

“Life-Giving Acts”  
Acts 9:36-43

In the famous Dostoyevsky’s novel *Crime and Punishment* we are presented a powerful scene when a murder and a prostitute are together in the prostitute’s house. The man is constantly looking over his shoulder afraid of prosecution for his crime of murder. The prostitute is living with deep guilt for her life style. In her house, the man notices a Bible. He asks her to read from it and she chooses the story of Jesus’ raising of Lazarus from the dead. Dostoevsky’s commentary follows, “the candle burned low as a harlot and an assassin sat under the spell of immortal words, words that said that if a man is dead, he shall live again - - words that said to a harlot and an assassin, You can be changed. You can be cleansed. You can once again be strong and beautiful. You can be reborn in your souls.”

This is the power and inspiration of the resurrection. This is the power of the stories of resurrection for the early Church. These stories were a very important part of what kept the early Christians going in the face of tremendous persecution. The story of the resurrection of Tabitha/Dorcas was an incredible witness of hope for a persecuted church. The crisis of Tabitha’s death was a small reflection of the greater crisis of the larger church. The people of faith were feeling discouraged because they had to continue the story of Christ without first-hand witnesses. By the time of the writing of the book of Acts which was around the year 90 or 100 CE, there were no more disciples who had been with Jesus and the church was under heavy persecution by the Roman government. The early Christians needed encouragement to know that the work of the resurrection and faith was still continuing. The story of Tabitha/Dorcas presented them the hope to know that the story of God’s salvation and love was still continuing. Peter was like Jesus and Jesus was like Elijah and like Elisha and all are like God: they raise the dead to life. The Christians had effectively been kicked out of Jerusalem and their movement was under heavy persecution. And yet the early Christians kept on believing and living out the ministry of Christ. The story of Tabitha/Dorcas was one of those formative stories that kept the fire burning within their hearts. For centuries this story has also inspired many ministries for faith building, justice and compassion such as Dorcas Home, Dorcas Ministries, Dorcas Learning Center, Dorcas Circle, and so on. Yet, this story is little known in many of our churches and among Christians today. For one thing, it is part of the same chapter where we hear about the story of Paul’s conversion. So, that story often overshadows the rest of the chapter. Today I would like to invite you to get to know Tabitha/Dorcas better. I will be sharing with you about her life in the first person.

“My name as you already heard is Tabitha or Dorcas. If you are wondering why I have two names, I can tell you it is pretty simple. It is because I was part of two cultures: Jewish and Greek. I spoke both languages: Aramaic and Greek. I was known among both groups in my community: The Greek Christians and the Aramaic speaking Christians. This was actually my nickname. But what I really liked about my name is that it means gazelle (a kind of antelope) in both languages. People started calling me Tabitha or Dorcas because of my speed and my ability to get things done. I was especially fast in helping others. I actually started my own business. I was a seamstress. But I didn’t just do it myself. I helped other women make a livelihood. They came and worked with me and we were able to support ourselves. In my time and culture, first-century Rome, women without men topped the list of vulnerable populations. A widow had little access to economic structures. That is why the Bible says over and over again to take care of the widows. Widows were not only women who lost their husbands. They were also women who did not get married or who lost their male protector such as their father or brother. They were very vulnerable in my time because only men could hold property and every

woman was supposed to be under the protection of a man for legal rights and matters of honor. But even though God through the teachings of our faith said many times to take care of the widows in the community, these women were often neglected and abused. I felt in my heart the pain of these women. I knew that I needed to do something about it. I felt God's compassion for them. I knew that our Lord Jesus spent his life teaching people to create a society that freed the oppressed from their suffering. I knew that this is what he would want me to do. So, I started this sewing business in my own house and organized a group of women to work with me and we were able to produce enough to take care of our own needs and to share with others. I had a lot of obstacles to overcome as a woman in my community, but through faith I found the courage to stand up for myself and for the poor women in Joppa. I was given the title of a disciple because of my love for Christ and my commitment to do his work. I am the only woman who has the title in the part of the Bible you call the New Testament. This was a great honor because many people believed that women were not good enough to be disciples or religious leaders. But Jesus was different from them. He believed that women and all people who were not high on the social ladder were good enough for the kingdom of God. Jesus saw in us the image of God and the gifts we had were to be shared with others. He knew that God's love was not limited by the standards of people and their social norms. I really was not trying to get any personal glory from following Jesus. All I wanted to do was live in the Spirit of love which he taught.

