

Karen Hollis  
May 12  
Acts 9:36-43  
Heart of the Church

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We haven't quite come to Pentecost in the church calendar, yet during this season of Easter, we get this glimpse into the life of the Apostles in the book of Acts. It's helpful to remember that the Holy Spirit came in on the day of Pentecost and turned the world upside down. God's presence was breaking in all over the place and astounding everyone. Fishermen are now preachers and healers, and someone like Saul can hear the voice of Jesus and transform his life. Acts tells us that after Saul's conversion followers of the Way lived in a time of peace and growth. One such community lived in Joppa, which is modern day Jaffa, on the Mediterranean Sea, about 50 km NW of Jerusalem. In their midst was a beloved woman named Tabitha.

Let us pray,  
May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be reflections of your word to us in Christ Jesus. Amen.

I love this story from Acts for many reasons and I'm really excited that on this day where we celebrate mothering, we have a text that lifts up the ministry of women! Tabitha is not only a woman in scripture with a name, her name is even translated into Greek as Dorcas. In English it is Gazelle. The church is full of Tabithas - how many have you known in the church who never fuss, but simply do what needs to be done? And are fulfilled in doing it? How many have you known who feel a genuine sense of purpose in serving the church? And you wonder, how can they possibly do another thing? Is there nothing that can hold this person back. Upon reflection you think, how many people are better off because of what this person does?

How many have you known who serve just out of love for God? We celebrate the Tabithas . . . and how much do we grieve when we lose them? How much do we celebrate their ministries and cherish what they leave behind?

Does anyone else find it kind of incredible that this story about a community of widows made it into Acts of the Apostles? It's actually consistently discussed by scholars . . . this is a very unusual story. From a healing perspective, there is usually some kind of sermon explaining the meaning behind this particular healing, but that sermon is absent; the apostles usually verbalize the name of Jesus in their healing, but Peter doesn't do that. Usually, we know people by their ailments, but here, equal attention paid in this story to Tabitha's back story as is her healing; we are told specifically why she is so essential to their community.

Tabitha it would seem is the one in the community who makes everything happen – you know what I mean? She just has a way about her that brings things to life, and at the same time, she does the most practical of things: makes clothing and gives the items to those in need, and she leads the social services in their town. While she is essential to her community, Luke also tells us she is a disciple of Jesus, using the female form of this word. It's the only time in the Christian scriptures it is used. She is a woman and she is a disciple. She is an equal and her work is crucial to the kingdom of God. Work like Tabitha's is the heartbeat of the church; Peter has a flashy ministry, going from community to community, he's known everywhere, teaching, clarifying, healing, checking in with communities. His work is to support the heart of the church, where people like Tabitha are doing ministry on the ground, day to day with people, serving selflessly in the name of Jesus.

Why Tabitha? Why this community and not another? I don't think we can know. The thing that stands out about this place is how common it is. It's a community of people, living their lives. Tabitha sees where the need is and meets it in practical and deeply impactful ways, and the women are proud of the garments she provides and are grateful for them.

But you see a curious thing when you look back to the beginning of Luke's gospel (the gospel of Luke and Acts of the Apostle's was written by the same person) to another beautiful woman of God, and a mother. When we remember back to Mary's Magnificat, we remember her celebration of our God who holds a special place for those who especially need God's care. "God has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant . . . God lifted up the lowly; God has filled the hungry with good things. God has helped his servant Israel in remembrance of his mercy." (Luke 2)

God remembers the humble community and the selfless servant and sends Peter to demonstrate that God is alive here in an ordinary place, with ordinary people who accomplish extraordinary things day to day for the kingdom of God. The Holy Spirit broke in at Pentecost and turned the world upside down. This is a world where in ordinary places God demonstrates the extraordinary; in ordinary places God's power is active; in ordinary places, God saves us right in the midst of our lives. God's power breaks in not because we are strong, but it breaks into our brokenness. God knows the way of brokenness; God knows the path of death into life and restores even us. Thanks be to God.