



Tabitha Raised to LIFE!, Isaac Horton

People Encounter Jesus Through the Work of the Disciples

SCRIPTURE

Acts 9:36–43

MAIN IDEA

The community of faith relies on the power of Jesus Christ in times of crisis.

OPENING PRAYER

Open unto me—light for my
darkness.
Open unto me—courage for my fear.
Open unto me—hope for my despair.
Open unto me—peace for my
turmoil.
Open unto me—joy for my sorrow.
Open unto me—strength for my
weakness.
Open unto me—wisdom for my
confusion.
Open unto me—forgiveness for my sins.
Open unto me—love for my hates.
Open unto me—thy Self for my self.
Lord, Lord, open unto me! Amen.³³
Howard Thurman, 1899–1981

³³ Used with permission of Beacon Press, from *Meditations of the Heart* by Howard Thurman (Boston: Beacon, 1999), 188–189. Originally published by Harper & Row (New York), 1953; permission conveyed through Copyright Clearance Center, Inc.

INTRODUCTION

Each Of Us Has A Name

Each of us has a name given by God and given
by our parents.

Each of us has a name given by our stature and
given by our smile and given by what we wear.

Each of us has a name given by the mountains
and given by our walls.

Each of us has a name given by the stars and
given by our neighbors.

Each of us has a name given by our sins and
given by our longing.

Each of us has a name given by our enemies
and given by our love.

Each of us has a name given by our
celebrations and given by our work.

Each of us has a name given by the seasons and
given by our blindness.

Each of us has a name given by the sea and
given by our death.³⁴

Zelda Mishkowsky, Israeli poet

The story in Acts 9 is of a woman with two names: Tabitha and Dorcas. Her third and most significant name, attributed to her but often overlooked, is disciple (see Acts 9:36). Tabitha is the only woman in the New Testament to be designated a

³⁴ Zelda Mishkowsky, *The Spectacular Difference: Selected Poems of Zelda*, translated by Marcia Falk (Cincinnati, OH: Hebrew Union College, 2004), 141.

Acts 9:36–43

³⁶ 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.

disciple, though she was certainly not the only woman who followed Jesus. Many women were faithful and significant supporters of Jesus during his earthly ministry. Luke's Gospel even includes the detail that women were the first people to encounter Christ after his resurrection (Lk 24:10).

"Disciple" was an early word used to describe people who committed to follow Jesus Christ and teach others about him. "Christian," as a term used to describe believers and followers, was used later. The Greek word, *mathētēs*, (plural; *mathētai*) was used to refer to the people who belonged to the Jerusalem church community as noted in Acts 6:1–2 which reads, "Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, 'It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables.'"

Possibly, Luke was influenced by the tradition of Jewish rabbis when he used the term, disciple. In their book, *Sitting at the Feet of Rabbi Jesus*, Ann Spangler and Lois Tverberg explore the first-century world of rabbis and disciples. Their

assumption is that, in the cultural context of Jesus' time, rabbis (exclusively male) were highly respected, and it was a great honor to be a disciple of a famous rabbi. The goal of the disciple was to gain the rabbi's knowledge and, even more importantly, to become like the rabbi in character. It was expected that when a disciple's faith matured they would take the rabbi's teaching to the community, add their own understanding, and teach and train disciples of their own. Christian discipleship seems to have been patterned after this rabbinic discipleship.³⁵

EXAMINE THE CHARACTERS

This brief story contains several important characters: the disciples, the two men sent to get Peter, Peter, the widows, and Tabitha. Luke does not mention the number of disciples or widows, but these two groups of people are included in the story. This sounds like a lot of people and uncertainty about the exact number leads us to assume that too many people were gathered to count them all. The disciples in the story could have been Tabitha's co-workers who shared in their gospel work with the people of Joppa, and the two

³⁵ Ann Spangler and Lois Tverberg, *Sitting at the Feet of Rabbi Jesus: How the Jewishness of Jesus Can Transform Your Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018).

men who were sent to Peter were also part of her network. While Peter the evangelist traveled to Samaria and other places healing and preaching, Tabitha and her team stayed home.

Tabitha is no doubt the main character in the text. Like Saul of Tarsus, Tabitha is a Greek-speaking Jew who has both a Jewish name, Tabitha, and a Greek name, Dorcas. Her parents named her Tabitha, which means gazelle: strong, swift, graceful, and nimble. She lived in Joppa, a small Jewish city, and she used her financial resources to support the widows in her community. She also opened the upper room of her home as a base for local and traveling Christians. Since widows cared for her body after her death, it is possible that she was widowed and childless herself.

