Tabitha’s Story

Gail Arnall
May 8, 2022

Text: Acts 9:36-43

The Zoom recording for Gail’s sermon can be found [here](https://zoom.us/rec/play/ob2WWaRob45Dnj7eKAl9JbZQea89_JWRZR4CEg6GZl9KHgrAh1oZCf6yA-SkPw3lZnxNnvJLNj5hAwz3.t4KELugRGauUsSKT?autoplay=true). It begins with Dixcy’s introduction.

My point, once again, is not that those ancient people told literal stories and we are now smart enough to take them symbolically, but that they told them symbolically and we are now dumb enough to take them literally. — John Dominic Crossan

So I have been trying to read the Tabitha story symbolically. Let’s see what you think.

The story says that Peter traveled to visit a dead woman. We know she was a woman because for the first and only time in the New Testament the feminine form of the word disciple is used. Symbolically the writer seems to be saying that Peter’s work was inclusive — men and women. Otherwise, it would not be important to use the feminine form of the word. Tabitha is her name in Aramaic — the common language of the time. Luke, the writer of Acts, also gives us the Greek word for Tabitha: Dorcas.

What are we told about Tabitha? It appears she was a beloved leader in her community. She devoted her time to helping the poor, specifically widows — typically the poor and discarded — with acts of charity. She even made them clothes. We know she was a leader in the community because the men sent men to Lydda to see if Peter would come — presumably to heal her. The story just before this one in Acts 9 tells of Peter healing a paralyzed man named Aeneas, so the word was out that Peter could perform miracles. Her community was suffering a great loss, enough to send for Peter.

Meanwhile, the women bathed her and laid her in an upstairs room. I suggest that it is significant that they did not anoint her with the oils that were typically applied after death. You will recall that the women went to Jesus’ tomb to apply spices and oil. So this got me thinking: What if Tabitha was not physically dead but rather had succumbed to a grave depression and was simply not able to function. She had let the burdens of her ministry drain her dry. Would that be significant? Let’s see.

So Peter was summoned *urgently*. And he went with them. What is it that they were able to say that moved Peter to respond by going? Perhaps it was something like,

our sister in Christ has fallen into a deep depression and we are all worried about her. We don’t know what to do. Can you come help her? We will put you up. We can pay you for your time. We know you are busy, but this can’t wait.

When Peter went to the upper room, he saw lots of women crying. Then showing Peter acts of charity that Dorcas had done for them, they explained how important she was to their community. Something moved Peter to clear the room. He then sat down and prayed. Now that seems significant. Peter no doubt asked the Holy Spirit to come visit Dorcas and heal her. Then Peter said (using the common tongue), “Tabitha, get up!” Such authority! And Tabitha heard Peter — another hint that she was not physically dead. She heard the commandment in the midst of her depression, and she obeyed. She opened her eyes, saw Peter and sat up. And then what did Peter do? He took her hand (a physical touch man to a woman) and helped her stand up. He called in the community and they had a great celebration, so great that lots of people heard about it and came to believe in the Lord … interestingly, not in Peter.

And then we are told that Peter stayed around, staying with Simon the Tanner — probably another symbolic reference because Jews did not touch skin and unclean flesh. Another statement of inclusivity.

So why did Luke put this little story in his telling of the Acts of the disciples? Here are some thoughts.

One is that Peter was trying to be obedient to the leading of the Lord, even if it meant going out of his way to a small town off his planned route; and he did not pause to consider whether going would be economical or efficient or the best possible use of his time. He just went. That’s a kind of obedience and faithfulness that we all might seek for ourselves. Rather than a grand design for our life, or even for our day, be open to what is given to us in the moment.

There was in Joppa a community that was so involved with each other’s lives that they knew that their beloved Tabitha was in trouble. She wasn’t herself. She had fallen into a type of death that was alarming. Both the widows and the men were concerned. Concerned enough to go over to Lydda and ask Peter to come. That was a gutsy thing to do. Peter is the leading disciple — kind of like a Billy Graham or Bishop Tutu. But they loved Tabitha and wanted her back. They were desperate and willing to try anything, even risking humiliation if Peter turned them down. What an amazing community that must have been. They clearly had the poor with them, but they must have had the rich as well, otherwise they would not have had the time or resources to leave work and go get Peter. This was a community that loved and looked after one another. That sounds like a community we would want to be. An intentional community. Not just a Sunday-worship community but one that provides housing, food, support for undocumented workers, care for children and their parents. And one that watches out for one another’s spirit and well-being. As flawed and crippled as 8th Day is, I think that is the type of community we are trying to be for one another and our world.

And here’s another thing I think is important. Peter stayed around. Luke says he stayed with Simon the tanner. I wonder if he stayed because he too needed to be revitalized, to be nurtured by this incredible community. He needed to spend time with the faithful in a joyous celebration of renewed life. He was taking care of himself by staying close to a faithful community.

One overarching theme for me is the power of the Holy Spirit. I suggest that Peter was led by the Holy Spirit to go to Joppa to see Tabitha. I believe it was the Holy Spirit that gave the men and women surrounding Tabitha to take a bold and audacious step of seeking Peter’s help. We know Peter prayed over Tabitha before commanding her to get up. The source of energy for Peter, the community and Tabitha’s actions came, I believe from the Holy Spirit. They were that in tune with God’s desire for their lives. This is the real lesson of the story, I think. It tells us that our inward mission, attending to the inward journey is critical for us individually and as a community.

In our Acts seminar last Wednesday, Dixcy shared a wonderful story of an act of redemption in which she heard the call to come. She responded in a timely way — having prepared for this occasion for the past 4 years — and she involved a school community and a community of trainers of dogs for the blind. After the shooting at Burke School on Connecticut Avenue last week, she got nine of her fellow dog trainers and went to the school to offer a type of dog therapy for the children and staff. They were so blessed to be able to talk about the trauma and to feel the love of the dogs. It was a Tabitha action.