

The Fourth Sunday of Easter  
May 12, 2019  
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Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Acts 9:36-43  
Psalm 23  
Revelation 7:9-17  
John 10:22-30

We had a funeral here yesterday. And I told those who were gathered here on that occasion that Mother's Day is complicated here. It's a grand day for some, of course, but it's a hard day for others. That makes it hard to celebrate here in public – because of our different and divergent experiences of mothers and of motherhood.

And it's not really on our calendar in any event. Today is the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter, and it's a minor feast day in its own right; we always celebrate this Sunday as "Good Shepherd" Sunday.

But yesterday, on the eve of these twin feasts, I allowed that we could celebrate both of these minor feast days: the love of a particular mother and Good Shepherd Sunday. For at its best, the love of a mother is like the care of a shepherd for a flock ... and both of them like God's steadfast, never-failing, abiding love: for her; and for all of us.

Well, that was yesterday. Today I'm going to flip the usual options and set aside both Mother's Day and Good Shepherd Sunday for that odd little story about funeral from Acts instead.

The story from Acts is easily overlooked. The traditional shepherd passages are so much more appealing. And even within the Book of Acts, it's a little-known account. Last week, we heard one of the best-known of the stories from Acts, the blinding account of Saul's conversion. This week, it's one of the least-known stories, the raising of Tabitha.

And even when this story is told, the emphasis is on Peter, not Tabitha. Which can be unhelpful. We get so few glimpses of women in Acts. And when we do glimpse them, they're generally passive and their stories are overrun by the stories of men who preach and do important stuff.

So this morning I want to start by noticing Tabitha. And the first thing we're told, even before we hear her name, is that she is a disciple. It's the only time in the New Testament that the feminine form of the noun is used, and it refers to her. That's a big deal.

And then we're told her name, not just once, but twice. Again, that's a big deal. Women so rarely get named at all, but we're told her name is Tabitha, in Greek Dorcas. In English, she's Gazelle.

And she is highly praised for being "devoted to good works and acts of charity." It's hard to know specifically what that includes. We're not told the details. And in Acts, the details are rarely spelled out, but it's a fair guess that her works revolve around what might be called "community care." She'd be one of those who tended to the fabric of the community, doing the things (often behind the scenes and unseen) that make a community work.

On Mother's Day, we might surmise she was a mother. And she may have been. It's almost certain that she was a widow – as important, it seems, as she was to the other widows in Joppa.

We're told all this about her, in just a few words, before we're told that she takes ill and dies. Given what we're told, it's hardly surprising that Tabitha is deeply grieved by her community.

They prepare her body for burial and for mourning. And they send two men to Peter, asking him to come and join them in their grief. And so he comes and stands with the widows as they weep, and they show him what she did for them – the tunics and other clothing she made.

We likely miss the weight of it. Clothing was a big deal in those days. In our days, we might throw a shirt away if it has a hole in it, but the making of clothing was time-consuming and laborious in the ancient world. There was a law that if you took a cloak in pawn, you could not hold it overnight (since it might be the only cloak the person owned). So when Peter comes, they don't point to her body; they point to her work, to help him, I think, better understand who she was to for them.

It all sets the stage for what follows. In what Peter does next there are echoes of work Jesus did. But notice that they didn't call Peter to come and make her better. That's a difference.

When a synagogue leader named Jairus asked Jesus to come to his daughter's aid, the daughter was sick, not dying. She was dead by the time Jesus arrived, but not when they first sent for him. By the time he arrived, they all thought he'd arrived too late. But Jesus said she was merely sleeping. And the mourners scoffed at him. Jesus sent them away and went in to the little girl, taking just a couple of disciples in with him. One of them was Peter. And then Jesus said to her, "*Talitha cum*" (and we're told it means, "Little girl, get up!") He woke up the sleeping child.

Well, Peter was (as I said) there on that occasion. So he follows the example Jesus gave him. He sends the grieving widows out of the room and says, "*Tabitha, get up!*" And it occurs to me that Peter does what Jesus did before. Only more. For in the original Greek, the word he uses here is not the same as the one Jesus used. Jesus woke the girl. Peter resurrects her. He makes Easter happen ... for her and for her community.

I'm suggesting that this isn't quite a resuscitation story, as was the story of Jairus' daughter – and the story of the raising of Lazarus, as well, for that matter. No, it's Easter story, a story about resurrection. It's a story that invites deeper questions about life and death and life beyond death.

I remember what I've often heard Bill Ellis say – and I think Marianne Borg says the same – that if this story is nothing more than a literal account of what happened back then to these particular people, so what? If it only happened then – but doesn't happen now – it makes no difference.

So I think there's something "more than meets the eye" going on. What if this is more than a resuscitation? What if this is the account of the first Christian funeral?

I remind you that Peter was never called on this occasion to raise the dead. They sent for him to preside over their honoring of the dead.

And yet Easter happens for her and for the company of saints and widows who were witnesses to what happened that day. God affirms that her work is too important to die.

Yes, the way the story's told, Peter speaks and Tabitha opens her eyes. Peter gives her a hand and helps her up, then shows her to the saints and widows gathered there. And it's all cause for celebration on the face of it.

