

*Open our hearts today, O God, to hear your word for us that we may become faithful disciples of the Risen One. Amen.*

May 12, 2019 – Acts 9:36-43

### **“Get Up”**

I think the best gardens are those which are filled with a wonderful mixture of plants and flowers. Seemingly random colors splashed here and there, but each flower inviting the person to get a bit closer and see what it has to offer.

The Book of Acts is like that flower garden with its wild array of fantastic and colorful stories. Stories like the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost accompanied by floating flames of fire and mighty winds; stories like the wilderness baptism of someone who was both a sexual and racial minority; and stories like the dramatic conversion from a person “breathing threats and murder against the disciples” (9:1) to someone who “began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues.” (9:20)

But sometimes the unexpected flower pops up in the garden. Maybe it’s a poppy that you had completely forgotten about. Or maybe it’s the passion flower vine that seemed to come out of nowhere.

In this morning’s case, we are treated to a brief story that has seemingly popped up out of nowhere, inviting us to get a little closer so that we can appreciate what it has to offer the reader.

It’s a story that takes place in Joppa, an ancient city, which was the principal seaport of Jerusalem. And if it was like most seaports, it would have been host to different races and cultures of people. It’s a tale about a woman who apparently walked with ease between the cultures of Joppa because she went by two different names. Her Jewish friends knew her by the name “Tabitha,” but was known as “Dorcas” among her Greek acquaintances.

We are told that Tabitha was a disciple. And we might easily read past this word that by this time seems so common in the New Testament, without realizing that Tabitha is the only woman explicitly identified as a disciple in Acts. And furthermore, the feminine form of “disciple” used here is the only place it occurs in the entire New Testament. So Tabitha wasn’t just a disciple, she was a disciple with a capital “D.”

She wasn’t noted for her miraculous deeds, but rather for her devotion to “good works and acts of charity.” (v. 36) In particular, she appeared to be a seamstress.

She reminds me of our own church. We aren’t noted for the high-budget noteworthy programs that would typically catch the eye of a local news reporter assigned to cover a human interest story. But we’re disciples nonetheless, noted for our own good works and acts of charity, serving others and making a difference, one life at a time. We are also disciples with a capital “D.”

But in our story, Tabitha died. And so her community sent for Peter, whose reputation some 11 miles away was spreading as a miracle-worker. Maybe they were hoping for their own miracle. Or maybe they were simply hoping the famous apostle would arrive to show his respect, and give them the opportunity to share with him the impact she had made in their own lives and in the lives of others.

At any rate, Peter arrived at the house where Tabitha’s corpse had been washed, dressed, and made ready for burial. The house was filled with people whose lives had been touched by her, people wearing the very clothes she had made for them, people grieving their loss. Tabitha’s death left a void that no one could imagine would ever be filled.

But not for long, because after Peter arrived, he escorted everyone out of the room where he could spend some time in prayer. And after that prayer time, he turned to Tabitha and told her to get up. And she did!

I think this is a story for our time. Because sometimes the saints among us grow weary and tired. Sometimes people pull within themselves, and their spirits seemingly wither up and die. Sometimes entire churches have been known to do it.

In fact, it seems to be happening all over the place. All polls and studies point to the declining

attendance of churches. People have become disheartened with organized religion's lack of prophetic voice in a world torn apart by violence, hunger and poverty, racism, homophobia, transphobia, and xenophobia. Our churches have fallen asleep on the job. Some might even be described as being as spiritually dead as was Tabitha.

But the good news is that not even death has the last word. Peter told Tabitha to get up, and God is telling the Church the same thing. Like Tabitha, we are being told to wake up and get up.

"Stay Woke," a motto that's often associated with the Black Lives Matter movement was a rallying cry to those who were unaware of police brutality in the Black community. The term is not simply a call to awareness but also one of vigilance. One must not simply awake from their slumber, but one must also stand up or stand against injustice. To "be woke," though, extends beyond the Black Lives Matter movement and can be used more generally in other instances of injustice. God's call is for churches to be woke, to wake up, and to renew our stand against injustice in whatever form it takes.

When Tabitha opened her eyes and got up, I can't imagine she did anything other than return to her acts of charity. That just seems like the sort of person she was.

And I feel as though the message is the same for you and me and our faith community. God is not just inviting us to wake up, but commanding us to get up. It is not enough to simply become aware of the conditions around us. It's imperative that we, too, act to improve the conditions of those who are suffering. Our actions can be the difference between life and death. When God calls us to get up, we are being called to be woke.

This morning's story is a story of hope. It's a story that was no doubt included to assure the early Christian Church of the power of life over death. That power still occurs today, assuring us of an existence that extends beyond this life. But even more than a story about the hereafter, I believe it's a story about the rising to new life, when to all appearances, death has settled in. As one commentator puts it, it's a story of resurrecting power that "flame[s] the fire of our desire to create a more loving and just world." (Jennifer T. Kaalund, Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at Iona College in New Rochelle, New York).

God is in the business of resurrecting things – bringing new life to people who thought they were done, re-igniting faith communities with a purpose, planting seeds of hope in a world which at times feels hopeless. And God's message for you and me and our church is the same as Peter's was for Tabitha: "Get up." Remember your roots and rediscover your calling. Get up! God's not finished with us by a long shot!

I like to think of the Church as the resurrected body of Christ, providing hope for the world. We probably shouldn't measure our impact by numbers, but we shouldn't ignore them, either. And if the numbers are any kind of indicator, they are revealing that the global Church is in trouble. It's not dead yet, but it's struggling. This is not a time to be complacent. Nor is it a time to throw in the towel. Remember, we're disciples with a capital "D." We have been commanded to open our eyes and to get up. Because there's work to do. The unfinished work of the Risen One. Amen.