

“Tabitha the Resurrected”
May 12, 2019 Rev. Michele Ward Acts 9:36-43
Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church

Sermon Prayer

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable in your sight, O Lord our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Over the course of the next month, with the exception of Confirmation Sunday, we will be exploring three different women in the books of Acts. The lectionary was kind this year and gave us three dynamic women: Tabitha, Lydia, and an unnamed, enslaved prophet.

This morning we start out in Acts chapter 9 with the account of Tabitha’s resurrection. Directly before her resurrection, Peter heals another person: a man by the name of Aeneas experiencing paralysis. Peter goes from the home of Aeneas to the home of Tabitha because their towns were close to one another.

Her community had already prepared her body for burial, ready for the inevitable, but they had not lost all hope. Two men from Joppa come to Peter and ask him to come with them in order to raise Tabitha from the dead. They ask Peter to do something that no other apostle has yet done: raise a beloved woman disciple from the dead. Peter rushes to Joppa with the messengers. When he arrives in the room where Tabitha’s body rests, he sees active mourning happening. The widows that Tabitha cared for are there, showing Peter the evidence of her value to them: the clothes and tunics that she had made for them herself.

Peter makes all of them leave the room when he begins to pray. He tells Tabitha to get up, which is similar language that Jesus used when he resurrects a little girl in Mark Ch. 5. I wonder if Peter, not sure how to do this or if it would work, used these words on purpose. If they worked for Jesus, then they surely will work for me! And, perhaps to Peter’s surprise, Tabitha

opens her eyes, takes Peter's hand, and gets up. I imagine her body prepared for burial, covered in sweet smelling oils and spices, awaiting her burial place, and the sudden return of her beloved community into the upper room. I imagine the widows and others rushing to her side, full of joy and gratitude.

Now, if we were to leave the story there, we would not be remiss. Many people do that. Peter runs to Joppa, heals Tabitha, many people convert to Christianity because of this miracle, and then Peter hangs out in town for a bit. End scene.

In the landscape of biblical characters, commentators and readers of this story think of Tabitha as the quintessential deacon--performing acts of charity, compassion, and hospitality. She is, for lack of a better phrase, the "classic church lady." And while these are the markings of faithful ministry in every age, the text reveals something unusual about Tabitha to us.

You see, the author of Acts does not call Tabitha a deacon, nor do they call what she does ministry. Rather, the Greek word used to describe her only occurs once in the New Testament. It is the word for disciple in the feminine form of the noun - *methetria*. This word is never used to describe women in the Bible, and yet here it is, plain as day. And yet some scholars reduce this word to mean "a Christian woman" by definition and dismiss her role in the early church. We do not know much about Tabitha. We do not know if she was a woman of means, if she had any family, etc. But we do know that she was so well loved that two men from her community rush to the nearby town to find Peter and bring him to Joppa to heal her. We do know if she was a widow herself and felt a kinship with the other widows she provided for so generously. But we do know that they loved her so dearly that they were actively grieving and could not help but show Peter the power of her works among them.

Her service in Joppa is not called ministry, either. The text refers to her actions as works and deeds in the original text. This signifies the value and importance of the work she was doing. This is a phrase for disciples and

apostles, for their healings, miracles, and teachings. For this phrase to show up in describing a woman like Tabitha is no small thing, and we are meant, as readers and listeners, to see this story in a new light because of this.

A feminist interpretation of Tabitha's life and deeds in Joppa plays on the idea that "the personal is political."¹ In feminist theory, the problems that women face are not individual issues for women to solve on their own. Their problems are political--shared and held by many women--and women need to address them as such. If we look at Tabitha's life this way, we see that she chose to make the problems of the widows her problem. In a political system where widows usually did not retain the wealth of their husbands after their death and relied on benevolent family members to care for them, the women that Tabitha provided for would have been close or near homelessness. Without her capacity to see their suffering as her suffering, Tabitha could have easily dedicated her energy and resources elsewhere as such a prominent figure in her community. But the suffering they experience is not a result of anything that they have done wrong. Their suffering is a direct result of the Roman system that subjugates their bodies, treats them like objects for birthing male heirs, and does not value them outside of their relationships to their husbands.

Tabitha is not simply a kind hearted woman. By directly ministering to these women, she is working against a male-centric approach to life that marginalizes women without men to pay their way. Taking it a step further, we could even say that Tabitha's resurrection points out to us that God cares not only for the widows themselves, but also seeks to dismantle the systems and transactions that keep them economically and relationally dependent.

What system are you called to dismantle? What barriers are you meant to break down for the sake of others? Go and live like the same resurrection that flows through the bodies of Jesus and Tabitha flows through you. Amen.

¹ Carol Hanisch, "The Personal is Political," in *Notes from the Second Year: Women's Liberation*, ed. Shulamitch Firestone and Anne Koedt (New York: Radical Feminism, 1970).