Several New Testament writings suggest that widows were quite poor. It is recorded in Acts 6:1 that food was distributed to widows. Family members were expected to provide for widows and we read in 1 Timothy 5:16 that the church helped. But Susan E. Hylen, professor of New Testament at Candler School of Theology, contradicts the idea that *all* widows lived in poverty. She says the idea that widows could not possess their own property is largely false for the Mediterranean world of the first and second centuries. Legal and social norms of this period granted women property rights and substantial authority within their households and communities. She says that while some widows were greatly disadvantaged, many would have experienced only a slight drop in economic or social status after their husbands died, and possibly none at all.³⁶

SACRED ENCOUNTER

At the beginning of the story for this lesson we read that Tabitha became ill and died. After her death, the widows who were with her washed her body

³⁶ Sarah E. Hylen, "Widows in the New Testament," *The Bible and Interpretation*, February 2019; bibleinterp.arizona.edu/articles/widows-new-testament-period.

Contemplate

In what ways does your church support people who have lost their spouses?

Sometimes congregations unconsciously marginalize widows and widowers. Imagine ways that your church might do this without being aware of it. How can you avoid marginalizing anyone in your church?

What ongoing pastoral care and spiritual growth opportunities are available in your church for people who have lost members of their families?

What impact does caring for the bereaved have on the life of the church?

and laid it in an upper room of the house. Though the women were distraught over the death of their dear friend, they honored custom. They washed her body, but it was unusual for them to lay the body in a room. According to Jewish practice, the dead were buried the day they died. With Tabitha, the disciples acted against their custom and sent for Peter instead of burying the body. Peter was in Lydda at the time, twenty-five miles northwest of Jerusalem, and a day's journey by foot from Joppa. By the time Peter arrived, Tabitha possibly had been dead for almost three days.

That Peter was willing to travel to Joppa for Tabitha indicates that she was a vital member of the faith community. Peter arrived at Tabitha's home and, following the example of Jesus when he saved Jairus's daughter (Lk 8:40–56), sent everyone out of the room, prayed, and said the words, "Tabitha,

get up.” Then Tabitha opened her eyes, sat up, and Peter helped her up (Acts 9:40–41).

Raising Tabitha from the dead wasn’t Peter’s first miracle. Peter was becoming an authoritative leader in the early church and had already performed significant miracles before saving Tabitha. Peter healed the disabled man at the Beautiful Gate (Acts 3:6–9) and others were healed and restored when they were placed in Peter’s shadow (Acts 5:15–16). Before he traveled to Joppa to Tabitha’s house, Peter was in Lydda where he healed Aeneas, a paralyzed man who had been bedridden for eight years (Acts 9:32–35).

Peter was an experienced healer but the sacred encounter between Tabitha and Peter was possible because members of the faith community intervened on Tabitha’s behalf. Her beloved community of widows and disciples decided to send for Peter, illustrating their faith in Jesus Christ and their love for Tabitha. The community did not lose hope after their beloved leader and friend died but believed in the power of God to do the inconceivable. They waited with anticipation for Peter to resurrect Tabitha.

TRANSFORMATIVE EXPERIENCE

Tabitha’s death caused a crisis in her community. Her friends, who relied on her for their daily needs, wondered how they would survive without her. In their consternation, they turned to their faith. Their decision to send for Peter was proof they believed in the resurrection. Tabitha had taught the widows and others about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and, here in the time of their anguish, they knew death would not have the last word. Luke includes this story to underscore that God is concerned for the poor and the marginalized and will come to their aid, and in the end structures of death will be turned into structures of life.

After Peter healed Tabitha, she resumed her work and ministry among the widows of her community. The early church grew and flourished because of women leaders like her. Through Tabitha’s compassion and faith in Jesus Christ, the problems of the widows became her problems; she saw their suffering as her suffering. Her ministry among the widows demonstrated to her community that women matter, and the work she did for her community mattered.

The ministry each one of us does has the potential to impact many lives. Our goal in serving Christ and the church should always be for others to flourish. Every day in our communities and world, women choose to go against customs and traditions to serve the needs of others. I think about eighty-two-year-old Betty who goes on mission trips out of her state and helps repair houses damaged by floods in South Carolina. Or Carrie from Georgia who works for a non-profit to facilitate the building of wells so that communities in South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo can have access to clean water. On a recent trip to Africa, Carrie waded through three feet of floodwater to reach the villages to check on their progress. Or Gwynne, a woman of faith who experienced tremendous loss and grief in her life: the death of her husband when she was thirty-five, both of her parents, and her young son and her young son-in-law. Gwynne has channeled her grief into helping others by leading the GriefShare program at her local church. Each of these women uses their resources of time, energy, experience, and faith in Christ to help others flourish.

Contemplate

The women mentioned above are women I know. In what ways do women in your community help others? What do you or will you do to help your community and church flourish?

CLOSING SUMMARY

Our goal at the beginning of *Sacred Encounters* was to show how Luke presents Jesus' radical, inclusive, and hope-filled message to his community and to ours. The stories of Jesus' encounters with people he healed and taught were told to illustrate the universal scope of Jesus' message and the inclusivity of God's love and salvation. Biblical followers of Christ took this message and spread the good news of Jesus throughout the world.

