

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Life Givers

Acts 9:32-43

Her death was a severe blow to the community, especially the widows in her neighborhood. Many of them had been at her bedside during her final days, and now they helped one another bear the grief. Some, especially those who spoke Aramaic, called her Tabitha. Others knew her by her Greek name, Dorcas. But whatever her tight-knit community called her, they always spoke of her with devotion and affection. Tabitha was renowned, as Luke says, for “doing good and helping the poor” (v. 36).

Some of the mourners had already contacted the local funeral home, and the hearse was on the way to pick up the body. But a few others gathered at Tabitha’s house weren’t prepared to completely give up. Even though her body had already been washed and placed in an upstairs room, they knew Peter was still in the vicinity. He had a widespread reputation as a healer. Plus, they knew their Bibles. They recalled stories of how prophets, especially Elijah and Elisha, had brought people back from the dead. Maybe Peter could do the same for Tabitha. Clearly, what God had done through Jesus Christ had unleashed the power of life into conditions of death. Surely divine grace was on the move. So who better to call upon than the leader of Jesus’ followers?

When Peter arrived at Tabitha’s house, he was immediately surrounded by sorrow. Widows whose daily existence had been sustained by Tabitha’s compassion kept coming up to him, testifying to the difference she had made in their lives. Some even tugged at the garments they were wearing as evidence of Tabitha’s goodness and generosity. “Look at this robe,” said one of them. “Tabitha made this for me. Do you realize how much time and effort it takes to make something like this? If it weren’t for Tabitha, I wouldn’t even have clothes to wear.”

For some of them, their grief was mixed with fear and worry. Without Tabitha, how would they survive? They were widows. In that culture, they were by definition poor. Widows were usually stuck at the bottom rung of society, dependent on others to represent them and protect them. So what now? With Tabitha gone, who would look out for their interests? Who, in the midst of such an unjust social system, would pursue God’s righteousness and speak up for them? What will become of this community of widows without Tabitha?

But Peter knows that because of the death and resurrection of Jesus, there’s more going on in the world than just the same old systems that keep some on the margins, confined in powerlessness and poverty. Peter knows that the reign of God, not the power of death, will have the last word. So after listening to the widows’ lament, Peter sends everybody out of the room. He gets down on his knees and prays. He brings Tabitha back to life. Then, as Luke puts it, Peter “called the believers and widows and presented her to them alive” (v. 41).

Note how Luke's summary, along with Peter's command, "Tabitha, get up," recall the resurrection of Jesus. In the healing story at the beginning of today's text, Peter uses a similar command when he tells Aeneas, "Get up and take care of your mat" (v. 3). This language of "getting up" is more than just a way of confirming physical restoration. It's also an indication of how the life-giving power of God, who raised Jesus from the dead, is operating in and through the community of believers. In other words, the church is a fellowship of those who have heard, who have experienced, and who proclaim the Lord's command, "Rise up."

Rise up. Get up. We might even tie it in with the language of awakening, of coming to life. Author Rebecca McLaughlin tells about the experience of a Jewish American atheist poet named Joy Davidman. When she was a young woman, she had a desire to work for justice and became a communist. She married a fellow writer named Bill. After Bill's death she married C. S. Lewis. According to McLaughlin:

At one point she [Joy] said, "Of course, I thought, atheism was true, but I hadn't given quite enough attention to developing the proof of it. Someday, when the children grow older, I'd work it out." But between marrying Bill and meeting C. S. Lewis, Joy met Jesus.

Bill was a workaholic, an alcoholic, and unfaithful. One day he called Joy from his New York office and told her he was having a nervous breakdown. Then he hung up. There followed a day of frantic telephoning. By nightfall Joy recalls, there was nothing to do but wait and see if he turned up, alive or dead. She put her children to sleep and waited. And in that silence, something happened:

For the first time in my life, I felt helpless; for the first time my pride was forced to admit that I was not calm after all, the master of my fate and the captain of my soul. All my defenses ... all the walls of arrogance and cockiness and self-love behind which I'd hid from God ... went down momentarily, and God came in ... There was a person with me in that room, directly present to my consciousness—a person so real that all my previous life was by comparison, a mere shadow play, and I myself was more alive than I had ever been; it was like waking from sleep.¹

In raising Jesus from the dead, God has acted to awaken us from the deadness of our sin. Catherine Booth, co-founder of the Salvation Army, wrote, "Satan has got men fast asleep in sin, and that is his great device to keep them so. He does not care what we do, if he can do that."² But God's aim is to wake us up, to get us up, to raise us up, so that we will be truly alive in Christ. Our greatest need is to be healed of our alienation from God and from one another, and the cross and resurrection are God's way of arriving on the scene to reconcile us and get us back on our feet, so that we ourselves can be channels for his life-giving power in the world.

