

Acts 9:36-43

9:36 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.

9:37 At that time she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs.

9:38 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."

9:39 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.

9:40 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.

9:41 He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive.

9:42 This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord.

9:43 Meanwhile, he stayed in Joppa for some time with a certain Simon, a tanner.

Sermon: Mothering Love

While I was a student at Wake Forest Divinity School, I was fortunate to have Dr. Phyllis Tribble as a professor for several classes. Her work has pioneered feminist perspectives in Biblical scholarship. In her work, Dr. Tribble combines a steadfast respect for ancient texts with a determination to give women equal voice. She has a remarkable way of noticing details that matter.

She often speaks of Miriam, Moses' sister. In the final redaction of Biblical texts that are available to us in 2025, Dr. Tribble tells us that Miriam is the only woman of whom we hear details of her whole life: as a young person, as an adult, as a seasoned adult, and of her death, and events beyond her death. We know she helps Moses to safety. We know she is a warrior who dances after the defeat of the Egyptians. We know she is a trusted advisor to Moses in the wilderness. We know her people wait for her recuperation from illness before resuming travel. We know of her death. We know how her people celebrated and acknowledged her life.

Miriam is the exception, and even still, editors diminish her presence. In most instances, stories of women in our sacred texts relate to marriage and birth. We hear very little of characters like Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, Hannah, and Ruth after they have been married and mothered sons. In the rare instances where we hear accounts of women beyond familial roles, the wisdom of Deborah, the courage of Esther, the determination of the Daughters of Zelophehad, we certainly don't hear additional details of their birth, death, or lasting influence. For comparison, we can chronicle the life stages of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Samuel, Samson, David, and even Boaz with ease, not to mention Jesus and John the Baptist.

It's really important for us to remember that the patriarchy's intentional attempts to exclude the accomplishments and contributions of women in written form does not erase their accomplishments and contributions. Ours is a faith rooted in the strength, love, and truth of women. They were there. They live in the spaces between the text, and they live in our hearts and minds.

Remember also that wealth in these times was passed only to male heirs of Jewish mothers. Such a system not only ensured the power and privilege of men, but also limited the spheres of influence for women – it threatened their full sense of humanity.

The Second Testament has its flaws as well, but we do begin to see some subtle shifts. Our Easter texts in this year's lectionary rotation have reminded us of women, who also happened to be mothers, who supported, followed, and bore witness to the events of Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. It is their strength and conviction that will pave the way for their dismissive male counterparts to eventually experience Easter for themselves. And it the witness of faithful women that makes ours possible today.

This morning's text is even better. Dorcas, or Tabitha, is mentioned as a disciple. Another Wake Forest faculty member who mothered and nurtured my sense of faith, Gail O'Day, notes that Dorcas is the only woman to be clearly and definitively mentioned as a disciple in Acts, and the only one in the whole of the Second Testament to be characterized as a disciple in the feminine form. Dorcas ministers and deacons to widows by providing for their needs: she makes them clothes, she offers emotional, physical, and financial support. Dorcas is a matron in a world full of patrons. She is a revered leader in her community, SO revered that when she dies, the community sends two men to go and find Peter. Dorcas is surrounded by women who weep

for her. And in raising Dorcas' body and spirit, Peter demonstrates the power and presence of God. Dorcas is SO credentialed, SO faithful, SO important that her death commands the pause of her entire community, and her revival is a lasting gospel expression. Dorcas, like Miriam before her, is a leader and provider whose leadership and provisions transcend systemic and structural norms.

And isn't that a theme of Easter, y'all? God doesn't create people in the image of systems. God creates people in order that their gifts, expressed in their own unique ways, might transform the world: created beings, living in shared creation, reshaping and reimagining God's possibilities.

We're also engaging this text on Mother's Day. Today, and every day, we give thanks for those persons who have mothered us, and all those who exhibit mothering qualities. Some have been our birth parents. Others have offered invaluable nurture and support.

It's my assumption that Miriam and Dorcas had children of their own, though I cannot say for sure. I assume this, because our texts often go to great pains to tell us when women are not birth mothers. In these patriarchal stories, there's a cruel irony: a woman's value is wholly attached to progeny. But women are rarely celebrated for progeny. It's an expectation and duty, and their bodies and lives become vessels. It's as if motherhood is the only thing to say about them, and the topic has a limited shelf life. And of course, this creates a culture of intense shame for women, who for whatever reason, cannot or choose not to have children.

