

Where No One is Left Out
Acts 9:36-43
The Rev. Mary Kathleen Duncan
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Acts 9:36-43

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

The word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Today represents many things in the life of our congregation – the fourth Sunday of Easter (remember it’s a season, not just a day), Confirmation, and the start of a new sermon series. This summer, we will explore the book of Acts. We chose this book of the Bible because Acts is the continuation of Luke’s Gospel narrative. They have the same author. And this particular story is a great one to start with.

As Nick reminded me when we were talking about this passage on Thursday morning, the story of Tabitha is a clear illustration of Act’s symmetry with the gospel story. The women at the tomb were the first to get a foretaste of the resurrection promise and now Tabitha is the first woman resurrected. The phrase, “Tabitha, get up,” mirrors the phrase “Talitha, cum,” used when Jesus resurrects a little girl in Galilee in Mark 5. And remember Lazarus? Jesus raised him from the dead before his own resurrection in John 11. Most of the time, we will explore Acts chronologically, but occasionally we will go out of order, like we are today.

Now let's get this sermon started...in the style of Ben Dorr. I'll give you a moment to get ready. Really think about this question and answer honestly. Who here today has ever felt left out?

Maybe it was during your school days on the playground. Maybe you weren't invited to a party in high school. Maybe your friends planned Halloween costumes together and didn't include you. Maybe you weren't invited to join the neighborhood moms' text chain. Maybe you didn't make the team. Maybe you saw a picture of your college buddies on a golf trip and wondered why you hadn't been invited. We have all experienced the feeling of being left out at some point or another. We will very likely feel it again. I got to thinking about feeling "left out" because of our 2025 Confirmation Class. 9th Grade can be one of the prime times in life where you might feel "left out". You're just starting high school. People have suddenly merged from different middle schools and friend groups are shifting. You have more freedom than in middle school, but your family's rules might be different from another family's rules. Your curfew might be way earlier than the group of friends you prefer hanging out with. You might have made the varsity team while all of your friends are still on JV. Suddenly you're on the outside of the circle, looking in and longing to belong. I imagine that for some of you, it was hard to enter the Confirmation classroom for the first time. Where would you sit? Who would you sit with? Would you be included in the conversation? I'll say it again. It is hard to feel left out. It is vulnerable. It is hurtful. It is lonely. But it is also a common human experience.

We don't know a lot about Tabitha. Her story is encased in just these 8 verses of scripture. But we know that she was also called Dorcas. Dorcas is a Greek name that comes from the word *derkomai*, "to see clearly". It also means gazelle because a gazelle is an animal with large, bright eyes. Tabitha was friends with several widows, so maybe she was one herself. Or maybe she just took the call of God to care for those on the margins like orphans, widows, and strangers seriously. Tabitha was also the maker of clothing. And not just any clothing, but clothing her community was proud to show off. We know that she was someone who took care of the poor. When our scripture tells us that she was "devoted to good works and acts of charity" that more specifically means that she helped those who had nothing. She gave them money and food and clothing and was merciful to them. She exercised great compassion for those in need. Tabitha was also a disciple. And when the book of Acts uses that word, it means disciple of Jesus. Remember, the writer Luke is continuing the gospel story through the book of Acts. It is the story of Jesus' disciples, and those they've brought into the community since his ascension, continuing his ministry. The word used here is the first and only time in

the Bible that the word for **female disciple** is used. A male disciple was known as *mathetes*. A female disciple was called a *mathetria*. Both come from the word math – the mental effort to think through something. Strong’s Concordance of the Bible defines disciple as, “a follower of Christ who learns the doctrines of Scripture and the lifestyle they require; someone catechized with proper instruction from the Bible with its necessary life applications.” What we have here in this sanctuary today is 43 new *matheteses* and *mathetrias*.

The chapter of Acts 9 has A LOT going on. And it is, geographically, all over the place. At the beginning of the chapter, a text to which we will return during this summer sermon series on Acts, is the story of Saul’s conversion to Paul on the road to Damascus. After being baptized in Damascus and then proclaiming that Jesus is the Son of God to synagogues there, Paul heads to Jerusalem where he joins the other disciples. The action then suddenly shifts to Peter who is in the region of Joppa, Lydda, and Sharon where he heals a paralyzed man named Aeneas and then raises Tabitha from the dead. Peter ends up staying in Joppa for an undisclosed amount of time, living with a man known as Simon the Tanner. The distance between Damascus and Joppa is over 200 miles. This was quite a long distance in Jesus’ time and wouldn’t have been an easy journey. Place is important in this chapter. It is important that the good news of Jesus Christ is proclaimed in Damascus, a place outside the region of Galilee, where Jesus did the majority of his ministry. It is important that Paul builds community with the disciples in Jerusalem where Jesus was crucified and raised. It is important that the action makes its way to Joppa, a port city on the Mediterranean Sea.

