

“Acts of Love”

Psalm 23, Acts 9: 36-43

Fourth Sunday after Easter/C, April 29, 2007

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She is a woman of limited resources. She has become a woman of limited mobility. While her legs have begun to fail her, her hands remain nimble. Where she has trouble doing the things so many of us take for granted; driving, working, grocery shopping, she can still thread a needle, run the sewing machine, and visualize simple beauty emerging from discarded scraps of cloth. She is the quilt lady and we call her Tabitha. Very gently and quietly she creates her quilts, hoping to share both comfort and beauty with people she may never meet. Every piece is infused with God's grace, the same grace she has known as a member of this church.

Tabitha knows very few of you and few of you know her. She doesn't know who donates the cloth she uses. From time to time she will write a simple note of thanks for the Connector. However, we all participate in this cycle of grace. We need not know one another to be part of this miraculous gift from God. Tabitha continues the work of the Lord, she is a disciple in every way possible, much like her namesake thousands of years ago.

This morning, we hear of our ancient sister named Tabitha. She was a member of the early church in Joppa. She appears to have been a very important member of this community, much beloved and a true leader. This could not be said of most women in that culture. She did not preach or teach, but she was a healer in her own way. She took care of the widows and orphans. She provided for those who were most needy. If you found yourself on the edge, worried that you were about to go over, you could count on Tabitha.

This morning we also meet Peter. The people of Joppa have sent for him because they are deeply distressed. He has become a trusted leader in the early church and they hope he has the power to heal in the Christ's name. In this situation, they have nothing to lose. Their beloved Tabitha has died and they do not know what to do. I am not sure they believed Peter could bring Tabitha back from death. Truthfully, I am not sure what they believed. However, I can surmise from the story that Tabitha meant the world to many people and they were not ready for her die. We can relate to that feeling. I imagine many of you have known someone who has meant the world to you,

who has cared for you and ministered to you in a time of great need. They are never hesitant to respond to the Spirit's calling, no matter when or how the Spirit invites them. After all, that is what a disciple of Jesus does.

Peter arrives in Joppa and finds Tabitha's body in an upper room. It is clear she is dead. There are many people gathered around her. This story sounds like the story of Jesus raising Jairus' daughter. In that gospel story, Jesus is summoned to Jairus' house because his young daughter is dead. The people ask Jesus to come, not expecting him to bring her back to life, but hoping he can do something. Perhaps his coming will help them move forward and begin the difficult mourning process. Perhaps Tabitha's friends expect much the same when they send for Peter. Somehow, without ever naming it, Tabitha's friends and Jairus believe in the power of resurrection. They wanted to believe the unbelievable, that the one whom they love is not really gone. Their only hope is that the power to raise the dead was not lost when Jesus left them. Perhaps Jesus' followers, people like Peter, have received this power as well.

In the story of Jairus' daughter Jesus brings her back to life, to eat and breathe and bring joy again to her family. Can Peter do the same? Can the disciples do more than preach and teach in Christ's name? Can they also perform miracles? This is a powerful moment for Peter. When Peter arrives at the house Tabitha is surrounded by people who have come to pay homage to their friend and to show Peter all the good things she has done for them. It is as if their witness alone could help bring her back. Peter gently asks them to leave while he ministers to their friend.

The story says Peter kneels beside her bed and prays. He then utters these simple words, "Tabitha, get up." (These words are strikingly similar to "Talitha cum," the words Jesus utters to resurrect Jairus' daughter.) Much to Peter's surprise and delight, Tabitha opens her eyes. He then gives her his hand and helps her up. Then he calls "the saints and widows" into the room to assure them that their friend has not died as they had thought. She is alive, ready to continue her acts of charity. The saints and widows are not sad because they had lost their most generous benefactor. They were not sad because they would now have to carry on her work. They can not conceive that their friend Tabitha is gone because they loved her in ways they may not have even realized until she was no longer with them. It was the spirit and life force that emanated from her that was so powerful.

