

Acts of the Apostles 9:32-43

Now in Joppa there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas. She was devoted to good works and acts of charity.³⁷ At that time she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs.³⁸ Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, who heard that Peter was there, sent two men to him with the request, "Please come to us without delay."³⁹ So Peter got up and went with them; and when he arrived, they took him to the room upstairs. All the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them.⁴⁰ Peter put all of them outside, and then he knelt down and prayed. He turned to the body and said, "Tabitha, get up." Then she opened her eyes, and seeing Peter, she sat up.⁴¹ He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive.⁴² This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord.⁴³ Meanwhile he stayed in Joppa for some time with a certain Simon, a tanner. (212)

Tabitha was a woman, just a woman. Her life was unremarkable, especially in the grand scheme of things. Her death was unremarkable. She'd been sick and then she died.

The women who grieved her death were also unremarkable, women, just women, but not even quite. They were widows, the sort of people who made up a huge portion of the early church, joining up because they'd likely be treated better here than anywhere else, better among these people than anyone else.

We're in the book of Acts, here, the Acts of the Apostles. Written by the same person who wrote the Gospel of Luke, this picks up where the gospel lets off, with the resurrection of Jesus and his ascension. Following when he was raised up on a cloud never to be seen again, the Holy Spirit came down and alighted on all the disciples so they would have power to act in Jesus' name, so they would now be apostles, sent out in Jesus' name and set to work toward his same ends of bringing good news to the poor and healing to the unwell and true sight to the blind and justice to the oppressed, declaring indeed the jubilee year, the year of the Lord's favor. And it is all these so-called acts that make the Acts of the Apostles the action-packed book it is, complete with shipwrecks and prison sentences and the breaking open of prison cells.

This drive to get the word out, even if under the threat of banishment or imprisonment, this illegal thing, this word of good news and hope intended for all people! This need to gather people in his name all over the world: this wasn't so much a religious crusade but an offering to all people a better life than what the world tended to offer. This wasn't about getting everyone to adopt the right creed as much as it was allowing people their own liberation, something less brutal, more merciful, less painful, more caring. Peter would preach all over the place among the Hebrews

to loosen the bonds of strict law and crushing failure. Paul would take the word even wider, out, out into the pagan world where lawlessness was more the problem, gleefully gory, trivializing of suffering, enslavement and exploitation and little cause for hope.

The possibility that there might one God whose nature is love and whose mode is care: this means perhaps God's world should be love and its practice should be mutual care.

This book tends to frustrate a lot of readers, a lot of scholars. It has over its long course of being in the biblical cannon. It's the only of its kind in the Bible and is more of a novel akin to other ancient novels, an epic tale. Part history, part hagiography, part adventure story, part theology, it begins in Jerusalem and goes out and further out, all over the Greek world and ending at last with Paul in Rome, though with no mention of his legal troubles there and how his life would end due to that persecution. It ends abruptly if quietly, a fading out of the story. As if the writer ran out of papyrus.

And it flirts with greatness. Playing with the tradition of epic tales to tell of a hero, to sing of his exploits, this sets the apostles up to seem great. And yet there's something of smallness here, too, the greatness of things that are also obviously, in the measure of the world, small, very small. A reassessment of things. A great reversal.

Like Tabitha here, Dorcas in Greek, a woman known, it seems, by both names, suggesting she straddled that dangerous divide, the Hebrew and the Greek, the Jewish and the pagan. These were two worlds that had every reason to avoid interchange, and yet here was the early church trying to zip them together so that they might be one.

This wouldn't be easy to do. Nearly every practice you'd find on the loose in the pagan world was anathema to the world of the Hebrews—which wasn't just religious priggishness on the part of the Hebrews. No, this was a matter of practice, of lived reality. Imagine the grossest thing you can think of and then imagine sitting down for supper with someone who does that, or doesn't do that. Whether it's practices of washing and cleanliness, or sexual practices of with whom or with what, or practices in entertainment—what's amusing and what's offensive, what's all in fun and what's grotesque and horrifying.

Tabitha, Dorcas: she managed to straddle the divide, and perhaps even to lessen the divide.

Because, you know, there are widows in both the pagan and the Hebrew world, there are people in need of care everywhere you look, and many of them, it seems, were finding their way into and among the early church because here, among this new dispensation, this new political order, you didn't have to be high born or heroic or endowed with imperial power or religious

power or physical beauty in order to be regarded well and treated kindly. Here all you had to be was human. A person. This alone made you worthy.

Indeed, as it says in the second chapter of Acts, just as this whole new dispensation was starting out, “All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.”

And thus it continued, even as the early church grew in number, a few chapters hence, “...the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common... There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold.”

Not that this all came easily, without effort. No, for in fact the first church conflict ever recorded was an outgrowth of this tricky balance. Coming just two chapters still later in the book, “when the disciples were increasing in number,” the Greek Christians complained against the Jewish Christians “because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food”—which had the original twelve call together the whole community of the disciples. And they would anoint deacons for this sort of service, a new administrative layer, for the fair distribution of resources, without fear or favor. See, as their task grew, they needed to get organized.

And it seems to have worked. That’s the last we hear of this particular conflict, all the widows now treated with equal care.

Even *tender* care. Like from Tabitha, Dorcas.

She’d sewn their tunics. Known for good works and acts of charity, she’d sewn their tunics and other clothing, which the widows, in their grief, brought to Peter who’d come at their request.

