

Sermon, Fourth Sunday of Easter, May 8, 2022, Jane A. Beebe

“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.” (Acts 9:39)

I love this story in Acts of Tabitha’s being raised from the dead. It is interesting to me what Luke, the writer of Acts, chooses to include as important facts about this woman. First, we know her name. We are given it both in Aramaic: Tabitha, and Greek: Dorcas. The Bible study group knows that I enjoy mentions of animals in the Bible. “Lions, and tigers, and bears, oh my!” The name Tabitha means gazelle. They are native to wilderness regions such as Israel and northern Africa. So I imagine Tabitha as a child being graceful and fleet of foot. She lives in Joppa (or Jaffa), a city in Israel. Luke then describes her as being a disciple “devoted to good works and acts of charity.” (Acts 9:36) I imagine her gazelle-like qualities standing her in good stead as she tends to those in her community.

But then we learn that Tabitha becomes ill and dies. Her body is washed and laid in an upstairs room. Peter is nearby in the town of Lydda so two disciples are sent to him with the request that he come without delay. (Luke 9:38) It is not entirely clear from the text what the hope of the disciples is in sending for Peter. Yet Peter does get up and go with them. “All the widows” stand beside Peter weeping. (Acts 9:39) Widows have a special place in Jewish society as being in need of protection. Yet there are also stories of widows sometimes having a special

spiritual vocation. In Luke we hear about the prophet Anna. She is described as fasting and praying in the Temple night and day; she is there when the baby Jesus is presented in the Temple. She then begins to praise God and speak about the child who is to redeem Jerusalem. I think these widows around Tabitha are similarly dedicated to a life of prayer.

Then Luke tells us that the mourning widows are showing the tunics and other clothing that Tabitha made while she was with them. Why does Luke remember this detail and include it in this story? Peter proceeds to send the widows out of the room, kneels, and prays. We do not hear his words or know the content of his prayer. For me this suggests that Peter has stepped aside and allowed God to fully enter the room. He turns to the body; the fact that Tabitha is now described as a body underlines the reality of her death. Then he says, simply, “Tabitha, get up.” She opens her eyes and sees that it is Peter. The fact that Tabitha recognizes him seems to emphasize her aliveness: she has been restored to full consciousness. She knows her teacher. Peter courteously offers her his hand and helps her up. (Luke 9:39-41)

A beautiful miracle has occurred. The truth and power of the resurrection has been demonstrated once again. Still, the mention of tunics and garments pulls at my imagination. We hear in Revelation:

““Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?” ¹⁴ I said to him, “Sir, you are the one who knows.” Then he said to me, “These are they who have come out of the great ordeal;

they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.’ (Revelation 7:13-14)

These white robes point to our redemption. They also seem to recall our baptism. It is wonderful that Tabitha, as a person who made such garments, is someone who also dies but is then restored to life. Peter who has been drawn from the water by Jesus continues to follow his Lord, reaching out his hand to lift up others.

I encountered a wonderful article about the significance of linen cloth in the Bible. It was written by a man, Bruce Clark, who comes from a family of nine generations of linen makers in Ireland. It helped me see that sometimes a detail from a scriptural passage that seems incidental can illuminate the meaning of the whole. Clark explores several passages from the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament that refer to linen cloth or garments. He noticed that linen can represent both the earthly and the heavenly.

This is especially true in the stories of Jesus’ death and resurrection. Soldiers cast lots for Jesus’ tunic. It is described as being woven in one piece from the top, and the soldiers do not wish to tear it. (John 19:23-24) Might Tabitha have woven it for Jesus? Joseph of Arimathea wraps Jesus’ body in linen, and lays it in a tomb. Later at the empty tomb the disciples see these cloths set aside. I was especially fascinated by his description of the final process of hammering the bleached linen with wooden blocks called beetling. The cloth becomes so brilliant as to be as

reflective as a mirror.¹ This recalls Jesus' transfiguration when his clothes become "dazzling white", or the appearance of an angel or angels at Jesus' tomb whose clothing is also described as "dazzling." (Luke 24:4)

Clark sees a wonderful metaphor for how our lives are transformed by Jesus' work of resurrection in the making of linen. "The process begins with a stalk that is earthy, smelly and produces cloth which is light brown in color. Then gradually over a series of human processes it is refined, purified, washed, exposed to sunlight, beaten to make it shinier, and at the end of that process, linen becomes a carrier of heavenly light. [He says], I don't think it is blasphemous or inappropriate to think of linen and flax, along with bread and wine, as a human product that undergoes an extraordinary transformation. It starts in a place which is very close to the soil, muddy brown in color and smelling of the earth; it ends up a glorious white fabric refined to the point where it becomes a vessel and reflector of the light of heaven."²

Today is sometimes known as "Good Shepherd Sunday," when the readings reflect themes of Jesus as shepherd, leading his flock. In today's Gospel Jesus says, "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish." (John 10:27-28) This is the thread weaving

¹ Clark, "Clothed in White Linen," 49.

² Clark, 51.

everything together. Last week the risen Christ asks Peter to, “Tend my sheep.”

Here, in Acts, we see him doing just that. Tabitha, maker of linen garments, now

dons her own robe of dazzling white. As we often pray in Morning Prayer from

Psalm 95:

“Come, let us bow down, and bend the knee,
and kneel before the Lord our Maker.

For he is our God,
and we are the people of his pasture and the sheep of his hand.

Oh, that today [we] would hearken to his voice!” (Psalm 95:6-7)