

In Praise of Dorcas
A sermon by David Roquemore
First Presbyterian Church, Newton
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Acts 9: 36 - 43

Peter is in Joppa which is a part of what we now call Tel Aviv, the beautiful city, a modern city of Israel. More will happen to Peter in the next chapter, and his location is a part of that story. For now, he is northwest of Jerusalem, at the coast, in the city of Joppa, at the house of Simon the tanner.

Note, tanners were not considered a part of polite society. Their work required them to be around dead animals, and doing things that were “unclean”, like skinning the animals. This was dirty, smelly work at best. For Peter to stay at his house shows us that God is preparing Peter for the dream he will soon have, which declares all animals clean for food. And it shows us something about the economics of the earliest church: they were poor.

Dorcas was a woman who was devout, doing good works when she could. She died! They summon Peter, since he was near. They are showing Peter all the stitchery she did and the clothing she had made. Peter shoos them away, and kneels by Dorcas’ bed. He prays. Then he tells her to arise. She opens her eyes, and gets up. He leads her out to the others. Many people believe because of this miracle.

Shouldn’t we all do this? Shouldn’t we be able to go into someone’s room when they are dying, when they have died, and pray, and see them get up, healed and alive and well?

When we were in Princeton, Susan was teaching at a high school, and one of her co-workers began to suffer from cancer. Susan frequently prayed for this woman to be healed. The woman went into the hospital, and Susan with a couple of other seminarians spent hours at her bedside, praying for her to be healed. When the word came that she had died, these people, Susan included, were stunned. How could God let this happen? Why did the woman die? Why wasn’t she healed? At the funeral, the woman’s mother stopped and said to Susan, “Oh but she was healed! She’s with Jesus!”

So what we learn is this. Just because the disciples do something, doesn’t mean we should be able to do it! Keep that in mind as you watch preachers from who knows where on YouTube! Remember that *anyone* can post a video and seem authoritative!

The Spirit moves Peter. I doubt he thought he could raise Dorcas from the dead, but he did it. He prayed, and must have prayed pretty hard. He even turned away from the dead body of Dorcas when he prayed, which may hint that he had his doubts. But he prays, and God’s Spirit acts.

Dorcas had been a major force in the Joppa church. She had given these widows beautiful clothing, at a time when no one helped widows. She was devoted to good works

and acts of charity. I knew a woman like one time; she never let anyone know what she was doing, but she did a lot. As her pastor, I was privy to some of it. The locals called them the fairies: the fairies did this good thing, and you should just give thanks.

A woman said one time her husband was due to come home after his heart surgery in a few days. He had to recuperate, but their air conditioner had given up the ghost! They were going to have to try to live in their RV for a few weeks. The next call I get was from one of these women, asking about this. Lo, the next day the air conditioner was replaced! The couple who got the new a/c unit asked me about it, but all I could say was, “the fairies have been there!”

We can all be like Dorcas, and bless someone around us. We can be like Peter, and pray for the dead to arise. We can pray for the Spirit’s power to keep moving among us and around us, leading the community into the new light of the Spirit’s including grace.

One of the things that is striking in this passage is that it concerns a woman! In those days women were not held up as examples. There may have been women who were respected and admired, but we don’t know much about them. We have heard of a few, but it is the rarity that makes this so unusual. In our time, we have all known women who were marvelous in their power and goodness. We have all known Dorcas-types.

That’s the thing about Christianity: for several centuries it was a faith that upheld and lifted up the poor, the oppressed, women, and others. As it became the faith of the empire, Christendom began, and began to continue that ancient oppression.

I told you the story a few weeks ago of my trials in Baltimore Presbytery, trying to get ordained. I mentioned that I answered the executive’s question in a somewhat smart-aleck way, when he wanted to know if I would ordain women. Since then I have been involved in more ordinations of women than I have of men.

The church has moved from its former parochial idea that only men can be ordained, at least in our tradition. Oh, there are those who dislike this idea, entire denominations that believe we are all headed for perdition!

When I served in Glen Burnie there was a PCA church just a quarter mile from us. One of our elders went there one morning because her son was being ordained as an elder. When the pastor called for elders to come forward for the laying on of hands, she didn’t think about where she was. She got up and went forward. Well, that was heresy! But she was welcomed, as his mother more than as an elder. We know there is no theological reason why a woman can’t be ordained, and many are. The Spirit has moved us.

Another thing we see in this passage is the way Dorcas herself treated the widows. I mentioned already that in the ancient world no one took care of widows. You were on your own; good luck! But these Christians were different! They did things no one else did.

I present to you Pliny the Younger, who wrote a letter to the Emperor Trajan, from his home in what is now Turkey. Some of these Christians had come to his attention. He had investigated them. He found that they did not worship the emperor, and so were guilty of treason. But they did a marvelous job of caring for widows and orphans and the poor. What is to be done about them?

Trajan's answer is that these are the sort of citizens that the Empire wants. If they do admit to being Christian and so not worshiping the emperor, they should be punished. But otherwise, don't seek them out. Don't worry much about them.

These were different people, these holy ones. In our text we read that Peter told "all the saints" that she was healed by the power of the Risen Lord Jesus in the Spirit. Saints means "holy ones," but the root of it means, "those who are different." Different from the rest of us: caring about the poor, about women, about oppressed minorities, then. Caring about all of these makes you different.

It's appropriate I suppose that we read this story on Mother's Day. I don't think the lectionary editors pay attention to this sort of thing. I served a church once that had a habit of presenting "awards" to the oldest mother, the one with the most children, things like that. After a while we stopped, partly because the same woman got the flowers every year! I thought about that for years, and in one place I said, "not everyone here can be a mother, but we all had a mother. So remember your mother and be nice to her." I thought I had solved it. Until after worship when a woman came up and said, "my mother was a real witch and I am glad she's dead!" Others in the family said similar things about that woman. At that point I gave up on even mentioning mother's day in worship.

But Dorcas makes me think, isn't this a person we'd all like to emulate? Isn't she someone we all could imitate? Dorcas is remembered in church history as one who was proficient with the needle, because she made clothes for the widows. And even here in our congregation we mourn the death of our Dorcas, and her skill with crafts and making chrismons. I doubt I will ever have much skill with the needle, but I do hope I can do some good for the poor.

You don't have to be wealthy to help the poor. You can help them even if you only have ten dollars. I have known guys who came by the church who needed all kinds of things, but all they would ask for is prayer. I would pray for them, and they thank me profusely, and leave. There was a guy named Bobby. He was in the church office one afternoon when I came back from somewhere. The secretaries were terrified! He was wearing a one-piece jumpsuit; he'd just gotten out of prison, for murder! He just said, "can you pray for me?" I did and he thanked me, and went on his way, to Annapolis.

All of us can pray for the poor, even at our homes. Just pray for them to find what they need today.

We are going to sing a hymn that features a number of women in the Bible. They've always been there, but we haven't always heard their stories, or the stories of so many others over the years. But they stand for us as examples of faith and discipleship.

Thanks be to God! Alleluia! Amen.