

**May 12, 2019 (Journey worship)**

**TEXT: [Acts 9:36–43](#)**

**THEME: Vitality**

*By the Rev. Heather Schoenewolf*

We are in the Easter season. Although we celebrated the event of the resurrection of Christ a few weeks ago, today we continue to celebrate that this event impacts life as we know it, even today. Yes, we acknowledge that there is still sin in spite of Christ's crucifixion and there is still death in spite of his resurrection from the dead. But we claim that light breaks in—in unexpected ways and places...

Today's Gospel lesson is a reminder of this in many ways. Tabitha, also known as Dorcas in the Greek, has died. Although she has no male relatives to speak of, perhaps a widow, she was highly valued by those around her, both the men and the women in her community. It appears that she was a woman of some financial means, as she lives in a two story house, which was unusual in those days. It also appears that she uses whatever resources she has to generously care for those who are in need. She is known for her generosity, her creativity, her love. She literally made the clothes on their backs, as the widows who gathered to mourn were not only exhibiting but wearing the fabrics and clothes that she made.

In the wake of her death, two men summon Peter, who is in a nearby town, while the women begin to mourn and care for Tabitha's body. And Peter gets up and goes with the men who have summoned him. He doesn't yet know what the problem is or who needs help, but when he is told that he is needed quickly, he doesn't miss a beat. But that seems so like Peter—always one to jump in.

And when he arrives and is greeted by the mourners, he clears the room and prays, and Tabitha is restored to life. For now the mourners have experienced a small slice of the resurrection. Yes, Tabitha, like Lazarus, would die another day. But for now, she's back. Those who rely upon her find hope. Those who adore her are comforted. Those who see her worth are blessed.

At first it seems like a regular old healing story, not unlike those we have seen with Jesus. Those who are distressed call out for help by roadsides and in crowds. And sometimes they travel far and wide to summon Jesus when a situation is particularly desperate and a loved one was on death's doorstep. And Jesus delivers every time. He heals with mud and spit, with forgiveness and commands. He heals with words of life and words of prayer. Whether in the midst of the synagogue or with just three disciples gathered nearby, Jesus heals disease, cures societal ills, and calls the dead to life.

And, by the power of Christ's Spirit, the disciples do this too. In fact, in the verses just before our story Peter just healed a paralyzed man named Aeneas by just saying the words "Jesus Christ heals you. Get up and take care of your mat."

But this text is very different. As familiar as it sounds, and as much as our minds fill in the blanks with the character of stories we've heard throughout the Gospels and Acts, this story is quite unique.

First, there are some features that tend to be common to miracle stories that are left out—for example, Jesus' name! Unlike the healing of Aeneas, there is no reference to Jesus nor any invocation of his name at the time of the miracle. And Peter does not use this opportunity to preach a sermon about the wondrous acts of God, or about how it is the power of the risen Christ enables him to revive Tabitha. Perhaps this is because Peter was alone when performing this miracle—another oddity of the text pointed out by commentators. Jesus usually always had at least a small circle of friends around him when he healed, but here, Peter, clears the mourners out of the upper room.

But the features that are *added* are what make this story so unique.

First, when Luke (who wrote Acts) writes of Tabitha, she is referred to as a “mathetria” or *disciple*. This is the only instance in all of scripture when this word is used to describe a woman.

Second, Luke includes Tabitha's Greek name. Frankly so many women in scripture are unnamed—even in the Gospel of Luke, who goes to pains to demonstrate how God in Christ includes the marginalized—even women. But for Tabitha, we get both an Aramaic name and a Greek name—suggesting her importance in the lives of many, even across culture and tradition.

Finally, her renown is marked by the story that is told about her. She was devoted to acts of charity, someone who put her faith into action. We see that when Peter shows up, there are widows who are mourning Tabitha's death who are dressed in tunics and clothing that she had made. She used the resources that she had to care for those who were most deeply marginalized—widows with no one to care for them, without clothing, without the basic essentials of life. Her good works are not the unusual part—but it is odd that we read about them. Usually the emphasis in a healing is put on God. But here, the focus is on Tabitha, and upon how necessary she is and upon how good her works are. One commentator points out: “This is highly unusual. We do not read encomiums to the personal character or economic output of Lazarus before Jesus brings him back from the dead (John 11)!”