But not in today's text! Dorcas is the kind of mother whose mothering transcends the idea of motherhood. I would imagine that motherhood is central to her identity, but not exclusive to her identity. Dorcas is first

and foremost a child of God, and that is the basis for her value. And she expresses her value in various roles which include disciple, leader, and friend, not to mention mother.

On this Mother's Day, I look around this room, and I am grateful for mothering figures of all expressions who keep bringing life into this community. Yes, some of you have literally given us breath, but that's not all you have given. You are teachers, and proclaimers, deacons, and ministers, and healers, and artists, and strategists, and marketers, and consultants, and financial advisors, and counselors, and activists, and volunteers, and friends, and disciples, and a thousand other things, too. And each and every day, in your own unique and spirited ways, you bring life into this world! To all those who model the motherly love and servanthood of Dorcas, we offer you our gratitude!

We also acknowledge that days like today aren't always easy, because for some of us, we are reminded of the mothering figures or children we've lost, or never had, or we grieve the opportunities for mothering that have eluded us. Once more, I believe the story of Dorcas is reminder of God's resurrecting possibilities: an old widow using her gifts to offer mothering love to widows longing for and needing motherly provisions. And there's no divine intervention needed to give Dorcas this mothering quality. As a matter of fact, the only mention of divine intervention is in reference to preserving the life of Dorcas so that others can keep experiencing her mothering love.

Finally, I also want to share with you that this morning's text is deeply personal for me. In my earlier preaching days, I always gravitated to the other lectionary text in this cycle: Psalm 23 or the Shepherd Psalm. I first preached the Dorcas text on Mother's Day three years ago, a month before my youngest daughter was born, and on the same week the Dobbs case was argued in the Supreme Court. This text affirms the

sacred autonomy of every person, and particularly the sacred autonomy of choice regarding reproductive rights. And taken with the 23rd Psalm, this text affirms the sanctity of both mother and child, and insists that sanctity cannot be absent from the abundance, provisions, and care that allow every life to thrive. I'm grateful for the wisdom of this text, and I hope one day, our nation's leaders will once more pursue its call for benevolence and empathy over and above their desire for sanctimony and political expedience.

Two months after first preaching this text, two stalwarts of my personal faith journey passed away in the same week: Carolyn McClendon here at Millbrook, and Marge Henderson at Sardis.

I don't remember exactly where I sat for Carolyn's memorial service, but it was somewhere about halfway up the piano side, and I remember listening to Bob and Kayla and the others offer such wonderful words about Carolyn's life, and I was grieving one friend, and wondering what in the world I was gonna say about another. And the story of Dorcas offered such a comfort.

Here's one detail I haven't focused on today. Dorcas was a provider – she knitted tunics for all the widows in her community. If we read this text too quickly, we may miss the depth of her wealth. It's not just that Dorcas had a wealth of resources; she also had a wealth of love. And she shared her love in transcendent ways. Dorcas made it her mission to offer belonging, and dignity, and community to widows who were not only grieving, but who also had an overwhelming sense of alienation and vulnerability.

Today's text tells us of the profound sense of loss – a void if you will – that was experienced at Dorcas' passing. The whole community

stopped. The widows gathered. The men came running, too. Even Peter, a pretty busy fellow himself, one-eighties to be at her side.

When I think about my friends Marge and Carolyn, I am flooded with a garment of memories, a tunic really. In each of them I received a thousand little affirmations to undergird the most vulnerable parts of my being – something knitted together with boundless love. And I know that that they knitted similar tunics for everyone they met, with just as much care and concern as they did mine.

And I suppose my two faith communities felt a strong sense of solidarity with those widows in Joppa all those years ago, because we too stood in the halls our friends once filled, clinging to our tunics, holding onto a tremendous tension: joy and gratitude for the gifts they were to each of us, and overwhelming grief for a present without their physical presence.

And I think then, I know, we know, a little something of resurrection in this story. I love, love, love that Dorcas is resurrected and resuscitated. She lives! She's so full of the God stuff; she's so important to her community; she's so exemplary of divine service, that she must live. And to be honest, I'm not the slightest bit interested in the science or the particulars behind such a miracle. Because while I am not a first-hand witness to the resurrected Dorcas of First-Century Joppa, I am a firsthand witness to the resurrected Dorcas of Twenty-First Century Raleigh and Charlotte. And HOW rich my life is, how rich our lives are, for such a gift.

On this, the Shepherd Sunday, the Psalmist proclaims, "The Lord is my shepherd." And sometimes, a whole lot more often than we realize, She comes as a tunic-maker named Dorcas. And I know this: I shall not want, and nor shall we. Thanks be to God!