How can we continue to allow the sacred encounters of

- Elizabeth and Mary in lesson one,
- the man healed of demons in lesson two,
- the woman healed of bleeding in lesson three,
- the sisters Mary and Martha in lesson four,
- the man healed of leprosy in lesson five,
- the man healed of a physical disability in lesson six,

- the Ethiopian eunuch in lesson seven,
- Lydia the dealer in purple cloth of lesson eight,
- and the bringing back to life of Tabitha in this lesson change our lives?

How will you?

CLOSING PRAYER

God, we call thee God because we love thee. We are glad to be called thy children and to dedicate our lives to the service that extends through willing hearts and hands to the betterment of all humankind. Grant us strength, courage, faith, and humility sufficient for the tasks assigned to us.³⁷

Mary McLeod Bethune, 1875–1955

³⁷ Learn more about educator and Civil Rights activist Mary McLeod Bethune at cookman.edu/history/last-will-testament.html.

People Encounter Jesus Through the Work of the Disciples

Overview: In the final sacred encounter of the study, Tabitha demonstrates the presence of Jesus by creating and supporting a community of widows. Peter demonstrates the power of Jesus by bringing Tabitha back to life.

Materials: Intercessory prayer notebooks; bulky yarn or brightly colored craft cord or shoelace

Prayer

Participants will make knots in a piece of yarn, cord, or shoelace as they pray. Lead the group in this activity in any way—as involved or as simple as you choose. If you know how to finger knit, teach the group how to do it and use your chain or braid of knitting to add knots. A crocheted chain or a knitted I-cord would work, as well as craft cord or a shoelace.

If you want to learn something new to teach your group, look for video resources online that offer quick instructions and simple techniques.

The idea is for everyone to start with a length of yarn, cord, or shoelace that can be knotted to keep track of the prayers.

Tell the group that every time the prayer uses the phrase “Open unto me . . .” they should add one knot.

Lead the group in taking three deep breaths and read the prayer on page 77 together.

Perform Acts 9:36–43

Invite participants to read the text divided into parts for the narrator (Luke), the widows, and Peter. They may wear costumes and do a dramatic presentation or read together as a group. Consider bringing tunics or shawls for the widows to show to Peter.

Option: Try a different take on the story. Instead of holding up the tunics, invite some participants in advance to wear clothes in honor of Dorcas. You could even have a fashion show!

Online option: Search for and share a short video of a performance based on the text.

Introduce the Lesson

Read the poem on page 77. For each phrase in the poem, tie one knot in the chain the participants started with the opening prayer.

Before discussing the introduction, invite the group to consider the different names by which people are called: first name, last name, nicknames, the name of their trade (doctor, pastor, officer, professor), by the relationships they have (mother, auntie, daughter, neighbor, friend), by their attributes or characteristics (the widow, the prisoner, the homeless person, the old person).

Explain: Most women in the Bible appear without a name, but this woman, a disciple of Jesus, appears with two names: Tabitha and Dorcas. She lives between two cultures! Many people in the U.S. live between two cultures and even change their name to a more accepted one or one that is easier for others to pronounce.

Ask the group: Who do you know who has had this experience? How do we try to learn their different names and their stories? Or don't we?

Add additional information from the Introduction on page 77.

Examine the Characters

With the group, create a list of the oldest people in your congregation. Make note of the people who have lost their loved ones, partners, or spouses. Add the names to the notebooks of intercessory prayers.

Who are younger people in your congregation who have suffered a loss? Add their names to the notebook of intercessory prayers, too.

If you have a recent church directory, look up everyone's picture.

In Acts 6, disciples are chosen to care for widows and make sure they have enough to eat. In what other ways could your group support grieving people in your midst?

Sacred Encounter

Ask the group: What are the practices of the congregation when someone is ill

or dies? What do the pastor, elders, deacons, and other members do? What follow-up is given to the family? In what way is the congregation prepared and empowered to offer help, prayer, and companionship during the mourning process? What skills would we need to develop to help, accompany, and pray for people who mourn?

Transformative Experience

Examine: A crisis can arise when a crucial member of a ministry team, like Tabitha, dies or is ill. This loss often takes time to mend and sometimes a group doesn't recover.

Ask the group: What do you see happening when ministry leaders can no longer continue their work? Do other people step up and serve, or do the ministries die with the person? How can the gifts of one generation of leaders be passed on to the next? How are ministries of service and community outreach important for today's interpretation of the Christ's call to us? What can we do to support established ministries beyond the lives of their founders? How can we start new ones?

Closing Prayer

Invite the group members to look at their chains with each of its knots and think about all the people who have served the mission of the church. Before us, the people serving were our mentors, guides, and inspiration. The responsibility to mentor those who will come after is ours.

Explain: Mentoring is also considered a spiritual discipline that requires accompanying and guiding those who want to learn something from us. If you would like to explore the possibility of starting a service or community outreach ministry, you can seek mentorship from someone who has done something similar. That way, the chain will continue to be made.

Lead the group in the closing prayer on page 81.

Until the Next Lesson

This is the last lesson of *Sacred Encounters* but remember that the next meeting with the presence of Jesus is just one prayer away.