That's what Tabitha was, before and after Peter brought her back from the dead. Luke says that before she got sick and died, Tabitha "was always doing good and helping the poor." When people thought of Tabitha, they thought of charity. They thought of compassion. They thought of her commitment to the community's most vulnerable, especially its widows. No doubt, some of this commitment came out of her own experience as a woman, which automatically put her on the margins of society. Interestingly, when Luke calls Tabitha a "disciple," it's the only time in the New Testament that the feminine form of the Greek term is used. This indicates that she was a devoted participant in the community of Jesus' followers in Joppa. She played a key role in how this community managed and distributed its goods.

The Southeast Outlook, a newspaper in Louisville, Kentucky, once reported on a woman named Lynette LeGette, who became known as the Hat Lady. When Lynette discovered how many thousands of people were coming to the city for chemotherapy treatments each year, she was moved to do something. Many of the patients were losing their hair, were concerned about being cold during the night, and were wrapping pajamas or towels around their heads to keep warm. So Lynette came up with a project to create turbans for them. She sent some of her first creations to a mother in Kansas. Later on, Lynette met the woman's 7-year-old daughter, who ran up to her, wrapped her arms around Lynette's legs, and said, "You made my mom so happy. She has a hat to go with every outfit." Eventually Lynette and her team of volunteers made 1,000 hats, providing them at no charge to those in need. The newspaper described her as a "modern day Dorcas." In other words, a contemporary Tabitha. She said, "When you ask the Lord what you should do, you need to be willing to listen for the direction and recognize the opportunities he gives you."³

Think of the widows who gathered around Peter, wiping their tears and showing him the clothes that Tabitha had made for them. These garments weren't an added luxury. They were one of life's essentials. They were part of how you got by one day at a time. And think of how tedious and time-consuming it was to make clothes in the first century. Consider these things, and you get a better sense of how Tabitha invested much of her life in caring for those who had the least and were most at risk. This is who she was before her illness and death, and I'm guessing this is who she was after she was brought back to life. Before and after her encounter with death, Tabitha was a life giver. She brought life to those whom society easily discarded.

That's what we're called and sent to be. As in the first century, so in the twenty-first century, you and I are part of a community of disciples in which God's life-giving, resurrecting power is at work. Our lives within the church and beyond the church are one of the means by which God brings life into places where disorder, disease, disunity, despair, and death seem to have prevailed. Sometimes that means we ourselves have to be awakened or brought back to life about the capacity of God's grace to right what's wrong and bring about new ways of living, new ways of being together in this world.

Fred Craddock tells a story about a young pastor who goes to pray with an elderly woman. She's in the hospital, near death. As she lies on her pillow, gasping for breath, the pastor spends some time with her, and then he says, "I need to go, but would you like to have prayer before I go?" "Yes," she says. So he asks, "Well, what would you like us to pray for today?" And she answers, "I'd like to pray that I'd be healed, of course." The young pastor gasps but goes on, "Lord, we pray for your sustaining presence with this sick sister. And if it be thy will, we pray that she will be restored to health and to service. But if it's not thy will, we certainly hope that she will adjust to her circumstances."

Suddenly the old woman opens her eyes and sits up in bed. She throws her feet over the side of the bed. She stands up, and says, "I think I'm healed!" Then she strides out the door. The last the pastor sees, she's striding down the hallway toward the nurses' station, saying, "Look! Look at me!" The pastor goes down the steps and out to the parking lot. Before he opens the door of his car, he looks up and says, "Don't you ever do that to me again!"⁴

When Peter knelt down beside Tabitha's bed, he didn't just pray that God would help her adjust to her circumstances. Instead, he prayed to the God who had raised Jesus from the dead, and whose life-giving power has been set loose in the world, not to conform to circumstances but to change circumstances. So as you go about your daily discipleship, remember that following Jesus means you're a life giver. You're part of God's work to

overcome death and despair. As you care for the sick, or witness to the lost, or comfort the grieving, or stand with the marginalized, or give to the poor, or speak up for the forgotten, you help bring the saving power of God to bear on the lives of others, so that hearts may turn to the Lord.

¹ Rebecca McLaughlin, *Confronting Christianity* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2019) 222-223.

² In "William and Catherine Booth." *Christian History*, No. 26.

³ The Southeast Outlook (December 16, 2004).

⁴ As told by William H. Willimon, "Evangelical Laughter," *Preaching Today*, Tape No. 137.