Which is interesting, don’t you think? When you consider how the women who’d first come to the tomb were received among the eleven disciples not long ago. When they’d come to the tomb on that first day of the week, in the morning, at early dawn, and found the stone rolled away and the tomb empty, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest.

Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale,” which is putting nicely, by the way. The original Greek is not so genteel. How it seemed to those disciples is actually quite a bit more coarse. *Leros* is the Greek word used here, and it’s something bulls make, say, in the field, after a big meal, and not something preachers say from their pulpits. This is how the disciples received that first message from that group of women first sent out.

Not so this time, I'm happy to say. This time, when these widows in their grief asked two disciples to send for Peter, the disciples weren't dismissive but did as asked.

Peter had been in nearby Joppa, people seemed to know, nearby when Tabitha fell ill in Lydda, and would eventually die, Peter whom people knew was hope embodied. "Please come to us without delay," the disciples arrived to him with this message. Which Peter did, come without delay. And when he arrived, the women made their case to Peter by showing him their tunics and the other clothing Tabitha had made them.

And it's so ordinary a thing, unremarkable. Sewing tunics was not something that took uncommon talent or extraordinary skill. This wasn't the best case to make when trying to convince someone to go the trouble of making a miracle. It's not like if Winston Churchill had dropped dead just prior to becoming the prime minister of Great Britain: "We need him to fight the Nazis!" It's not like if Abraham Lincoln had dropped dead just two years prior to when he was killed: "We need him to sign the Emancipation Proclamation!" No, when it came to Tabitha, surely someone else would sew everyone some tunics.

And, no, maybe not with such care.

And, no, maybe not with such grace.

Or at least not—no, certainly not—with that unnamable quality that made Tabitha *Tabitha*.

Whatever. You know what I'm saying: she wasn't a pivotal person in the playing out of history. She showed no sign of being so before her sickness and death, and she didn't prove to be after her being raised back up. Getting her back to live out more days, more years: it hadn't apparently been a pressing need: we never even hear of her again.

And yet.

I know. I agree with you.

It's Mother's Day.

It's Mother's Day at a time in our politics when being a mother is as politically charged a thing as ever. This most embodied thing, this most intimate thing, is also as politically charged a thing as it's ever been. To become a mother, as ever a powerful mix of happenstance and personal choice, is a fraught question, unhelpfully made so by the likes of political leaders and online influencers. They're doing what they can to appeal to the world to have more children (or at least certain sorts of people to have more children)—

by which they are making it utterly unappealing, to me at least. If I weren't already a mother, these two and the subcultures they apparently represent would have me thinking twice, and then twice again—

the pro-natalists and the “mom-fluencers” and the trad wives of TikTok who swear it's easier to make fruit leather at home than to go to the grocery store and buy some, all while wearing Prada and with full hair and makeup, would definitely have me thinking twice. If motherhood is about making organic fruit leather while wearing Prada in your kitchen, which has not one but *two* kitchen islands, or is about having a quiver-full of kids whom the mother is to indoctrinate into a certain ideology or a certain religiosity or simply into being copies of what's come before, then count me out. I'm not that into control. I'm way more into come-what-may.

Which I imagine is the truly scary thing about motherhood and is moreover what all these public displays of mothering in current America are actually about. To be a mother, whether a biological one to a child whom you've conceived and birthed, or an adoptive one or a step- one to a child whom you've conceived *of* by way of imagining and hoping for, or a foster one to a child in crisis and in need of intervention, or to become *as* one to someone else you'd nurture and take care of as aunty or mentor or adult treasured friend, man or woman, cis or trans, is to sign up for something quite beyond your control.

And don't we love control! As a culture, as a country that is now more than ever made for TV, governed as we are by those who are creatures of TV, don't we just love control! Everything looking just so, everything managed to be just so, or, if out of control, then only apparently so, performed playful mayhem, staged and directed: “Girl, wash your face!” Don't we just love it.

I was a new mother alongside a friend, now more acquaintance. Of her son, three months younger than mine, she said to me once, “I just think he was born pure and my job is to keep him as pure as possible for as long as possible,” which had me feeling for her. That's a lot of pressure! Plus, it's not true, not born out in fact. We humans are a mix of nature and culture right from the start, inborn and input. We people are a mix of dirt and sky. We're mongrels, who have our good days and our bad days, who can't take a joke and are the life of the party, who sometimes need a nap and other times have just had the most refreshing burp.

And to be the one to meet that mix, to receive of it, and to shelter and nurture and raise it up, then to offer it all back, this stew of crank and beauty, to offer it all back as grace and forgiveness and mercy and love! To be the mother of that one, recognizing the naked vulnerability

of another and fashioning for it a tunic, a blanket, a pair of socks or mittens or a colorful hat for when the weather gets cold or the world is harsh:

Tabitha must be raised! We cannot do without her.

This is a small story about a small person whom we meet and then never see again. The world is full of these. The gospel is full of these. You might be one of these, which these days is regarded a curse. Everyone wants to be famous. Everyone wants to be great, the Greatest of All Time is everyone goal, it seems, the GOAT.

This desire is one more hindrance to people becoming instead a mother. You're not gonna be great in the eyes of the world if you spend your time making tunics for nobodies. But those nobodies will argue persuasively for your life—and thus you'll have it in abundance.

A great reversal.

Thanks be to God.