

**“Dorcas”**  
**Acts 9:36-43**  
**Andrew Foster Connors**  
**3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Easter**  
**April 10, 2016**

First of all, who names their kid Dorcas? I’m only asking the question because everyone that I’ve told “I’m preaching on Dorcas” has snickered. It’s impossible to know how many people were named Dorcas in Peter’s time, but there are only about 22-26 newborns named “Dorcas” each year in the US. Nobody in MD has been named Dorcas since 5 people named their kids that back in 1947. Hopefully none of them are in church today. If there are any Dorcas here today, don’t blame me – I’m just reporting on the snickering that I’ve received which is probably less severe than the laughs you got as a kid.

The obscurity of the name is kind of fitting since Dorcas is kind of obscure in Acts. We don’t hear about her before this brief or after her brief appearance in this text today. She’s not a powerful leader in the traditional sense of that term. There’s nothing heroic about the circumstances of her death. She was devoted to good works and charity. Nothing terribly notable. Which raises the question, what’s the big deal about Dorcas?

The obvious answer is that Peter is trying to do everything that Jesus did when he was around including raising a little girl to life. We don’t know the name of the girl that Jesus raised but we do know that he said to her, “Talitha cum,” which means, “Little girl, get up.” And “Talitha” sounds a lot like Tabitha, the Aramaic name of Dorcas. Just like Jesus, Peter comes across someone who has died. Just like Jesus he puts everybody out of the room. Almost just like Jesus, he says, “Tabitha, get up.” I think Luke wants us to see that Peter can be just like Jesus. Miraculous power doesn’t end with Jesus. New life doesn’t end with Jesus.

But why waste this kind of miracle on Dorcas? Think about it – if you had the power to raise someone from the dead, wouldn’t you think carefully about who you would use it on? Bring back someone notable; someone worthy of a long obituary printed in the Joppa Sun. But Dorcas? Really? You have to question Peter’s discretion here. There are plenty of other dead people in Joppa during his time, I’m sure, who could benefit from new life. But Peter chooses Dorcas, which doesn’t make a lot of sense.

If Dorcas were a student applying to college, she wouldn’t be at the top of her class. Her application would note only “devoted to good works and charity. Able to knit tunics.” About the only thing that would stand out on her application would be her name.

If Dorcas were running for office, she wouldn’t stand a chance. She wouldn’t move anyone deeply with her speeches, no charisma as far as we know. No exceptional energy or passion. Yet Peter chooses her for this act of extraordinary healing.

If Dorcas were applying for a job, her application probably wouldn’t rise to the top. It would have solid recommendations – “dependable,” “consistent,” but

nothing like “gregarious” or “a notable leader.” Yet Peter chooses her to heal. Peter chooses her, a standard rate disciple devoted to charity and good works to be his choice for an extraordinary gift of life.

Of course, Peter’s choosing of Dorcas isn’t the first time she’s been chosen. Dorcas had already been chosen as a disciple. Maybe that word doesn’t seem that important to you since we use it all the time around here. We apply it to people who follow Jesus regardless of anything else about them including their gender. “God calls women and men to all ministries of the church,” states the Brief Statement of Faith. But this is the only time in the New Testament that the Greek word for disciple is used in its feminine form. And that name is applied to Dorcas.

At a time when few would have expected women to be public leaders, the church chooses Dorcas and a bunch of other widows to help lead the church. And maybe that’s the first miracle in this story: God chooses people the rest of the world would never choose to lead the church. Peter himself is a case in point. Who would have guessed that Peter would go from serial denier of Jesus, to the number one healer on the apostles’ team? Not too long ago we watched Peter slink away from Jesus, deny his relationship with him, run in fear. But here he is *acting like* Jesus and doing a pretty good job at it, too! And Peter’s not the only one in the book of Acts. Next week we’ll hear from the youth about the most notorious turnaround – Saul to Paul – persecutor of the church becomes its primary planter.

These stories shouldn’t surprise anyone who knows the basic biblical trajectory. This is the God who chooses fisherman to follow, and children to prophesy, deniers and haters to teach us how to trust and love. And while we don’t get that much on Dorcas, the tears of the widows tell us enough. People don’t cry that hard for someone who’s had no effect on their lives, especially not widows who are already acquainted with grieving. The deeper the relationship, the more impactful the life, the harder the grief. The stronger the love, the more difficult it is to grieve. The widows’ tears are enough to show us that Dorcas had weaved more than tunics with her modest gifts. She had woven the church together into a community of disciples chosen by the Spirit to continue the ministry of Jesus.

These are the kinds of people God chooses to lead in the church. People who might not do well in college admissions, or electoral politics, or job applications. People whose primary feature is not even really their devotion to good works and charity, or their ability to sew fine tunics, or their capacity to always remain true to Jesus. No, people’s who’s primary distinguishing mark is that they’ve been called and claimed by God, baptized in the Spirit, given an assignment that matters even if that assignment is forgotten, or barely remembered by the rest of the world.

I spent this week in Birmingham, AL with The Well, the name given to a group of preachers who get together once a year with gifts of study papers and sermons and support to keep us strong in ministry. On Thursday afternoon several of us ventured over to 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church to see the memorial to the children killed in the bombing of the church in 1963, the church that had served as a kind of headquarters for Birmingham’s part of the civil rights movement. I was moved standing there on 16<sup>th</sup> street looking at the place where a bomb tore through the church and took the lives of 4 little girls. The scripture quote on the tombstone spoke to God’s ability to take the worst of our world and transform it into good.

Ordinary disciples whose deaths catalyzed international outrage at the depth of white hatred in our country.

But across the street in the civil rights museum I spent more time than I expected reading newspaper articles about the Montgomery bus boycott. Rosa Parks, of course, started off the Montgomery action by refusing to give up her seat in the front of the bus. But the boycott lasted 381 days. People still had to get to work, so the churches organized transportation. Buried in one article was a note that the black churches had banded together to purchase 14 new station wagons to provide transportation to get people to work. I thought about all the ordinary Christians in those churches, pooling their offerings, organizing the carpool lists, recruiting volunteer drivers. All the ordinary Christians whose good works and charity, not so notable as individuals, wove a fabric of action that helped launch a movement that continues to transform. Whose ordinary action produced miracles of life not just for people in the churches, but for the whole world.

So I thank God today for all the ordinary actions in our churches and for those of you who commit yourselves to them. You who cook casseroles that feed the hungry, organized Lenten lunches that weave a fabric across the dividing line of Eutaw Street, and teach the faith. You who lead committees and serve on them, You who lead us in singing the faith, and sharing our gifts, and welcoming new members, and praying every week for people on the prayer list. You who tutor children in our program or at Eutaw-Marshburn, or sing with them not always sure if your efforts will make the difference. You who give generously trusting that God can take your offerings and transform them into healing and helping. You who cut up the communion bread and prepare the juice, and knit the prayer shawls and visit the sick. And you who, in your work, heal and write and nurse and teach and legislate and dispense justice and build and make art and lead. Because this is the way God transforms the world – through countless actions of obscure disciples whose work and whose efforts matter in the church.

It may not always seem like it. Like the college admissions process, we sometimes think the best and the brightest are the primary way change comes about. We look for the most charismatic politicians, the standout individuals. And sometimes they deliver. But Jesus looks for disciples, disciples whose ordinary gifts are multiplied by this motley crew of disciples called the church. A church whose roots prevent us from becoming mere flashes in the pan. A church whose Spirit takes less than perfect people, ordinary people, and continues to weave them into a community that can transform the world.