Can you think of such a person in your life? Is there someone you know who lives in the spirit and likeness of Jesus every day? They don't have to say "I believe in Jesus" for you to know it to be true. This kind of person is the first to contribute when donations are solicited. They always bake goodies for a reception, accompany the youth on a bus trip to Boston, provide flowers in memory of a loved one at Easter, or make a special donation so a piano can be purchased. When you hear of this person's generosity you are likely to exclaim, "oh, that Mimi Truesdell, or that Don Peterson or that Bruce Fraser" as though you are not in the least bit surprised to hear they were the one to make this "miracle" happen. Now, I could have inserted any one of your names in that exclamation, because this church is chock full of "Tabithas." It is one of the things that make South Church so remarkable. In fact, I was reluctant to mention any one person at all. You are all the kind of people who would have rushed to Tabitha's bedside to celebrate her death-defying act. I have seen such things happen here over and over again.

What we hear this morning is more than a resurrection story. We don't have a name for it, but this story is more about restoration than resurrection. Tabitha is brought back to life, not to live for a short while, but to live a long, fruitful life. We don't know how long Tabitha lived, but we suspect she was a faithful, loving disciples for many, many more years. When her days on this earth were over, I imagine the church gathered to celebrate her glorious life among them. However, today was not to be that day. She still had more life to live, more love to share, and so many more people to touch in Christ's name.

Stories of restoration instill hope. This story tells us that even if I am not able to restore one who is dead back to life, as Peter did, I do have the power to bring life where there is death, love where there is hate, and healing where there is brokenness. As disciples of Jesus Christ, we share in this power. The preacher William Loader believes that "the great wonder today is when we can see people stand on their feet, communities make their way out of traps of poverty, enemies move towards reconciliation, despairing people finding meaning again. These are realities which take up the direction or flow of what would otherwise be legends left to the past. They invite us to take such stories as symbols of what is an abiding value and through them to find the hand of God in new beginnings today." In other words, they make this miracle accessible and real for each one of us today.

Tabitha's community was living the resurrection, working to overcome the darkness, bringing life where there was once only death. Many of them lived faithfully even though being a disciple in the early church could be dangerous. Every time you donate a bag of scrap cloth for Tabitha, you are practicing the resurrection. Whenever we gather on Wednesday to break bread with our brothers and sisters at South Park Inn we are practicing the resurrection. Whenever we come together, with yarn and knitting needles to knit a prayer shawl and to pray, we are practicing the resurrection. Tabitha lived a resurrection life, praying and loving and caring for those whom others had neglected. She was a child of God, a faithful disciple the world was not yet ready to let go of.

As a follower of the Way, Tabitha filled her days feeding the hungry and clothing the naked and caring for those who could not care for themselves. Of course, she was much beloved. We have the power to be like Tabitha. God does not limit this power, only we can do that. God calls us and equips us to do many things. Some of you cook, some of you knit, some of you teach, some of you edit the monthly newsletter and still others assemble it and get it in the mail. We do what we can, in whatever way we can, to help usher in the kin-dom of God.

I wonder if it is possible to transform the world one prayer shawl at a time? It may sound preposterous, but it just might work. I am not sure that is what Janet Bristow or Victoria Galo had in mind when they knit their first shawl. as part of a program on applied Feminine Spirituality at Hartford Seminary nearly ten years ago. From the very beginning, many blessings have been knit into every shawl. No matter what you call it; a prayer shawl, peace shawl, comfort shawl or mantle, the intention is the same. To provide a tangible witness to God's never ending love and a source of comfort and peace for the one who receives it. Each shawl is infused with the power of the Holy Spirit to bring life where there was once death and hope where there was once despair.

Tabitha's spirit lives in and through this powerful ministry. Her spirit hovers over the circle of worshippers each week on Boston Common at the Common Cathedral. She is the host at every evening meal at Peter's Retreat. She guides each knitter to select the right color for his next prayer shawl and she keeps the needles straight and any stitch from dropping. Blessed be Tabitha, protector, provider, friend. May it be so! Amen