunday before the shelter opened, the worship service began as usual in the sanctuary. When it came time for communion, the people carried the bread and the cup downstairs to the basement. The whole congregation gathered around the empty beds. We passed the bread and the cup around the circle. 'The body of Christ given for you.' That night the shelter beds were full, and the worship space still needed a lot of work.

Dro Lundblad said, "Well, I suppose you can live with that, if you have to." To which her friend responded, "the more important thing is: so can they. [5 ¶s adapted from <http://www.day1.net/index.php5?view=transcripts&tid=496>; as used in "Wide Enough for All (Mother's Day)" by King Duncan, [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com).]

Thanks be to God. Amen