When I got sick and died many were mourning my death and they sent for Peter to come and pray for me. They wanted me to continue the work we were doing in Joppa and as it turned out, Peter was able to help me. This was an important reminder to the followers of Jesus that the work of Christ was not done and that we needed to continue. But my coming back to life was a reminder that the Holy Spirit was continuing to be among us. Just like the Holy Spirit worked among us through Elijah in raising the widow of Zarephath's son (1 Kings 17:17-24), through Elisha raising the Shunammite woman's son (2 Kings 4:18-37), and through Jesus in raising several people from the dead, the Spirit was working through the disciples of Jesus such as Peter and myself. This was so important to us because we were experiencing a lot of resistance. After Jesus was gone from us, we were still persecuted. The Roman government was going after us. They were afraid that we were going to cause unrest. They wanted the social order to stay the same. The religious leaders cooperated with them on that. They rejected our way of living out our faith. We saw that our faith led directly to doing justice and practicing compassion in our communities. They thought that we were agitators. We were not trying to overthrow any government. This was not the message of Jesus. What we were trying to do was establish communities of peace, justice and love. We took care of the poor, the sick and the imprisoned. This was our way of life as I believe it is your way of life. You give money to the poor, help those who are oppressed, and offer opportunities to those who may not get them in any other place. There is nothing really radical about that! But we became such a threat that they started stoning and executing us in public. But there was nothing they could have done that would have changed our commitment to God's love because once you know true love in your life, you are never the same. Love changes everything. Once you meet the Spirit of the living Christ, no earthly power can hold you back. I pray that you will continue in the Spirit of Christ in service, love, justice and compassion. I hope that you will always remember my story as a story of hope and love overcoming death and suffering. My story is about the love that will never die once it is born in you."

The story of Tabitha is an invitation to all of us to think about how we are continuing the mission of Christ in our world today. It is a story of hope to live a life filled with life-giving acts in the face of brokenness in our own lives and in our own world. Faith in Christ is not about living in some land of fantasy and bliss. It is about living faithfully in the face of the challenges of our everyday life. And there is great power in that because every time we affirm life in ourselves and in others,

we are reenacting the amazing mystery of life and faith. I would like to end with a poem called "Being the Resurrection" by Victoria Weinstein.

Being the Resurrection by Victoria Weinstein

The stone has got to be rolled back from the tomb again and again every year.  
Roll up your sleeves.

He is not coming back, you know.

He is not coming back unless it is we who rise for him

We who lay healing hands on the reviled and rejected like he did  
on his behalf --

We who rage for righteousness in his insistent voice

We who love the sinner, even knowing that "the sinner" is no farther off than our own heartbeat

He will not be back to join us at the table

To share God's extravagant banquet

God's love feast, *all are invited, come as you are*

And so it is you and I who must feast for him

Must say the grace and break the bread and pass it to the left  
and dish up the broiled fish (or pour the wine) and pass it to the right.

And treat each one so tenderly

as though just this morning she or he made the personal effort

to make it back from heaven, or from hell

but certainly from death

to be by our side.

Because if by some miracle (and why not a miracle?)

He did come back

Wouldn't he want to see us like this?

Wouldn't it be a miracle to live for just one day

So that if he did, by some amazing feat

come riding into town

He could take a look around and say

"This is what I meant!"

And we could say

*it took us a long time...*

*but we finally figured it out.*

Oh, let us live to make it so.

You are the resurrection and the life.

Amen.