

Get Up

A Sermon Preached by Anne Keener
First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee
May 11, 2025
Fourth Sunday of Easter Year C
Acts 9:36-43



Now in Franklin, there was a disciple whose name was Alice. She was devoted to good works and acts of charity. She made clothes for her children, the neighborhood children, and anyone who was in need. She also loved to sew anything the church needed. One church needed drapes for windows, some needed choir robes, others needed costumes for Christmas pageants, and our church needed a pall to place on a casket and then later when we built the memorial garden, a smaller one to place on an urn. She loved the people she sewed for, and they loved her.

Alice's good works and acts of charity extended beyond sewing. She also loved caring for people, especially children. Ms. Alice was often found in a rocking chair in the church nursery with a sleeping baby on her shoulder or a child upon her knee, and those relationships only strengthened as the children grew up. I can attest to this as one year she requested to celebrate her birthday by getting ice cream with our daughter and another young girl in the congregation. She loved children, and they loved her.

Alice used her gifts of sewing and caring to reflect God's love which had been freely given to her. Her devotion to good works was all in response to God's grace.

Upon her death, Alice wasn't placed in an upstairs room where widows surrounded her weeping and showing the tunics and other clothing she made for them, but there were many tears shed in Wilson Hall during her visitation as family and friends shared memories connected to the various garments of love made by her loving hands, many of which were displayed proudly around the room.

As much as the family may have longed for a miracle like Tabitha's, that didn't happen, but during Alice Boyce's Service of Witness to the Resurrection, where that pall she lovely made was lovely placed, the homily was based on today's Scripture.

Now in Joppa, there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha. To our 21st century ears, this sounds like a normal introductory sentence about a Christ follower, but the early church would have understood the magnitude of this statement. This is the only time in the Bible that the word disciple is used in the feminine. Even in a patriarchal culture, Tabitha is named as a disciple. This is remarkable. All these centuries later, there are still denominations who do not allow women to teach Sunday school to men or boys over a certain age much less allow them to be ordained as pastors. Yet Luke, the author of Acts, acknowledges Tabitha as a disciple.

It is fitting that the lectionary text on Mother's Day includes the only female disciple. There were many women followers of Christ who supported his ministry, but Tabitha's good works and acts of charity were viewed as her ministry as a disciple.

The inclusiveness of the early church continues to be on full display in this short passage as Luke goes on to explain that Tabitha is also known as Dorcas. Tabitha is Aramaic which identifies her as Jewish, and Dorcas, her name in Greek, tells us she is also part of a community that includes Gentiles.

The book of Acts tells the story of the gospel spreading from Jerusalem to all of Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8.) By sharing both names, Luke is showing us that the gospel has spread to Joppa as Tabitha is respected across cultural boundaries in this community. Tabitha has bridged the cultural divide.

We also live in a society that too often pushes us to stay with our tribe. So, we can learn a great deal from how this disciple named Tabitha and also called Dorcas responded to God's grace as she devoted herself to good works and acts of charity across cultures helping to spread the gospel to the ends of the earth.

In the midst of their grief the disciples send for Peter, but why do you think they sent for Peter? There is no indication that they expect him to bring her back to life. Her body has been washed in preparation for burial, and the mourning process has begun. The message for Peter doesn't even mention Tabitha. It is simply, "Please come to us without delay." And to that simple, vague request, we are told that, "Peter got up and went with them." No questions asked. Peter just got up and went. Peter responded.

And upon his arrival in that upper room filled with grieving widows testifying to Tabitha's good works and acts of charity, Peter asks everyone to leave so he can be alone. Peter isn't seeking attention. He is seeking God's presence as he kneels and prays. We have no idea how long he prays, but I am confident his praying involves more listening

than speaking. Once he has finished praying, Peter turns to Tabitha's lifeless body and simply says, "Tabitha, get up."

Few women in the Bible are named, much less given two names, and when women are addressed by men in the Bible, the word "woman" is often used in place of their name. Peter, however, chooses to use Tabitha's name. This takes me back to John's resurrection story that we hear each year at the Easter Sunrise Service. In John's gospel, Mary Magdalene is the only woman that comes to the tomb early on the first day of the week and remains in the garden after Peter and the other disciple who Jesus loved flee.

Do you remember what Jesus says to Mary when she doesn't recognize him but instead supposes him to be the gardener? "Mary" It isn't until Jesus speaks her name that her eyes and heart are opened. This reminds us of earlier words of Jesus in John's gospel where he called his sheep by name, and they know his voice.

Peter choosing to speak Tabitha's name is powerful, but he doesn't just speak her name. He says, "Tabitha, get up." The Greek word used here is the same word used to describe Jesus' resurrection, and some translations say, "Tabitha, arise." Peter alone doesn't have the power to raise Tabitha from the dead, but in Matthew chapter 10 Jesus tells Peter and the disciples to get up and go "proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons." (Matthew 10:7-8)

Through prayer and the power that Jesus had bestowed upon him, Peter is able to raise Tabitha from the dead. God works through these simple words, "Tabitha, get up." When Tabitha, even in her lifeless state, hears Peter speak her name and instruct her to get up, she opens her eyes, sees Peter, and gets up. She responds.

When Peter raises Tabitha, it doesn't just affect Tabitha. When Peter shows Tabitha to be alive, it provides resurrection hope for the community and beyond, as it says, "many believed in the Lord when this became known throughout Joppa." Tabitha's death affected her community, but Peter bringing her back to life doesn't only affect her community. It helps to spread the reach of the gospel to the ends of the earth.

There are many people like Alice Boyce who devoted their life to good works and acts of charity that weren't miraculously brought back to life enabling them to continue participating in God's kingdom on earth. But thankfully, through Christ's life, death, and resurrection, Alice and all those saints who bore witness to the light are alive in the resurrection and are seeing God face to face where we only see in a mirror dimly.

We are Easter people. Those three words we shouted on Easter morning remain on our lips as we live in the hope of the resurrection, “Christ is risen!”

It is easy to focus our attention on Tabitha and Peter, but this story isn’t ultimately about them. It is about God. God sent the kingdom of heaven to earth in the person of Jesus. God is the one whom Peter prays to when he kneels alone in that upper room. God is the one who inspires Peter to say, “Tabitha, get up.” God is the one, working through Peter, to raise Tabitha in this text and again after her eventual death. And God is the one who will raise us all when that time comes.

We have much to learn from Tabitha, the only female disciple in the Bible. She lived her life as Peter instructed those first converts following Pentecost, which was to devote themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship. Through clothing and caring for her community, Tabitha is feeding Jesus’ sheep just as Peter was told to do on the beach that early morning in the scripture that Sammy and Braden so powerfully proclaimed last week. Tabitha’s life, like Peter’s, points people to Jesus.

The inclusiveness of the early church is expanding. Both Luke’s reference of her Aramaic and Greek names and Peter’s decision to remain in Joppa with a certain Simon, a tanner, who was most certainly a Gentile since he engaged in unclean work, act as a crescendo toward the approaching baton handoff in Acts. Peter has been the main voice proclaiming the kingdom of God has come near, but the baton will soon be passed to Paul to continue spreading the gospel to the ends of the earth.

Change is a constant in life. Batons have been passed for generations and will continue to be passed, but God’s love remains constant. The love that inspired Peter and Tabitha is the same love that inspires us today. May we, as individuals and a community of faith, continue devoting our lives to good works and acts of charity in response to God’s grace as we carry the baton and participate in spreading the gospel to the ends of the earth.

May it be so. Amen.