

“Keep Her Alive”

A Sermon Preached by Rev. Young-Mee Park
First United Methodist Church of Oak Park
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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. (Acts 9:36-43)

At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." Jesus answered, "I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me; but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand. The Father and I are one." (John 10:22-30)

You remember Peter, don't you? He was one of the most talkative students of the class of the twelve. He loved to sit next to his teacher. And he loved to raise his hand and speak up, whether he had understood the lesson or not. He had lots of ideas, but little carried through. He was ready to fight at any time, and yet, had a problem staying awake or loyal at critical times. I don't know about you, but I really like him. How can I not, when I see myself in him?

Under the spotlight in our story today is that Peter. Well, I should not have said "that Peter," because the Peter we have in today's lesson is not the good old Peter we knew, but a new and transformed post-Easter Peter! He does not even talk much! Just two words through the entire story! Yes, it is with just two words that Peter brings a saint back to life from the dead! Called to the bedside of a disciple who became sick and died,

Peter kneels down, prays in silence, and then says, “Get up!” At these words, the disciple opens her eyes and sits up!

What an amazing story of Resurrection power and transformation! The Peter we find in the Book of Acts is quite different from the Peter we knew from the Gospel stories. He now is a strong, bold, and powerful apostle of the risen Lord! Upon the descent of the Holy Spirit, Peter preaches a powerful sermon on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and wins a large number of converts to the Christian community (Acts 2:14-41). When arrested by the Jewish authorities, Peter defends the cause of Jesus and the freedom to preach the Gospel in undismayed and impressive fashion (Acts 4:5-21). Peter travels extensively, preaching, healing, and working miracles. Peter also baptizes and receives into the Church the centurion Cornelius and his kinsmen, the first Gentile Christians (Acts 10:1-48). Later, when this becomes an issue, he goes up to Jerusalem, and with firm conviction and power, he helps the Church to move forward as an open and inclusive community (Acts 11:1-18).

Often I am amused to see before and after advertisement pictures – before and after hair growth, before and after anti-wrinkle cream, before and after this and that. There are so many products out there that will work miracles for you, if, only if, you are willing to spend your money and buy them, right? Sometimes I believe them, but more often than not, I am rather suspicious. I know too well how difficult it is to reverse the course when your head start losing hair or when your skin start to wrinkle; I know too well how difficult it is for us, human beings, to change. Yet, thanks to Peter, I believe in transformation. Yes, I have hope that I, too, can change, that I, too, can move beyond all my shortcomings and failures and take part in God’s unfolding story of forgiveness and healing, love and life abundant and eternal!

Actually, Peter is not the only hero in the Bible or in today’s story in particular. Along with Peter at the center stage in our lesson today is a woman. Her name is Tabitha in Aramaic, and Dorcas in Greek. In our language, it would be Gazelle. Pretty name, isn’t it? We do not have her “before” picture anywhere in the Bible. But her “after” picture, as described in our first lesson today, is enough to touch and move our hearts.

Our story begins with a simple statement, “*Now in Joppa there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha.*” Did you know that this is the only place in the Acts where a woman is explicitly called a disciple? In fact, the feminine noun for disciples attributed to Tabitha here in this verse is found nowhere else in the New Testament. Interesting, isn’t it? Anyway, disciple Tabitha was such a loving, caring, and generous person. “*She was devoted to good works and acts of charity,*” we read. Her good works or ministry was especially for the most vulnerable and powerless, those on the margins of the society, especially widows. When disciple Tabitha becomes ill and dies, all the widows of the community stand at her bedside, weeping. Yes, the whole community cries over the loss of a beloved friend and a saintly and charitable leader.

I am so glad that Peter was in the area, that he was able to come right away to be with the grieving community. I am so glad that God used him to bring disciple Tabitha back to life. Her ministry is too important to die. I don’t know about you, but I have met

disciple Tabitha in every church I have ever served or to which I belonged. I see disciple Tabitha, not just one, but many of them, here in Oak Park.

She may be young, or she may be not so young. She may be retired, or she may be working more than a full-time job. She may be poor or she may be rich. She may have what we call status or standing, or she may not have any of them. Yet, with deep devotion to her Lord and an unflinching commitment to serve, she gives expression to God's compassion to all God's children, especially those in need. Yes, she brings healing to the diseased, hope to those in despair, joy to the grief-stricken, and life where death seems to reign. She may not make tunics and other pieces of clothing as Tabitha did in our lessons today, but in many different areas of ministry, our Tabitha serves her Lord and his Church humbly and faithfully, with unswerving love and loyalty. So generously and so cheerfully, she gives her time, talent, and treasure to help others and build up the community. So freely and so joyfully, she shares her life with her friends and also with strangers. You see? In our story today, God worked through Peter to bring disciple Tabitha back to life. Now, God works through us; yes, God works through you and me to keep her alive.

In Acts, we read stories about conversions, healings, and all different kinds of miracles. And often, we find these stories uncomfortable or unbelievable. They do not fit easily into our contemporary worldview, do they? These stories may have been possible back then, but not any longer, not now, not in our world, we tend to think. The thing is that most of us have adjusted our lives and our ways of thinking to the ways of this world. We are content with the status quo. We are so used to, if not resigned to, the way it is. But not so for the people in the Book of Acts, not for Peter, not for Tabitha, not for her community! No, they did not accept poverty, disease, even death as final words. They wept together, they hoped together. They cared and shared together, as a community of faith.

In our Gospel lesson today, Jesus says, "*My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish.*" (John 10:27-28) We, Christians, are a people freed to imagine a new world. We, Christians, are a people empowered to work toward it. We, Christians, are a people enlivened by the Spirit of our risen Lord, who gives us life, life after death, and life before death, here and now.

Let us continue to keep disciple Tabitha alive. Let us continue to write the Book of Acts with our own stories, with our own lives. Let us continue to follow our Good Shepherd, who gives us eternal life! Let the congregation say, AMEN!