

4th Sunday of Easter – The Tabithas in Our Lives – Acts 9: 36-43
May 12, 2019

Please pray with me. You tell us what we should devote ourselves to, O God. Turn us toward those who show us how to serve as neighbors through life-giving words and deeds. Let us be bold in following their example, as we grow as disciples of the risen Christ. Amen.

I was intrigued by this week's lectionary scripture because Tabitha, the disciple that Peter made to come alive again has a Greek name of Dorcas, the lady for whom the Dorcas Society was named in 1834. Now, let me say here that while our text says that Peter prayed over her purportedly dead body and raised her up, we don't know if she was actually dead or simply comatose. We remember that Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead as well. Peter stands firm in his identity, in Tabitha's identity and in resurrection identity. The simple power of resurrection life that refuses to be snuffed out by circumstances or oppressive systems. Dorcas will not live forever, but this is not her day to die, or at least to remain dead. The emphasis of this text is not upon a return from death, but upon a community honing all of its spiritual strength and resources passionately upon life and wholeness.

I delved a little deeper into the history of the Dorcas Society and found the following on the web, courtesy of Wikipedia which has improved greatly in accuracy as a source of information. A Dorcas Society is a local group of people, usually based in a church, with a mission of providing clothing to the poor. The original society was founded in Douglas, Isle of Man, one of the British Isles, on December 1, 1834, as part of the community's thanksgiving for being spared from an outbreak of cholera.

This day was set apart by Wesleyan Methodists and others, of Douglas, for Public Thanksgiving to the Almighty for that merciful exemption of the town from

cholera during that year. At a meeting held in the Vestry of the Wesleyan Chapel at which several ladies were present it was agreed: "That a Society be formed, which shall be denominated 'THE DOUGLAS DORCAS SOCIETY', in allusion to the character of Dorcas recorded in Acts ix, 36." They had a set of rules and primarily made clothing for the poor and needy. The immediate reason for the Society's founding seems to have been that there had been a wholesale destruction of clothes and bedding during the cholera outbreak which had left many of the poorer families in the town in great need. Blankets were given out, as well as the garments sewn by members of the sewing circle.

Our Dorcas Society was founded November 23, 1897 by Kate Douglas Wiggin as an auxiliary of Tory Hill Meeting House whose initial or primary purpose was defined as religious, charitable, literary and educational. The *Dorcas Doings* published in 1927 states, "The original Dorcas of Joppa was a saint and lived a saintly life, but we modern Dorcas of Maine can hardly hope to reach such heights." Much of the work of the Dorcas Society of Hollis and Buxton as it was legally incorporated, was in connection with the welfare, repairs and upkeep of the old Tory Hill Meetinghouse and its parsonage and with the building and maintenance of a much-needed parish house at Bar Mills. It also gave generously to the surrounding area charitable organizations. I am not sure what Kate Douglas Wiggin would think of the present Dorcas Society as it has evolved, but it certainly isn't what she established originally.

Tabitha was a disciple of Christ and she lived with the hard questions of the day which were "What is your identity? How shall you be known?" They are also questions for the early church, to whom Acts is written, and questions for the church today. What is our identity? How shall we be known? Will people who meet

us identify us as Christians by our actions? Tabitha's Aramaic name links her to her ancestors, Abraham and Sarah who trusted God would lead them to new lives, Moses and Miriam who led the people out of slavery, and the prophets who proclaimed the justice and compassion of God. Jesus was from this same prophetic lineage and was executed by the Roman empire yet remained a source of resurrection life for all who believed.

Dorcas was her Greek name, the official language of the Roman Empire and establishing a bicultural identity was a necessity for Dorcas, as it is whenever people live in a dominating culture that continually privileges language, art, music, and how one is named in order to gain access and advantage. Dorcas knows how to navigate in that world, no doubt using her tailoring skills to make a living in the economy of Roman control, but also resisting the hierarchy and its exclusive domination by ministering to women routinely overlooked. Dorcas' acts are life-giving and Dorcas was a very important part of the early church as she lived a life definitely worth emulating.

I spent a good bit of time trying to make a link down through the ages, bringing Dorcas forward into our time and also thinking about the influence the women who followed and supported Jesus have had on the church through the years. Thinking about how women have been suppressed through the ages from the beginning of time and how we have struggled to make our voices heard. Granted, some women are very happy to be mothers and homemakers and others are very ambitious, striving to break the "glass ceiling."

We recently saw the movie, "The Wife" starring Glenn Close. Without spoiling the story for anyone who hasn't seen it, the story centers around a woman who is an

excellent writer, but who is told as a college student, by another woman no less, that the men who pick the books will never pick books written by a woman. This explains why some women wrote under men's names back years ago – in order to be published, and in the movie Glen's character goes even further than that.

So, who do we know we can link to Tabitha/Dorcas? Mother St. Teresa comes to mind as she spent her adult life caring for those society would throw away. Hanley Denning from our own nearby Yarmouth who sold everything and went to Guatemala to help save the extremely poor children who scavenged the Guatemala dump and formed the organization "Safe Passage" which continues her work long after her death.

It isn't only famous women; I could name many more women who fought long and hard for the emancipation of slaves, for the women's right to vote, better working conditions for women in the factories, but it is also women who quietly worked for simple improvements in the world such as those who advocate for justice for victims of sexual assault, domestic violence, clean water and the list goes on.

I googled "women who exemplify Dorcas" hoping I would find a few women who are considered to be like Dorcas and was quite surprised to find nothing there except several articles about Dorcas herself. What I did find was that the name literally means, "a gazelle", and that she has the distinction of being the first Greek female mentioned in the New Testament.

We don't know if Dorcas was married or if she was a mother. Nothing is mentioned in that regard, but nevertheless, she had some things in her life that every woman, mother or not, needs in her life today. She was able to navigate in the life

of the Roman Empire and in the life of the Hebrew nation. She was a good woman who made it her charge to see to the needs of others more than her own needs. I know I have had those women in my life – all through my life. I think of the minister's widow, Mrs. Campbell, who came to our town when I was a little girl and served as the minister, although she had no formal religious training. She also served as the leader of our Sunday school, Vacation Bible school, and youth groups for both boys and girls. She was someone we looked up to, who taught us core values and always looked out for the needs of others more than her own.

I think of my friend Janie who I have talked about many times. She has always put others needs before her own even though she has suffered much loss in her life. I am not sure if she ever thought of herself first, but rather how could she help someone she felt was in greater need than she was. She was not afraid of catching any disease she might be exposed to in order to help someone. She was not afraid to stop and pick up a local young man who was always in trouble with the law and most people were afraid of – even visiting him in jail.

I know that all of you have women in your lives who are like that. So, I charge us as we go forth to celebrate Mother's Day and beyond – let us think about Dorcas/Tabitha and try to emulate her in our daily lives. Even though our lives 2,000 years later are very different, we can do it and we will be so much the richer for it. Amen.