And yet I think maybe it's something even more. Peter lifts up her body, and I think he lifts up something more: he lifts up her life. And when the text says, he shows her to be alive, maybe it means that he is showing them how her life can live on in them.

They honor her good works. They have been transformed by her witness. And so she lives on in them: in the love they shared; in the community they formed and maintained; in the clothes she made, yes, and in the lives changed by her love and service. She lives on in community as they keep doing these things together.

And so I come back to Mother's Day here at Trinity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. You'll all know, I hope, that Mother's Day was not intended to be what it has become. The seeds for it all go back to the Civil War. Ann Jarvis was one of the mothers first honored. She was a peace activist who cared for wounded soldiers on both sides of the Civil War. Julia Ward Howe, best known for writing "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," was a kindred spirit. She issued what she called a "Mother's Day Proclamation," crying out: "Arise, then, Christian women of this day!" Here's a bit of what she said:

We will not have great questions decided by irrelevant agencies. Our husbands shall not come to us, reeking with carnage, for caresses and applause. Our sons shall not be taken from us to unlearn all that we have been able to teach them of charity, mercy and patience. We, women of one country, will be too tender of those of another country, to allow our sons to be trained to injure theirs. <sup>i</sup>

These women were angry at the state of the world. They wanted a day to recognize the power and mercy of love to reverse the carnage of violence and war. Their rallying cry was for the universal power of women to make world better place.

Ann Reeves Jarvis' daughter, Anna, worked tirelessly to establish Mother's Day as a formal holiday. And she lived to see it established as such by President Woodrow Wilson in 1914. But she soon regretted it. By the 1920s, she despaired that it had become commercialized, just another reason to sell cards and candies. Sentimentality had overtaken a day to honor mothers, to keep their work alive.

For those who celebrate Mother's Day, I wish you all good blessings. For those who wonder if something more is asked of us, I share these closing words I heard this past week:

Let's keep the work [of women who have gone before us alive].

Their work is so important. We need to keep the work of these mothers alive. We need to keep the work of these widows alive. We need to keep the work of these women [alive]. It's not defining women on [the basis of] their relationship to men. These women have work that needs to be kept alive and needs to keep going. God is ordaining this work to keep going. It's not done. We are not anywhere near where we need to be. And maybe this is a call, a clarion call ... to rise up just like Tabitha. <sup>ii</sup>

And so may we rise up to keep the work of Tabitha – the work of “community care” – alive. May we who celebrate Mother's Day do more than honor their memory; may we do the work that shows them still to be alive in our world

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<sup>i</sup> From her “Mother's Day Proclamation” @ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mother%27s\\_Day\\_Proclamation](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mother%27s_Day_Proclamation) -- accessed May 10, 2019.

The full text of her proclamation deserves our remembrance and consideration:

Again, in the sight of the Christian world, have the skill and power of two great nations exhausted themselves in mutual murder. Again have the sacred questions of international justice been committed to the fatal mediation of military weapons. In this day of progress, in this century of light, the ambition of rulers has been allowed to barter the dear interests of domestic life for the bloody exchanges of the battle field. Thus men have done. Thus men will do. But women need no longer be made a party to proceedings which fill the globe with grief and horror. Despite the assumptions of physical force, the mother has a sacred and commanding word to say to the sons who owe their life to her suffering. That word should now be heard, and answered to as never before.

Arise, then, Christian women of this day! Arise, all women who have hearts, Whether your baptism be that of water or of tears! Say firmly: We will not have great questions decided by irrelevant agencies. Our husbands shall not come to us, reeking with carnage, for caresses and applause. Our sons shall not be taken from us to unlearn all that we have been able to teach them of charity, mercy and patience. We, women of one country, will be too tender of those of another country, to allow our sons to be trained to injure theirs. From the bosom of the devastated earth a voice goes up with our own. It says: Disarm, disarm! The sword of murder is not the balance of justice. Blood does not wipe out dishonor, nor violence vindicate possession. As men have often forsaken the plough and the anvil at the summons of war, let women now leave all that may be left of home for a great and earnest day of council.

Let them meet first, as women, to bewail and commemorate the dead. Let them then solemnly take council with each other as to the means whereby the great human family can live in peace, man as the brother of man, each bearing after his own kind the sacred impress, not of Caesar, but of God.

In the name of womanhood and of humanity, I earnestly ask that a general congress of women, without limit of nationality, may be appointed and held at some place deemed most convenient, and at the earliest period consistent with its objects, to promote the alliance of the different nationalities, the amicable settlement of international questions, the great and general interests of peace.

See also Robb McCoy @ <https://fatpastor.me/2011/05/06/what-would-they-think/> -- accessed May 9, 2019.

<sup>ii</sup> From Pulpit Fiction podcast (#323 – May 12, 2019) @ <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/easter4c> -- accessed May 9, 2019.

Much of the content of the entire sermon suggested by this podcast, augmented by additional material from this week's Sermon Brainwaver podcast (#662 – Fourth Sunday of Easter) @ [http://www.workingpreacher.org/brainwave.aspx?podcast\\_id=1136](http://www.workingpreacher.org/brainwave.aspx?podcast_id=1136) -- accessed May 9, 2019.