

Pastor's Message – 5/8/22  
Acts 9:36-43

Overtime since I became a pastor, the scheduling has changed for funerals. The timing used to be much more varied but now it is increasingly rare to have a visitation the night before a funeral. The standard funeral right now seems to be: visitation at 10:00 am, the funeral itself at 11:00 and then a luncheon following. Burial can be before or after the luncheon at this time.

What has also become common practice, during the visiting hours preceding a funeral service, is for the family to display a collage of carefully selected photographs of their loved one. Sometimes they even place certain small objects within the casket itself, which visiting friends and neighbors can't help but notice as they file by.

For a veteran, it may be an American flag, folded into a crisp triangle. There may be a cross -- or, if the person had some history in the Roman Catholic Church, a rosary.

Sometimes there are offbeat choices as well: baseball caps from the person's favorite team; crayon pictures scrawled by grandchildren; hammers, paintbrushes, or other tools of a trade. While a can of beer may make visitors flinch, there are some families who consider such a choice meaningful.

One can only imagine what some future archaeologist would say, after unearthing such objects after a millennium or two!

This is no different from what the friends of Dorcas the seamstress did, holding up examples of garments she had made.

When each of us die, we all leave behind a legacy: memorabilia or memories, our words or actions that remain in people's thoughts. Acts 9:36-43, our Bible reading for today, suggests that part of the legacy Tabitha/Dorcas left behind was symbolized by the pieces of clothing held by the many mourning women. But there is more to those coats and other pieces of clothing that is Tabitha's legacy. These things tell us about her and what was important to her. They tell us what she was about and who she was. The things that she left behind can be a model for us. They can help us to consider what is important to us and how we may be remembered.

We don't know, of course much about her: what she looked like, what she sounded like. Scholars suggest the coats and other clothes may

have been meant for distribution to the needy, which was one of the tasks assigned to widows in the early church. Whatever the truth is about this woman, we may never know; but we do know that the church in Joppa valued her ministry, and that she was well-known to the twelve male disciples, at least to Peter, and that remembering her was so important that her name and her story were preserved in the Bible.

The response of the community to Dorcas' death is worth considering. When we die, there will hopefully be a circle of friends and family who will miss us and mourn our absence. This is only natural and may be primarily related to familial and relational bonds.

But will there be a wider circle in the community adversely affected by our absence because of the impact our lives and our ministry had on the community? Is this too high of an expectation to have for everyone? Tabitha's story, however, emphasizes the importance of living for the benefit of others and not for ourselves. The loss of Tabitha/Dorcas was devastating for those who had come to depend on her charity.

"She was always doing kind things for others and helping the poor" it says in verse thirty-six. The original Greek says she was "full of good works" suggesting that good works and acts of charity were absolutely Dorcas' life. She did not *dabble* in good works. They were not a hobby of hers. They were not a compartment in an otherwise busy life. Good works were *her life*. She had no room for anything else because it was overflowing with her "good works. Good works were what Dorcas was all about.

Should we be tempted, then, to measure our lives on Tabitha/Dorcas' example? She had her gifts and talents and ministry. Each of us have our own and are called to our particular areas of service. We can't all be Tabitha/Dorcas, but we can all be Dorcas-like. After all, the apostle Paul says to the Ephesian church, "For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago."

The Bible is clear: Our way of life is to be a life of service and good works.

No one can do everything, but everyone can do something. There are all kinds of jobs to be done in the church, both great and small, but often, we can walk right past and not even notice what needs be done. There are many ways to be of service in our communities and in our family and the building or neighborhood in which we live.

Some examples are: sending flowers or a birthday card; visiting in the

hospital or nursing home; weeks and months after a tragic occurrence still offering to bring meals, provide child care, provide transportation, clean, or run errands; performing unseen acts of service in the church such as organizing the pew racks, pulling weeds, helping to count the Sunday offering, providing refreshments for after-worship Fellowship time, providing the bread and juice for Communion and setting it up, waiting with a family during surgery. These are just a few of the many acts of service in which one may become involved. As you look around the church, you may notice something you could do that you never noticed before.

Done with a spirit of humility and in a spirit of service to God and to God's church makes every act of service, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant, holy work. Holy work gets done when a need is seen and then met. Tabitha's life and work imitates Jesus and teaches us about ministry that is both ordinary and profound. Perhaps you might think about what others might "show" as evidence of your service in your church. That ministry is evidence of spiritual power in our midst.

You heard the story today, Peter is summoned to come "as soon as possible," and, upon arriving, finds Tabitha/Dorcas already dead. Peter sends everyone out of the room, kneels to pray at her bedside, and then says to her "Tabitha, get up" -- a command not unlike the one that Jesus spoke to the little girl in Mark 5:41: "Talitha koum" ("Little girl, arise"). Tabitha awakens from death and sits up. Peter takes her hand and helps her out of the bed.

And then he calls all of the people who were there for the funeral and shows them that their friend and sister is alive. Did you get that? The story does not end with Tabitha's resurrection. Before the story can end, two important things have to happen.

1) Her resurrection has to be used as a witness, a declaration of the power of Jesus Christ in our lives. The resurrection of Tabitha is a story that must be told. It is a declaration that must be made. Once again, life has won a victory over death. And we can declare with Paul: "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?" (1 Corinthians 15:55).

2) The good news of God's victory over death must be spread throughout Joppa so that many can hear it and respond to it by coming to believe in Jesus Christ.

In the Sundays after Easter, we often do not have the usual reading from the Old Testament to go along with an epistle and a psalm and a

gospel reading. We typically have a reading from the Acts of the Apostles. This practice makes sense to me. Christ is still risen and the miracle that happened then is still happening. Easter is not just something that happened to the crucified Jesus; resurrection is a power let loose among Jesus' followers. Jesus' resurrection is still shaping and forming the church and how believers will be the church and live in the church.

The world after Easter is not like the world before Easter. Before Easter, everyone who lived died, and all who died stayed dead. Before Easter, poor people and those in need were totally at the mercy of external forces over which they had no control. Before Easter, there is much grieving as we bid farewell to the dear saints who depart from us in death.

But after Easter, after God's great defeat of death in the raising of Jesus, death no longer has the last word. After Easter, those who are poor and vulnerable have hope because there is a power for good let loose in the world that is greater than the powers of evil. After Easter, we can have hope that the future is not totally determined by the past.

This is one reason we refer to the message of what happened in Jesus as "gospel," as "good news." It is particularly good news because what happened in Jesus Christ on His resurrection still happens. Here. Now.

Easter is a promise not only that death does not have the last word but also that God will not be defeated by evil and death. And those disciples and those churches who work in Jesus' name will not be defeated. Certainly, there will be sickness, setbacks - and even death and mourning. But all those once all-powerful forces have received a fatal blow. Death, the great Defeater has been defeated. And thus, we have hope.

Easter people, those who are still being developed and formed and changed into people who are Dorcas-like, continue to look for ways to serve. There are many ways to serve and many gifts and abilities to serve those needs. There is undoubtedly a way for you to serve.

As I was reflecting on our passage about Tabitha/Dorcas today and preparing a sermon, I remembered an old television game show that some of you might remember: "What's My Line." A panel of celebrity judges would try to guess the occupation of a mystery guest from clues to their questions. Could the panel guess who you are and those things that are important to you? Could they tell what you did or are doing with your life? Could they figure out your particular area of service? Would they figure out that you, too, are Tabitha?