

Fourth Weekend of Easter (RCL/C): "Dorcas?"
Acts 9:36-43; John 10:22-30
May 10-11, 2025
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

I'm going to start with show and tell today. More than arts & crafts, these are examples of artistry from 3 of our church friends who have gone ahead to the Church Triumphant. The needlework of bluebirds with the caption "BLESS THIS HOUSE," on an easel to the right of the altar, is by Caroline Willinger. Caroline was the oldest of the 17 Mueller children, and her name is on the charter member plaque in the narthex. I was blessed to know her at least for a short time after I came to Holy Trinity. She was a startling woman of faith, made wonderful apple custard pies and told marvelous stories.

The quilt stand was painted by Ruth Walsh, who used to work all year creating items to sell at the women's circles' annual Christmas bazaar. Ruth was assisted by Doug Kutz and Herb Strucek, woodworkers who created sleds, jewelry boxes, stools, and quilt stands for Ruth to embellish. The crocheted blanket on the stand is the work of Elma Salzer, whose hands were never idle and whose welcome was warm.

I thought of these women and others when I read this weekend's story from the Book of Acts about a seamstress named Tabitha in Hebrew and Dorcas in Greek. I've always smiled when I've come upon this lesson because of the name thing. Tabitha always makes me think of the little girl with supernatural powers in the old TV show *Bewitched*, and Dorcas, is, well, such an unfortunate name by today's standards, sounding pretty much like a female version of "dork."

The Holy Spirit helped me approach the story this year with a more open mind and heart, though, and I've come to a real appreciation of it! After studying about Dorcas, a Corrie ten Boom quote came to mind: "If you're not satisfied with your lot in life, build a

service station on it.” I just love the real estate play on words about building something on an unsatisfactory lot **and** the beautiful insight that serving others is often a surefire way to dispel depression and sideline sadness.

Dorcas was definitely a servant. St. Luke tells us, “*She was devoted to good works and acts of charity.*” (Acts 9:36) She’d never **seen** the Gospel of St. Matthew, because it wasn’t written yet, but maybe the Matthew 25 parable about a king judging between the sheep and the goats was circulating in oral tradition: “And when I was naked you clothed Me.” (Matt. 25:36) In any case, Dorcas knew that caring for the poor, providing for the needy, is an essential component of living out our faith, whether we’re Jewish or Christian. Dorcas had the spiritual gift of artistry, sewing in particular. She tailored all kinds of clothes for the widows in her community. (Widows and orphans were among **the** most vulnerable in those days, and sometimes still in **these** days.) Dorcas put her spiritual gift to work for the Lord’s people, which is the whole point of why the Holy Spirit gives at least one of those gifts to **each** of us.

The passage makes it sound like the ladies brought show-and-tell to share with Peter when he arrived to view Dorcas’ body, but some scholars say they weren’t just **showcasing** her creations, they were **wearing** them. Dorcas made them garments so these impoverished widows would be warm and also presentable going out in public. She decreased their isolation and gave them the joy of community. They loved her for it! When their friend died they were devastated and immediately sent for Peter.

We know Dorcas is extra special because:

- Upon her passing the community sends for the head apostle, Peter.
- Also she is one of the relatively few **named** women in Scripture. She has not just one name, but two: *Tabitha* in Hebrew, *Dorcas* in Greek, and if you have a study

Bible and check the footnotes, you'll learn that both those names mean *gazelle* in English.

- Most importantly, Tabitha is the only woman in the New Testament specifically called a disciple.

We don't know if Dorcas' friends called Peter to come so he could simply console them or actually raise her from the dead. He did have street creds, after all, for being a healer. He'd famously said to a lame man begging on the steps of the Temple, "Of silver and gold I have none, but what I have, I give to you. In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, get up and walk!" (Acts 3:6) And the man **did**. And in a beautiful but kind of odd story right before this one, Peter visits a man whose paralysis has left him bedbound for 8 years. Peter announces with the voice of authority, "*Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you; get up and make your bed!*" (Acts 9:34) (So if you need anyone around **your** house to do that, try saying, "Acts 9:34!" When they look it up, out of curiosity, they'll get your drift: "...get up and make your bed!") Dorcas dies right after that. Perhaps her community had a glimmer of hope that Peter might do something wonderful again, even though their friend was dead.

The widows Dorcas served may have felt desperate for her return because they couldn't imagine anyone else taking her place, filling her shoes, picking up her work. She seemed irreplaceable to them. Who would love them like her? Who would serve them like her? They probably questioned each other, "Whatever will we do without her?" Turns out that in the short term they didn't have to worry about it, since Peter uses the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to call her back to life. St. Luke only records the words, "Tabitha, get up," but Scripture scholars tell us it's a good bet he called on the name of Jesus, since that's true of most post-resurrection healings. The healing power didn't belong to Peter; it belonged to Jesus. But Peter trusted it and claimed it on behalf of Dorcas.

The coolest insight I found about this story comes from Church of Scotland theologian William Barclay:

It was not his own power on which Peter called; it was the power of Jesus Christ. We think too much of what we can do and too little of what Christ can do through us.¹

How many times have I said, “I could **never** do that!” No, I couldn’t, **alone**, but what might **Christ** do **through** me?? I can’t do needlepoint like Caroline, I can’t paint like Ruth, I can’t crochet like Elma, but God has given me other gifts, some of which I don’t recognize until the Holy Spirit uses somebody else to call them forth from me. On Mother’s Day it’s natural to think of our mothers, grandmothers, great-grandmothers who have gone ahead. We know none of them can be replaced, any more than Dorcas could be. But as we take on their roles, we turn toward God and prayerfully remember, “*I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.*” (That’s Philippians 4:13, one of my “go to” verses, especially at times I feel like I’m climbing Everest and find myself wondering, “Where are my sherpas??” ☺)

In Mark 11:24 our Lord Jesus says, “*So I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.*” There’s Kingdom work for each of us to do, including William Austin, baptized into Christ this weekend! One of our old hymns, “There Is a Balm in Gilead” (ELW 614), describes our common calling this way:

If you cannot preach like Peter, if you cannot pray like Paul,
you can tell the love of Jesus and say, “He died for all.”

In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, our risen Lord, all things are possible. Through Him all sickness, sadness, hurt, will ultimately be healed. Amen.

¹William Barclay, *The Acts of the Apostles* (rev. ed. Daily Study Bible Series, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), p. 77.

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