

“Hope Has a Name”  
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III  
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana  
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**Acts 9: 36-43**

The disciples who organize meals for a couple as the wife recuperates from surgery and illness. The disciple who intentionally invites someone to church, and they are present in the weeks that follow. The disciple who listens intently, patiently, caringly on the phone, while a fellow sister in Christ shares her burdens. The disciples who organize rides for a couple who no longer have transportation of their own. The disciple who is eager to assist those who have no one to call on for help, but then wants no recognition for their good deeds.

Each of those examples are not generic people I’ve made up as an illustration. Each of those are examples of individuals – disciples – from this congregation, who are willingly and faithfully living out their calling as sisters and brothers in Christ. They reflect so many others at John Knox who seek to share hope with others in small yet meaningful acts of grace. In many respects, they are the Dorcas’s and Tabitha’s of our church.

It seems only fitting that in this season after Easter, and on this day when we honor women in our lives, we would read a story about one of the early church’s faithful disciples. In this story from the Acts of the Apostles, we encounter resurrection once again, and we are faced with many questions: Why does there need to be another resurrection? Who was Tabitha or Dorcas? Why was she so important to her community? Why did Peter take this so seriously and come with haste to Joppa? And perhaps most importantly, how does Dorcas’s resurrection give us hope as we bear witness to the resurrection of our Lord?

To begin, let’s consider the significance of where Dorcas lived. The town of Joppa was located about 35 miles west of Jerusalem on the Mediterranean Coast. A major trading route passed through Joppa, and consequently the town served as the port of Jerusalem. The town itself was about 2300 feet below the Holy City, so to travel between the two places involved quite a bit of effort and time ([www.ancientsandals.com/overviews/Joppa.htm](http://www.ancientsandals.com/overviews/Joppa.htm)). But its commerce and livelihood would have centered on the sea: fishing, boat-building, merchants and trading. Undoubtedly, as in any city at that time, there would have been significant poverty, as well as a wide chasm between the “have’s” and the “have not’s.”

So, who was Tabitha, and what did she do in this town of Joppa? To begin, we know that in Greek her name is Dorcas, so whether you read Tabitha or Dorcas, you’re talking about the same woman! In Acts,

she is described as being “devoted to good works and acts of charity.” We also learn that she must have done much work with the widows of that city, for they stood around Peter when he arrived and showed him “the tunics and other clothing Dorcas had made while she was with them” (9:39).

Why would her service to widows cause such high distinction within the early church? In ancient times, widows were on the bottom of the social ladder. They had no one to speak for them in society. They had no rights, as compared to married women or to men, in general. Once their husbands died, they were all alone and often forgotten amid the busyness of life. It was to this group that Tabitha ministered. She sewed them clothing, more than likely out of her own resources. She visited them, cooked for them, cared for them when they were sick, and spoke up for them when their voices could not be heard.

It’s clear to see why the widows were devastated when Dorcas died. “Her death has caused a crisis in the community. Now the most vulnerable ones have no one. Their coats and garments are tangible evidence of the life of Tabitha and what her death means for them. These widows do not concern themselves with questions of theology, are not interested in the consolations of the possibility of a better world someday. They are too poor, too consumed with the need to get by one day at a time for such speculation. Tabitha is gone; how will they survive?” (Willimon, *Interpretation: Acts*, Westminster/John Knox Press, © 1988: 84).

And so, it is to this situation that Peter is called. The widows ask Peter to come to them “without delay,” for they do not know what to do now. The leader of their community – Dorcas – is now gone, and they need Peter’s help. He was only in Lydda, not more than a few miles from Joppa, and he came as soon as he could. He found Dorcas in an upstairs bedroom, where the widows had prepared her body with spices and oils. He asked them to leave the room, and there, alone with Tabitha and God, Peter prays. We do not know the words of his prayer, nor the length of his prayer. That does not matter. What is important is that while he kneeled beside her bed, “Peter opens himself to the power of the [Holy] Spirit” (Gaventa, *Texts for Preaching, Year C*, 297). What Peter is about to do is not of his own power, but is done by the power of the Spirit.