So as much as these differences stand out, we are left, then to figure out what to do with them. On one hand, the lovely narrative about Tabitha's gifts can generate some complicated theology. One could read them and think that the text suggests that if only we make a righteous enough appeal, God's healing will occur. If we present the resume of the deceased just so—talk about their importance to our community and how we wouldn't be the same without them, that God would hear and answer our prayers. But isn't this, basically, what we do every time we pray? And sometimes that prayer is fulfilled to our liking, and sometimes it is not— and we are left to wrestle with the question “why?”

The text can also suggest that if someone is good enough, or important enough, God will spare them for the time being. It can suggest that God works on behalf of the best of us and the best within us. It can lead us to think that it is our works that compel God's action and merit God's favor, that some of us *deserve* to be blessed, healed and resurrected. We know that is not true. When my cousin died at the age of 28 I knew that the world was better with her in it. She was an amazing teacher of children who had special needs. She was hilarious. When Rachel Held Evans died last week at the age of 37, millions mourned, knowing that her generosity of spirit and wisdom made a difference for many. We also know that it is God's grace that saves, not any manner of works. Miracles occur, prayers are answered, and Christ's Spirit is poured out upon us not because we *deserve* anything, but because of God's unmerited grace.

So what do we make of this exchange? What do we get from this story?

See, I do not think that the resume that is outlined by the disciples is to try to convince God to act, but rather an attempt to get Peter to act. The mourners gathered around Tabitha feel that she has a story worth telling—a story that would often go unnoticed or untold. In spite of her wealth, Tabitha was a woman and a widow—two qualities that render her virtually invisible in that day and time. Yet, she is someone who has made a tangible difference in their lives. They are enriched for knowing her. When they encountered Tabitha, they saw Christ's love in action. They saw how she took seriously his call to minister to those on the margins, to share what one has toward the common good, to let your light shine. They needed to speak up—to speak on the behalf of the one who spoke up for those ignored.

See, this story is less about the miracle of Peter raising Tabitha from the dead and more about the miracle of a church community truly living into their call. It is the story of a community “getting it”—and welcoming the outcast, caring for those who are most vulnerable, sharing their resources for the good of all, and recognizing the power of God at work among them—even through those who would have not been deemed worthy to be called Christ's disciple.

So what does this say for us? As we celebrate our bicentennial this week, we have and will hear the names of many men whose contributions to our church laid a solid foundation for us to be who we are. There are pastors whose tenures navigated change and challenge. There are elders who made decisions that helped ELPC be a beacon of hope...And there are the famous ushers in morning suits with boutonnieres who were the first to greet those walking through the doors to worship each Sunday.

Their roles and contributions are important to the history of our church—past, present, and future. Yet there is so much more to our story. There are countless women whose faithfulness nurtured the faith of others. There are Sunday School Teachers and musicians; missionaries and ministers. Yes, there are those who likewise serve the larger church—on committees and councils.

Once there was the first female Elder at ELPC.  
Once there was the first woman Associate Pastor.

Their stories are important to tell too. I first came to ELPC because a high school friend named Carrie grew up here, and another friend named Susan decided this should be a church we visited when we were looking for our own churches after college. Then there was Heidi Houston who called me when I still lived at my Mom's house after college and asked when I was going to join the church, and LaRoux Hopper who prayed for my cousin when she was sick. And then there is Susan Gilmore who told Judy Menk that I liked to work with kids, and that is how I came to teach Sunday School. Then there was Connie Dunn who invited me to apply for my former position as Director of Youth and Young Adult Ministries and then took me to seminary to visit for lunch, encouraging me to pray about a call to pastoral ministry.

These are just a handful of names that are a part of my own story of faith. These are just a few of the faithful witnesses at ELPC who have made a difference in my life—and who, quite honestly, made a difference in the lives of many.

May we, like Tabitha's church, be a church that tells our story in a manner that lifts up the gifts of the marginalized, highlights our interdependence without excluding anyone, celebrates the call and contributions of all of our members. May we mourn and celebrate together. May we, like Tabitha, be doers of our faith. May we put our resources to work in ways that care for the most vulnerable in our midst, ways that put into action how seriously we take our call to love. May we live as an Easter people, celebrating the vitality of our congregation, not just in the past 200 years, but setting up our ministry to proclaim the Gospel in word and deed for another 200 years to come. Thanks be to God.