

Raising Her Up: A Word for Tabitha People  
*In Honor of Mother's Day*

*Acts 9: 36-42*

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.

Tabitha loved them through her hands. She looped needles through fabric. She knitted, tailored, measured, cut, stitched, weaved, and sowed materials—wool, linen, fine fibers that she spun into coats and gowns. Shirts and dresses that she embroidered and decorated with a designer's touch; a seamstress who performed daily resurrection miracles of tailoring new possibilities into something well-worn...into someone well-worn. Oh, how Tabitha loved them through her hands.

We can hear it when we listen to some of the stories told from her community. One woman holds up a lap robe and says, "Tabitha crocheted this for me when I got sick with cancer. It kept me warm through those cold chemo treatments." Another holds up a garment saying: "This was what she made for me after my husband died. She told me to wrap it around myself as if God was wrapping God's own arms around me, so I know I'm not as alone as I feel sometimes." Another was a small little girl, and orphan, who held up a dress: "She made this for me, and she taught all of us how to make them for others." This is who Tabitha was to them: a mother of the faith, a pastor who not only mended fabric, she mended lives. With the gifts of her hands she covered the community with God's grace.

Perhaps you remember someone in your life? Someone who invested in you and covered you with God's love. Maybe our Tabitha was someone who inspired us; whose example of how she lived her life, boosted our imaginations for what was possible for ourselves. I remember hearing one of our pastoral interns speak about her life as a woman growing up Baptist. She says she will never forget the first time she walked into a Baptist church and heard a woman preaching the gospel. It changed her life for what was possible for her. Maybe our Tabitha was our own mother or grandmother who would have holy conversations with us about the mysteries of God on the way home from church. They cared for our curiosities; they held our questions with space. Or maybe it was a Sunday school teacher who not only taught us the

stories, but they believed in us as well. Tabitha's are special people in our lives. Perhaps you can think of someone? Someone who covered you with God's grace.

Of course, the sad part is, one day our Tabitha's die. The thread that once held things together comes unstitched. And we are left wondering, now what do we do? It's the question the church asks when we have saint who we depended on to hold the community together. When they die we ask: "Now what do we do?" While working in the homeless shelter there was a woman there named Bonnie who was a Tabitha. Bonnie was childless and poured her love into these homeless men. All the regulars at the shelter called her "Momma Bonnie." One night, a fight broke out between two men who were arguing over something. As spectators formed a circle around the two men to watch, it was Momma Bonnie who ripped through the crowd, stood in between them, and scolded them like children: "Now boys," she said, "You know better than to settle your differences this way!" And the two towering men both blushed and said, "We're sorry Momma Bonnie." She ruled the roost. But, on that sad day when she died the church was filled with salty-eyed homeless men who grieved in a lost way because she was their pastor. She was the one who nurtured and cared for them when nobody else would. Like Tabitha, she glued the group together. And after she was gone they wondered, "Now what do we do?"

So, in the story, what do the women decide to do? For starters they invite Peter to come. To be clear: Peter is a minor character in the story, who is moved by the witness of these women. He gets on his knees, prays, says, "Get up!" and then comes the miracle: God raises up Tabitha. If we linger here, it's a profound moment. Why? Because Jesus is no longer the only one God raises from the dead! It is no longer just "He is risen," but also, "She has risen." You see, God raising Tabitha is significant because, it is the only time in the entire New Testament that the feminine form of the word disciple is used. You see, Tabitha is the only named disciple to be raised from the dead! In Luke's gospel *women are central to the witness of the church*. Remember it's Luke who shares the story of God's revolution being birthed through Mary's and Elizabeth's bodies. It's the women who stick around to witness to Jesus' death, and it's the women who witness to the empty tomb. Without women there would be no witness to Easter's news.

You know, lately we hear a lot of talk about the church dying. And for some places this is true. But I don't see it that the church is necessarily dying as much as *the patriarchal church is dying*. Now, I'm not tossing shade on our faithful men. But I see a church being rebirthed mainly through the witness of our women! If you need evidence, I present to you exhibit A: our choir! While it would probably be nice to have some men's voices, and all men are welcome, the truth is, they don't need any. They sound wonderful on their own! Other than the Building and Grounds Committee, I usually find myself sitting in committee meetings around tables in the company of all women. We have ten ordained clergy in this congregation. All but two of us are women! We are a church filled with Tabitha's whose nurture and strength, whose wisdom and courage help us to witness to the love and justice of God. I don't see a dying church. I see a dying patriarchal church and a new church being raised up through the gifts of our women. And do you know what I say? "It's about time! Amen!"

There's an ancient Chinese proverb that says, "When sleeping women wake, mountains move." I see women waking among us who are boldly speaking the truth to institutions, including the church, that has bred toxic masculinity for too long. I see women waking who are forming movements for justice like Black Lives Matter and #MeToo and a local group called Women of Action. I see women waking with Spirit-saturated gifts who are covering the world with love and grace through their hands. Perhaps Luke sees it too. And it is why Tabitha is the only named disciple in any of the gospels who God raises from the dead. Because women and their witness are central to the church's story.

You are Tabitha people. Like the intergenerational quilt hanging in the narthex stairway, you help us to weave our lives together into a single tapestry of God's grace. Today, we lift you up and we give thanks to God for your witness of the gospel. Because the old proverb is true: when sleeping women wake, mountains move. Keep moving mountains, Trinity. Keep. Moving. Mountains.