After his prayer, he simply turns to the dead disciple, the woman who has given so much of her life to the poor and helpless, and says two words: “Tabitha, arise!” The word used here for “arise” is the same word which is used in the New Testament to refer to the resurrection of Jesus (Gaventa 297). And with that command, Dorcas opens her eyes, takes Peter’s hand, and is once again alive to do the work God has called her to do.

Joseph Harvard writes: *To enter into the world described in Acts, we do not need to leave our minds at the door, but it is necessary for us to accept the assumption that God is still working through God’s Spirit in the lives of people and in human society to restore this broken world.*

*Today's story about a woman being raised from the dead challenges our assumption that we are left to our own devices to fix our predicaments – or, more to the point, that our predicaments are not fixable at all. That is just the way it is – but not according to Acts.*

*Acts tells us that those who belonged to the Way (9:2) were empowered to “turn the world upside down” (17:6). So, in Acts we keep reading stories about conversions, healings, and life after death. This community empowered by the Holy Spirit was not content with the status quo.*

*Tabitha was a disciple, Acts says, employing the first and only use in the New Testament of the feminine form of the Greek word for disciple . . . The Spirit of God who raised Jesus from the dead brings back to life this faithful woman whose acts of compassion are central to the new reality of God's reign. This is a strange turn of events according to our standards, but God has a different value system (Joseph Harvard, Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 2, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2010: 428-430).*

On this Mother's Day when we give thanks for the women who have been influential in our lives of faith, there is also a poignancy which accompanies this day for many in the Christian faith. Many remember with sadness and grief their mothers or other women who have died and are no longer here. They have not had a Tabitha experience for their loved one. They seek comfort and peace as they walk this journey of faith without that loving disciple by their side.

Two years ago, I had the pleasure of meeting Rachel Held Evans, a Christian writer and speaker, who was the keynote speaker for one of my Wabash Pastoral Leadership Program reunions. She was bright, smart, funny, and insightful, as she shared about her faith journey and her vision of the modern, contemporary church.

What I remember most about her was not her keynote talk, but her having dinner with us. Despite her national notoriety and fame, she showed genuine interest in each of us who were sitting at table with her. That reunion gathering took place in the midst of my father's illness, only six weeks before he died, and I recall my spirit being lifted by just talking to her, if even for a brief time. Rachel was pregnant at that time with her and her husband's second child, as they already had a son who was just over a year old.

Three weeks ago, Rachel came down with the flu. As she was treated with antibiotics, she experienced a severe allergic reaction and went into seizures. Her doctors put her into a medically-induced coma to try and find answers as to why this was taking place. Ten days ago, Rachel started experiencing swelling of the brain, and despite their best efforts, her medical team was unable to reduce the swelling. On May 4, Rachel Held Evans died in a hospital in Nashville, Tennessee. She was 37-years-old.

Even though she is no longer here, I know that Rachel will continue to inspire and influence others as God speaks through her writings. She was a self-described “wandering evangelical,” who wished to bring all to the table of God’s grace in the model of Jesus’ ministry. As I spent time re-reading many of her thoughts in these days after her death, there were two quotes which not only embodied her vision, but also the vision of Tabitha, Peter, and the early-church. First, Rachel Held Evans writes: “What I love about the ministry of Jesus is that he identified the poor as blessed and the rich as needy . . . and then he went and ministered to them both. This, I think, is the difference between charity and justice. Justice means moving beyond the dichotomy between those who need and those who supply and confronting the frightening and beautiful reality that we desperately need one another.”

Second, she writes: “We could not become like God, so God became like us. God showed us how to heal instead of kill, how to mend instead of destroy, how to love instead of hate, how to live instead of long for more. When we nailed God to a tree, God forgave. And when we buried God in the ground, God got up.”

As witnesses to resurrection hope, we are called to be like Dorcas, understanding the beautiful reality that we desperately need all God’s children because God loves all God’s children fully and completely. As witnesses to resurrection hope, we are called to embody the love God has shown us in Jesus - to heal, to mend, to love, to live - so that all might be made to feel welcome at the table. As witnesses to resurrection hope, we are reminded that in times of darkness and despair, when it seems that all hope is lost, it is not. Because God got up.

Hope has a name. That name is Dorcas. That name is Tabitha. That name is Rachel. That name is all who call on the name that is above every name.

For that name is Emmanuel - God with us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.