

Raising Tabitha People

Acts 9: 36-42

³⁶ 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. ³⁷ At that time she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs. ³⁸ 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." ³⁹ 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. ⁴⁰ 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. ⁴¹ He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive. ⁴² This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord.

Imagine the moment. A circle of women gathered around the casket of their beloved pastor and friend. Tabitha's death is a huge blow to the church. The tears fall as they read Psalm 23 and sing *Amazing Grace*. And then comes the sharing of memories. One woman holds up a lap robe saying, "Mamma Tabitha crocheted this for me when I got sick with cancer. It kept me warm during the chemo chills." Another holds up a prayer shawl: "This is what Tabitha made me after my spouse died. She told me to wrap it around myself so I would know I'm not as alone as I feel sometimes." A little orphan girl touches her dress and says, "Mamma Tabitha made this for me so I'd have something new in my closet on special occasions." Tabitha was more than a pastor. She was a mother figure for the church who stitched hope and love into well-worn lives.

Maybe we remember a Tabitha. A motherly presence who hemmed God's love into our well-worn lives. Maybe it was a parent or a grandparent whose presence became a rock for us to lean on. Maybe it was a teacher or a pastor who believed in us. Or a neighbor who made us feel like we could be the best version of ourselves. Maybe we remember a Vi Brady and Sally Heald—members from long ago—who helped mend us into belonging. Or we think about our busy Bea who would drop off tokens of care on our front doors. We remember our Tabitha people fondly. They were glue people who helped hold things together for us. And when they died it left a hole in the community.

Turn to the story and it's interesting that Tabitha is given two names. One in Hebrew, the other—Dorcas—is in Greek. Why? Because she stood in the gap for two different groups. During a time when there was great tension between Jews and Greeks, she was who mended them together. She may have been bilingual, who knows. But most importantly she was the pastor of a multicultural church who she loved and who loved her deeply. She welcomed people with a hug, like Laura Spedding. She taught the young ones to knit—like Janet Rolison did with Calvin and Jackson. She checked in on people like Cristy does with the choir and cared for the children like Brenda does. So after Tabitha was no longer there the hanging-by-a-thread

multicultural church wonders how they are going to manage without their anchor holding them together.

So what do they do? They hear Peter's in town. So Lydia reaches out and Peter comes and raises her up. To be clear: Peter is a minor character in the story. He doesn't "mansplain" or dominate the space. He is simply moved to action by the women's witness. And what's significant here is that for the first time—and only time in the gospels—a woman is named a disciple. For the first time since Jesus' resurrection, another body is raised. So now it is not only "He is risen," but also, "She is risen."

In a male-dominated, patriarchal society; where a woman was not given a voice or a choice,. In a time when a woman's body was not her own, God raises up a woman to help move the church forward. Are we not in a similar time where it's the women who are moving us forward? Now, I'm not tossing shade at our fellas, but perhaps today is a reminder for the Peter's in the room to play the minor character role, by witnessing and empowering the amazing work of our women. Heard a story from a friend who was a pastor at a Presbyterian church. She said one of her more conservative elders once confessed to her, "If it were up to me, this church would be a PCA church"—a branch of Presbyterianism that does not ordain women—"and we would've left the PCUSA a long time ago. Except I'm sure glad we didn't because when I look around it is our women pastors and leaders who are keeping the church going! We wouldn't be here if it wasn't for them!" Can I get an amen?!

You know, it must be God's prophetic Spirit that this text gets assigned today which is not only Mother's Day, but also during a highly alert time when the power of our male-dominated system is trying to control what happens to women's bodies. During a time when the forces are once again trying to keep women down. Perhaps it is no coincidence that during a time when the threat is upon us, God raises a women's body. She is risen! And in her rising, she lifts up other Tabitha people to keep the world moving forward.

It happened when God raised up women to lead the Black Lives Matter movement. It happened when God raised up women to lead the #MeToo movement. And the word of the day is that God is still raising Tabitha people to move us into freedom and justice for all. I am honored and humbled to stand in the presence of so many Tabitha people who have fought, and continue to fight, in the name love and justice and freedom.

There is an old Chinese proverb which says, "When a sleeping woman wakes, mountains move." Today is a day when we are reminded of resurrection's power to move mountains. Today is a day when we get to lift up our women and say thank you for your witness. Today is the day when the proverb comes true: when a woman wakes, mountains move. So with the power of God's Spirit, keep moving mountains Trinity. Keep. Moving. Mountains. Amen.