

**Grace Episcopal Church Galena, IL**  
**April 17, 2016**

**Sermon by Rev. Dr. Gloria G. Hopewell**  
**Text--Acts 9: 19-36**

The theme of this Fourth Sunday of Easter, “Good Shepherd’s Sunday,” is carried today in our hymns, prayers, and anthems. I want to focus, though, on our reading from *The Acts of the Apostles*, though. The story of a woman, a disciple, that one writer describes as being “like a footnote, a miracle with a name attached.”

That would be Tabitha. Known as Dorcas in Greek, both names meaning “gazelle.” This story is rather amazing, really. Amazing in itself, but also just its existence in scripture. There are few women who are mentioned by name in the Christian scripture – and this one even has the distinction of being the only case in which a woman is both named and called a disciple! I am curious to know how many of you have ever heard this story? (It’s not fair for the Wednesday morning Bible Study or EfM people to answer!).

What if someone decided to write your life’s story in 94 words? Ninety-four words is about one medium-sized paragraph of single-spaced type in a normal 12 point font on your computer. In the average Bible, it is about 3 column inches. It takes not much more than one minute to read. What would a 94 word synopsis of your life say about you and how you lived? Would it say as much as the 94 words that summarize the life of Tabitha in this morning’s reading from the book of Acts? Or as little? Leaving us wanting to know more.

We have made a rather sudden transition this morning. We have moved quickly from the confusing times following the resurrection of Jesus when he appeared to the befuddled disciples to instruct them on their new tasks and ministries. We have now jumped head first right into those ministries where the disciples begin to carry the gospel toward the “ends of the earth.” Today is Peter’s turn as he is called to Joppa because the community is in crisis over the sudden death of one of their beloved people.

First, though, a few words on the book of Acts. It is not a gospel – the four gospels tell the stories about Jesus and his life and ministry on earth. Yet it is generally accepted that Acts is “part 2” of Luke – that Luke and Acts were written by the same person. Acts is not an epistle, either, like the letters of Paul. It is a narrative that gives us insight into how the good news was spread and glimpses of what was to become the early Christian community. In Acts, this takes place in three phases: the first was in and around Jerusalem; the next extended to the whole of Palestine; then, beyond Palestine and throughout the Mediterranean world. The ministry began primarily to – and for – other Jews – those who were Hebrew or Aramaic speaking and those whose language was Greek. Then, the gentiles were included, at least in part because a large number of the Jews were resistant to the message being preached by those who believed Jesus to be the Messiah.

The book of Acts contains some historical incidents but should not be looked at as a historical or chronological record. It is more of a collage of stories, a painting of impressions into a landscape of the beginnings of the church. About those acts that the apostles performed in

their ministry. And through those acts, the glimpses we get of the people that they healed and encountered and inspired.

Today's piece of the collage is about Peter—and about Tabitha (or Dorcas in Greek). It takes place in the middle phase—teaching and preaching and proselytizing to wider Palestine and a Jewish community. Dorcas' life was devoted to caring for the widows of the community out of her own resources. That in itself was not unusual: the community's obligation to care for the widows, the orphans, and the sojourners is an ancient theme in Jewish thought dating all the way back to the laws of Moses. The unusual or remarkable part was the degree of devotion in her ministry and the response of the community to her gifts.

We encounter Dorcas after her death. She has been prepared for burial, is laid out in an upper room, and is surrounded by mourners, other women—widows—who are devastated, weeping and wailing as was their custom. Death and dying were not so institutionalized as in our day. They were quite accustomed to being so close to it. For them, the "ministry of presence" was an ordinary part of life—showing concern by taking the time, making the effort. Showing up, assisting with the ritual preparation, and just being present in the time of mourning.

A major part of the widows' sadness concerned the loss of the unique gifts that Dorcas brought to the community—a generosity of spirit that showed itself in her acts of care and charity. Her special contribution was sewing tunics and other garments for those in need. And apparently, she didn't just throw together some odds and ends of fabric—any old thing, whether it matched or not, whether it was smooth or prickly—just enough to cover the body and give warmth. For when Peter arrived after being summoned, the widows brought out samples of Dorcas' work and proudly showed them off. Perhaps they were even wearing some of them. They were works of art, comfortable pieces made in pride and shared lovingly. Hers was not a ministry of duty to be finished as quickly as possible so she could go on to "real" life. *This* was her life and she engaged in it with all of herself. And probably felt a quiet joy in it. No wonder her death was such a crisis. How could such a person ever be replaced?

I find myself wondering about these weeping widows standing there at the bedside. I wonder if they ever expressed their appreciation of her work before she died. I wonder if they were standing there that day regretting what they had never taken the time to say to her and thinking that it was now too late. They, of course, got a second chance. Peter came there and through the power of the Holy Spirit, restored Dorcas to life and to her community. Their work could continue. Maybe they would appreciate her more. Maybe they would follow her example and become disciples, too.

What does a story of a first century woman like Dorcas have to do with us? She wasn't Peter, healing through the power of the Holy Spirit. She wasn't Paul, converting and baptizing the Gentiles, being imprisoned and for spreading the Gospel. She wasn't Stephen, refusing to stop preaching until he was stoned to death. She was just making clothes.

Just making clothes. Clothing the naked, probably feeding the hungry. I would say that she was also in the healing ministry. Healing the community, restoring not only bodily comfort but dignity. And worth.

That is what I think that we are about as church. Oh, there are many organizations with more money and resources, more expertise than what we have. They do good work, caring for the lost, the broken, the grieving. We may not think that we as individuals or as a smallish church can really make a difference in this complex world of ours. But that is not true. Each person, uniquely created by God, brings his or her own particular gifts and skills to the community. I suspect that many of us know a Dorcas or two. They may be sitting beside you this morning. You may be Dorcas yourself.

We come together with those gifts and skills, we are enlivened, renewed by the Spirit. We are a healing community, and all together sharing our love and support, we can change the world. It starts right here. And at the Dubuque Rescue Mission, in the knitting circle, at Bible study, Centering Prayer, and EfM. In the chapel offering and receiving healing prayer and holy oil. In the moments when we place our nickels, our dimes, our quarters in the little blue boxes and bless them. Even in our meetings. Whether it is in preparing the altar for worship or painting the base boards, it starts right here—all of us together, bound by the Holy Spirit, fed, made whole---and sent forth into the world.

On Friday, I treated myself to a small bunch of tulips. The buds were still tight with just a hint of the yellow that would soon bloom. When I got home, I trimmed the stems and divided them into two vases—one for the living room and the other for the dining table to brighten the place where I would be working on my taxes.

On Saturday morning, I came downstairs to a cheerful display on the dining room table. The buds had opened. In the living room? Well. Three limp stems bent in half. That's when I discovered that I had failed to put water in the vase. Oh, Gloria, yet again you have killed living things! Yet just before I tossed the stems into the trash, I added water and tried again—sure that it was a futile effort. As the day passed, they began to stand up—ever so slowly. Today, they are just about as dazzling as the others—broadcasting their yellowness through the room.

It's a mystery to me how that happened. Just a bit of water. But just enough. It restored those flowers to life, to yellowness. Just as we are restored by the living water, the bread and the wine, and the loving care of the community. So restored as to burst forth and bloom in the world!

Amen.