

May 8, 2022

4th Easter Year C Good Shepherd Sunday

Acts 9: 36-43

Psalm 23

John 10: 22-30

Acts 9:36-43

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. At that time she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs. 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." 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. 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 the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive. This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. Meanwhile he stayed in Joppa for some time with a certain Simon, a tanner.

"In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our readings from Acts during this Easter season are introducing us to the early church, those who carried on the work and ministry and message of Jesus after he ascended to heaven. Last week we heard of the dramatic events when Saul, who had been attacking the early Christians, was blinded on the road to Damascus and called by Jesus to change.

This week we find Peter, now healing in the spirit of Jesus. Just before this reading Peter had visited the town of Lydda and healed a man paralyzed for eight years. Today, he is called to the home of a woman who has just died. The woman is named Tabitha in Aramaic, and was also known as Dorcas, in Greek. The writer of Acts is the same as the writer of Luke, carrying on, after telling the story of Jesus' earthly ministry, in telling the story of yes, the early church. The writer likely included both names of this woman, as she

was well known in the community, her caring acts crossing the lines of language and culture.

Tabitha has just died, and the women she gave particular care to, the widows of the community, have come to wash and prepare her body for burial. The widows weep as they do their work, overwhelmed with the loss of Tabitha's help and even more so, for the loss of her caring, drawing them out of their isolation and despair, into community.

Widows, as well as orphans, are mentioned frequently in the Old and New Testaments as those in need of care and aid, as the society offered no help, no net to catch them in their dire and lonely circumstances.

The opening of our reading uses a startling word to describe Tabitha that we do not want to miss:

“Now in Joppa there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas.”

The writer of Acts used the Greek word for disciple in the feminine form, the first and only use of this form. Tabitha IS a disciple, a follower recognized for her gifts, and a painfully rarely acknowledged female disciple.

The other disciples who know her send for Peter after her death. He arrives and the widows show him all the cloth and clothing Tabitha made for them. He sends them out of the room and alone there, he says: “Tabitha, get up.” And she is brought back from the dead and stands again.

These healings by Peter, first of the paralyzed man and now of Tabitha, echo healings by Jesus, and deepen the understanding in the early church that, Peter and others will carry onward the ministries of Jesus.

But on this Good Shepherd Sunday, and on this Mother's Day, our focus is not on Peter, but on Tabitha, and on the care, and even more, the community, this female disciple and shepherd, created.

In her ministry Tabitha chose to serve some of those forgotten or devalued by the community, shepherding a flock of those lost in the pain grief.

Tabitha provided for the needs of the widows, most obviously by making clothing for them, but even more, by making community with them. The text reminds us:

All the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them.

While she was with them, Tabitha did not drop off clothing and other

necessities and then leave, she was with the widows, she created community with the widows.

The church, we the church, are called to follow in the footsteps of Tabitha, and help others, to be *“devoted to good works and acts of charity”* AND to create community with others in need, in body, mind, and spirit.

I see community being created at both churches, and together, the together most dramatically on Easter Day, when thankfully we were working together when the 150 folks showed up to celebrate the resurrection with us!

And just this weekend I saw community created twice with our churches.

Yesterday morning, the Episcopal 101 class met for the first time, 15 of us gathering in Trinity’s Pavilion, folks from both churches, learning names, sharing coffee and doughnuts, talking and laughing together, and creating sacred space to hear a bit of each other’s stories.

Then in the afternoon, the Labyrinth at Whitechapel was the site for a World Labyrinth Day public event. The theme of World Labyrinth Day was:

“Walk as One at 1”. By walking a labyrinth at 1:00 p.m. local time we join a rolling wave of peace passing from one time zone to the next around the globe.

And we were invited to focus our walks and prayers on peace for Ukraine. Our Labyrinth brought together different groups and made us no longer strangers but a community, in the spirit of Tabitha, praying together for the needs of others.

As you well know, it was cool and rainy yesterday, but the rain fell back to a mist as we gathered at the Labyrinth in the Woods. Folks from our churches, the Vestry and Rector from Abington Episcopal Church in Gloucester on retreat, and a woman from Campbell Memorial Church, met together and found common ground as we visited.

The woman from Campbell, Carolyn Young, had been in Ukraine with her husband in the early 2000s as Peace Corp volunteers, and her stories brought the reality and spirit of Ukraine more keenly among us.

We gathered around the circle of the Labyrinth and prayed together. At one point, in a time of silence, the mist grew a bit stronger and I felt the tiny water drops on my upturned face and heard the persistent and full throated singing of the birds join us as we prayed for the people of Ukraine.

Afterwards Carolyn spoke of President Zelensky, the leader of Ukraine, who

was included in one of our prayers. She recounted what he has said many times over the past weeks of this terrible war, repeatedly asking the world to not forget Ukraine. We all know how something can grab our attention and hearts, as we watch the news and read of a tragedy, but our attention easily fades and is drawn to another newer concern, or our attention wearies, and we are drained to hear of the unrelenting horror of a war.

Carolyn reminded the new community that was created at the Labyrinth, to please not look away from Ukraine, to do this simple act that President Zelensky asks of the world, to keep watching and being present with and praying for Ukraine and her people.

In doing so we can follow from afar in the footsteps of Tabitha, who did not just help the widows tangibly, but was with them, in community, creating community as a woman and with women, and shepherding them through dark valleys, assuring them they were never alone.

Amen.