I wanted to understand a bit more about Tabitha’s place of belonging. The place where her gifts were honored, and her name was beloved, and her work made a difference. I wanted to know more about Joppa, so I did some research this week. Jaffa, as it is known today, is a suburb of Tel Aviv, the capital of Israel. If you visit Israel, you would most likely fly into the Ben Gurion Airport in Tel Aviv. Jaffa is port city along the Mediterranean Sea. It was founded in 1800 BCE and the cedars of Lebanon that were used in the building of Solomon’s Temple came through this port. It is also the place where the prophet, Jonah (remember him?), boarded a ship to escape God’s call. Today it is a city where Jews, Muslims, and Christians co-exist. It is 37% Arab, some of whom are Muslims, some of whom are Christian. The remaining population is made up of Israeli Jews. There is a church there that bears Tabitha’s name. St. Peter and St. Tabitha’s church is built over the traditional site of Tabitha’s tomb and serves the Russian Orthodox community. There is also a school sponsored by the Church of Scotland in Jaffa that was founded in her name. The Tabitha School provides education in English to children of Christian, Muslim,

and Jewish backgrounds and “promotes reconciliation, tolerance, and harmony.” What a legacy Tabitha has left behind. Jaffa, a place that has such close ties to new life and promises of resurrection and hopes for a world where those with different beliefs can co-exist peacefully, is only 40 miles from Gaza. Gaza. The place in the news. The place of destruction. The place of displacement and war and discord. 40 miles. Sliding rock, Sierra Nevada brewery, Presbyterian College. These are all places about 40 miles from here. Can you imagine war and destruction happening in places so close to us? In places where we have memories and families live and schools welcome students and nature exists in all its beauty?

You may not believe me, but this week, in addition to my research on Joppa, I encountered a podcast about a woman named Tabatha. And so, I couldn’t help but listen to it. It is the newest episode of one of my favorite podcasts, Criminal, hosted by Phoebe Judge. In fact, I referenced another episode of this podcast in last year’s Confirmation sermon. If you’ve yet to check out this podcast, I think this is your sign. But, I digress. The story of Tabatha Trammell from the May 2nd episode of Criminal reminded me so much of Tabitha of Joppa. Tabatha Trammell first entered the criminal justice system when she was 15 years old, pregnant, and arrested for selling marijuana on the streets of Atlanta.

She gave birth to her first child in prison and was in and out for several years. But eventually, Tabatha got her life together. She re-engaged the Christian faith of her upbringing and began to depend on God. She fought for custody of her two oldest children and went on to have 3 more children. Tabatha became a wonderful and caring mother. And the title of mother became so important to her that she felt called to help other women who were pregnant and incarcerated. At the age of 50, Tabatha went back to school to receive training as a doula. She now accompanies women who are incarcerated or recently released through their pregnancies. She advocates for them, supports them, teaches them about parenting, and helps bring life into the world. The name of her venture? Dorcas Doula Initiative.

Why did these two stories remind me of one another?

Because they are stories in which NO ONE IS LEFT OUT. Tabitha of Joppa is the culmination of an important chapter of Acts. We see Paul the former persecutor of Christians welcomed into the Way. We see Aeneas, paralyzed for 8 years, someone whom society had surely cast aside, healed in the name of Jesus. We see Peter staying with Simon the Tanner, a man who works with dead animal skins. A man any good Jew, a man like Peter was raised to be, would consider unclean. And we see Tabitha. A woman. Possibly a widow. Unattached to a man. Helper those of the margins. The lowest of low in the culture of the day. We see HER as the first person raised from the dead after Jesus. We see HER called by name and referred

to as a female disciple. Tabitha carries the gospel promise of resurrection in her very body. And shares it with the world. Tabitha of Joppa shows us that everyone has a place in the kingdom of God and NO ONE IS LEFT OUT. Tabatha Trammell very obviously wants live into her name. She wants to be like Tabitha of Joppa. Why else would she have named her venture after the Greek form of her name? She wants to live a life where NO ONE IS LEFT OUT. Even those whom society has cast aside. Who have made poor choices and ended up in the system. Tabatha Trammell sees those in need clearly, just as her namesake did 2,000 years ago. As Kaitlyn Scheiss says about the biblical Tabitha, “Tabitha lives like the kingdom of God had actually arrived, like Jesus had actually risen from the dead.”¹ And you know what? I think Tabatha Trammell does, too. She lives as if Jesus is really risen, and that new life is possible in his name.

There are things in this world that make us certain that death and destruction, loneliness and hardship, war and decay are the status quo. They’re something we can’t escape. Something we must accept. The way life is intended to be. But they’re not. They’re not for places like Gaza, no matter what we hear or how insurmountable peace seems. They’re not for our community here. And they’re not for our individual lives.

I want y’all to go from this place living like the Tabithas of the world. Living like the kingdom of God has actually arrived. Go out into the world and make sure NO ONE IS LEFT OUT. See others clearly. See yourselves clearly. And bring people together. Invite others in. Create inclusive communities. Maybe even make yourself a little vulnerable. Sit next to someone you don’t know very well and ask what they did over the weekend. Seek out a service opportunity where your unique skills and gifts meet the needs of someone on the margins. Introduce yourself to a person you don’t know on your pew. Stay for the reception after worship today and make a new friend. Foster peace and tolerance and understanding in the world. Throw a party and invite those who never get invited. Because the kingdom of God has actually arrived, and you are a part of it. Amen and amen.

¹[Women in Scripture and Mission: Tabitha - CBE International](#)