

A New Day

Sermon by Pastor Paul Olson

Easter 4

May 11-12, 2019

Acts 9:36-43

This weekend we celebrate what many consider to be the third major festival in the life of the church after Christmas and Easter—Mother’s Day! But there does seem to be an ironic twist to this time: It is only one day. Consider this: egg salad gets a whole week. As do pickles, pancakes, pickled peppers, split-pea soup, clowns, carpenter ants and aardvarks. Peanut butter gets the month of March, chickens the month of September, and oatmeal gets January; each one rating an entire month. But moms and dads can draw solace from the fact that, along with themselves, such national treasures as the rubber eraser and moles also merit only a single day of recognition.

Most of us recognize the nurturing and supportive role that mothers have played in our lives. For some in our world, this weekend is one of loving remembrance or active relationship. But there also are others for whom today is a painful day with broken connections or heartache-filled memories. Perhaps that may be one reason why the reading from Acts reminds us of what God intends in the gifts of people that God provides for us in our world.

You may never have heard of a woman named Henrietta Lacks. At the age of 31 back in 1951, she was diagnosed with cervical cancer at John Hopkins Medical Center. In the process of that diagnosis, a biopsy was taken. The cells that were removed created an immortal cell line that is known as HeLa. This cell line made possible some of the most important discoveries in modern medicine—crucial in everything from the first polio vaccine to cancer and AIDS research. Since then, scientists have grown more than 20+ tons of HeLa cells in vitro to further advance medical research. [1]

Henrietta Lacks was an unsung hero of modern medicine. She was not highly educated, not a researcher or a doctor. But she made a major contribution, not unlike the contribution of Tabitha in the reading from Acts. Tabitha is an Aramaic name that means “gazelle,” but she is also known as Dorcas in the Greek language. These few verses in the reading from Acts give us all we know about her. A seamstress beyond belief, she should have been inaugurated into the first-century Holy Land Guild of Sewing.

Yet the Bible reserves for Tabitha—or Dorcas, if you prefer—the only use of the feminine form of the word “disciple.” This may suggest that at some point Tabitha actually studied under Jesus. This may or may not be true but she clearly embodied what Jesus told his followers to “make disciples of every nation.”

Her resurrection from the dead is a miraculous event, but what is impressive is one little detail that Luke tells us about this woman from Joppa: She is generous and full of good

works. In Tabitha's day, women were not valued and widows especially had no one to stand up for them. So that may be why, when Tabitha died, the community threw a fit. So strong was their reaction that when they heard Peter was nearby, they sent a message asking him to come without delay.

We're not told whether Tabitha, aka Dorcas, had a husband or whether she was ever married. Her skill in sewing and creating was a gift she used to help out other women in her world who had little or no income. Dorcas was not a preacher, theologian or eloquent writer. She did not make her mark on the church with brave deeds or major financial gifts. But she did live the Good News and touched lives, and probably influenced more people than anyone else in Joppa.

She took care of people. She made tunics and knitted afghans, baked cookies, held hands and visited people. She listened to the heartbreaks and joys, toils and triumphs of the faithful community in Joppa. And what's more, she persuaded her friends to help. In essence she was like a first-century BeFriender. She organized her own form of ecclesiastical welfare system and established her version of the Little Sisters of the Poor. She was the Dorothy Day of her time, putting a human face on the compassion of Christ and expressing and embodying that love for those in the village of Joppa. I'm not suggesting that she was the founder of the Ladies Aid Society or the feminine archetype of Martha Stewart in the ecclesia. She did express in her life the compassion that *all* Christians, men and women, children and youth are called to embody in their lives.

Compassion (in Latin, *cum patior*) means to suffer with, to put yourself in the place of another, to enter into their experience. It is the primary characteristic of incarnation. It is what God was doing in Christ when God reconciled the world to God's self. [2] It is much more than kindness, far more radical than simply being nice. It is fulfilling the requirements of a godly life as described by Micah: doing justice, loving mercy, walking humbly with God, [3] and doing all in a way that is hardly noticeable except for the compassion of it. It is to take to oneself the sufferings of another so deeply that you empty yourself and take the form of a servant, in the manner of Jesus, who did precisely that, even unto death.

