

Wonder Women

Psalm 23, Acts 9:36-43

Center Church

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You know Tabitha. You've met her, some of you **are** her. That woman who volunteers to help out at church, with friends, with neighbors. That woman who seeks out people who need the help most, people others might pass by, and does some simple life-giving act for them. That woman who works really hard and tries her best to be loving in the midst of that work.

You know Tabitha. She's not a celebrity. She certainly does not have supernatural, superhero powers. She's not Captain Marvel or Okoye or Nakia or Wonder Woman. She lives in your apartment building or on your street. She works in your office building or restaurant or school. She comes to your church.

She's a good woman, perhaps someone from time to time might call her a "saint," but not in the statue-we-light-a-candle-by sense of that. She probably hasn't won many awards or even had her name in the paper very often. She hasn't gone viral on social media.

Out of all the women that died in the region of Joppa that week, why did Peter choose to raise Tabitha back to life? We have no idea. But what we do have some idea about is why her story was told, written down even, when surely countless healing stories from those days have not been recorded.

Christians have remembered Tabitha not because she was a Saint with a capital S. In fact, we never hear of her again in the scriptures anywhere, so we don't know what she did with her second life. Far as we know, she went back to making clothing and doing good works, and, eventually, she died.

We remember her because one of the really radical, culture-challenging pieces of what it meant to believe in Jesus was to affirm that all lives have value. Not just the wealthy. Not just the politically powerful.

Not just the Emperors and Generals of the world. Not just the religious leaders. Not just certain ethnic groups. Women's lives had value. Those widows, among the least powerful and most often desperately poor people of that time, their lives had value. The last line of the reading today seems like a throwaway; why do we care where Peter stayed in Joppa? It's important because a tanner would have been considered unclean, and yet Peter chose to stay in his house. All lives have value. The lives of those who are sick and disabled have value. Jesus taught this by every healing he did in his short time among us. Children, women, foreigners, soldiers, politicians, those with contagious diseases, those with mental illness, those who had committed a crime. Their lives had value to him, and so, he embodied, to God.

I believe Peter did not raise Tabitha because she did good works; it wasn't a reward for behavior. I think he raised her so she **could do** good works. Just as in baptism, we do not baptize only those we think are already extraordinary; we baptize all who seek a relationship with God through Jesus, and then call them to be like Jesus. This is still a radical statement in a world that values, or de-values, or even de-humanizes people for more reasons than we can count.

Tabitha's story reminds us that what God was up to in the Jesus project was nothing less than a radical re-orienting of values and power in the world. Mary sang about it when she was pregnant with Jesus: "God has scattered the proud, brought down the powerful and lifted up the lowly."

Peter took Tabitha's hand and lifted her up. And I expect Tabitha then continued her service in lifting up the widows of Joppa's church.

Take a minute and consider who is often de-valued today.

Poor and frightened mothers at the southern border whose children, including infants, are taken from them as they come seeking safety from harm. Young black women and men in the city who too often see their lives ended early. Young poor women and some men who are taken and trafficked to be used as sex slaves right here in Connecticut. Poor children in the cities whose schools are denied the same resources as those in wealthy suburbs. People in abusive relationships who are beaten down by those who convince them they are of no value. Gay, lesbian and transgender youth who commit suicide at alarming rates because they are convinced that they have no value.

One of the new practices to come out of so many police shootings of people of color is for protestors to encourage us to “say their name.” To say out loud that this person’s life had value. It’s a powerful practice, especially with a large group of people.

But I don’t think we should wait for someone to be killed to say their name. Like Tabitha with the widows of Joppa and Peter with Tabitha, as disciples we are called first to understand our own value in the eyes of God, and then to work with God to lift up those whose lives are devalued in any way. To say their names. Perhaps to **learn** their names if we pass them everyday and yet they remain anonymous to us, or we see their picture in the news but don’t bother to listen to their story, perhaps dismissing them because of our own biases.

Say their names. Think for a moment of people you may know or know of whose lives are often pictured as less valuable in our society. (Pause) Now if you know their names, say them out loud, and if you don’t know their names, then say something that describes them (the janitor in my building, the homeless person on the street corner). Let us begin the lifting up, by lifting up their names.
(Say names)

We don’t have to be Wonder Women (or Men); we don’t have to have the power to raise the dead like Peter. But day by day, name by name, act by act we are called to be Tabitha with the widows of Joppa, raised up by God, person by person seeking to continue the Jesus Project of turning the world upside down. I, for one, still believe it can happen. Can you believe it into being with me? Amen.