A church without men and women who are willing to follow the example of Dorcas is an impoverished church. The creeds may be perfectly recited, the prayers eloquently prayed week after week, the arias perfectly performed on Easter morning, but these are not enough unless the church also has a lot of gazelles taking care of others as Dorcas did. Unless the Dorcas'—male and female, young and old—of our time are known for driving members who have no transportation to church, sending cards to shut-ins on their birthdays, baking communion bread for worship, quilting blankets for orphaned infants and desperate mothers in far-off lands, sewing pillowcase dresses shared across the globe, mentoring students in a nearby elementary school, repairing houses so that folks can have a home, supporting refugees locally and globally, being a welcoming, worshipping, connecting, serving, and moving-forward community of believers [4]—well, you get the point—unless there are a lot of gazelles, that church will dry up, blow away and be nothing but a distant memory.

It's very easy and perhaps tempting to try to put "2 and 2 together" and conclude that Tabitha—or Dorcas—was raised from the dead because of her abundant good works. At this point don't forget the primary tenet of our faith that "we are saved by grace through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God" [5] Good works and generous hearts do not save us; only faith in Jesus Christ can do that. But our faith is evidenced by the way we serve Christ in the world. Our faith is shown when we live like Dorcas, "full of good works and compassionate acts."

Dorcas became a symbol of resurrection life in the Joppa church because her simple acts of compassion and caring were expressed in a visible and tangible way. It was something of the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Is it any wonder that death could lay no more claims on her than it could on Jesus? Thus, when Tabitha died—unexpectedly—the whole community felt her death deeply.

The community mourned. It felt her death as they remembered all that she had done. Grieving and loss cast its shadow over the community. But the miracle of life was given back to Tabitha. Remember the words of the reading from Acts:

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. He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling all the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive. This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord.

(Acts 9:40-42)

Belief happened because of a new day, in spite of loss and grief.

In a few weeks this community of believers at St. Mark's will be faced with a significant change. After twenty-three years here, Pastor Geiseman will be leaving to begin a new and different journey in her life as she enters retirement. And, as in all aspects of life when change happens, there is a time of loss and grief. As a community, St. Mark's will need to feel that loss, but not in a way that paralyzes. But rather, this community needs to reflect and remember in a way that gives thanks for faithfulness to the Gospel expressed and to seek courage for the times ahead, just as the community in Joppa did.

As a community of saints and sinners, you have experienced from Pastor Geiseman grace upon grace, in spite of our world where we sense little or no grace. In our world—where we often don't even see and hear small hints of kindness; where honesty seems to be discarded for ego-inflated desires; where shootings painfully take place in workplaces, schools and worship centers; where humility has become a byword; where our national climate is one of fear, anger and revenge; where violent rhetoric, strutting, smirking, lying and threatening words become a daily habit—this modern day Dorcas named Patricia has embodied in word and deed what it means to be a faithful servant. Resurrection life has been preached and lived by her in a world that wants to hold on to the demons that death spews. You have seen and witnessed from her a person full of good works and compassionate acts.

In this Season of the Resurrection, we rejoice in the Good News that we are all called to “get up.” We are not called to cower in fear and discouragement. We are not called to listen to the voices that preach fear, racism and hatred. We are not called to live in paralysis and pain. We are not called to live in dread. We are Easter people in a Good Friday world. In this Easter Season, this powerful time of the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, it gives us energy and focus and determination and hopefulness so that we, too, are called as a community to be full of good works and compassionate acts.

Happy Mother’s Day to all of you—and to you, Pastor Geiseman—and may you all have many, many more.

Resources

[1] <https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/henriettalacks/index.html>

[2] II Corinthians 5:19

[3] Micah 6:8

[4] St. Mark’s Annual Report, <https://s3.amazonaws.com/media.cloversites.com/35/354872b2-7d8b-49d8-826e-89bd6d097ba8/documents/2018-annual-report-4web.pdf>

[5] Ephesians 2:8

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Reflection Questions:

- Who do you know as being someone “full of good works and compassionate acts”?
- How would you be defined as someone who is “full of good works and compassionate acts”?
- In what ways can you contribute to St. Mark’s to continue to be known as a community of faith that is “full of good works and compassionate acts”?