

Sermon – *In the Footsteps of the Apostles – Tabitha / Dorcas*

Linda Driver

Athelstone Uniting Church #65

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Text: Acts 9:36-43 [NIV]

Let's pray

Risen Lord Jesus

Draw near.. as we lean into you..

Open our eyes to see

Open our ears to hear

your Word to us this morning. Amen.

Shoes

We are now in a new season after Easter, following in the footsteps of the apostles.

Each week we are looking closely into the story of one or two of the apostles.

The shoes indicate the footsteps. Being Mother's Day, I was keen for a feminine touch – so thanks to Di who has lent us her high heels!

Tabitha / Dorcas

Today we heard about Tabitha the disciple in Joppa.

What do we know about her?

The facts

She's a disciple

She's from Joppa.

She is known by two names – Tabitha from the Hebrew language and Dorcas from the Greek

She was always doing good and helping the poor

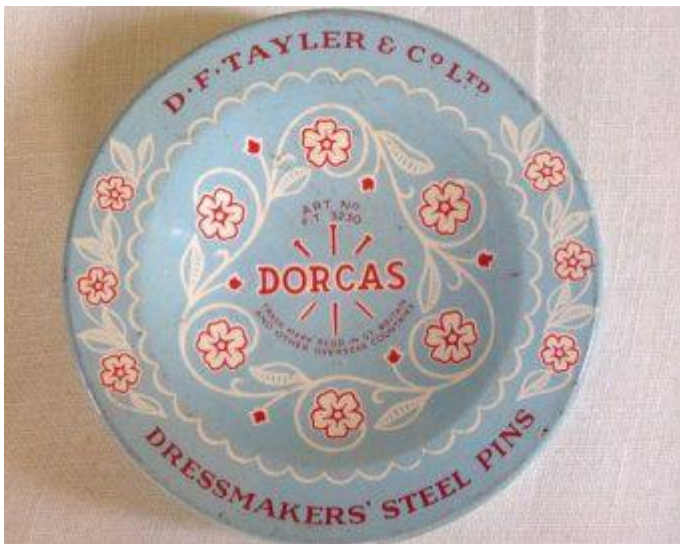
The widows grieved her loss, crying and showing Peter the robes and other clothing that she had made for them

That's all the text really tells us

But this story has inspired generations of people because of the miracle of her being raised from the dead by Peter.

The Dorcas pins

Being a sewer, one way Tabitha / Dorcas is remembered today, is through the Dorcas brand of pins and needles. Nola brought in her container. Who has a tin like this at home? Or grew up with one in their Mum or Grandmas sewing box?



What we don't know

So we know that Tabitha was a sewer.

But ...what did she look like?

Was she young or old?

Tall or short?

Light or heavy?

What colour was her skin?

What kind of personality did she have?

Was she serious and pious?

fun loving and flirty?

Or gentle and mild?

Why was she so loved by the people – especially the widows?

Did she light up a room when she entered?

Was her home a happy place?

Why did she serve in this way (caring for widows through sewing and giving generously?)

How can she afford to give so much away?

Where is her family?

What would her shoes have looked like? I wonder if she made her own?

Threads

Through our group, Threads, I'm beginning to appreciate the joy of making things for others.

The group is currently working on a project of knitting for Syrian refugee children.

There is something special about hand crafts. The slow process of making something for someone else. To be able to pray about the receiver of the gift.

I am working on my own project – knitting different coloured squares to make a wrap. Each square represents a person or situation that I have prayed for.

Soon, we'll introduce a knitting basket for those who would like to knit during worship – together we can make squares to be stitched together to make rugs for those who are shivering this winter. Another activity – like colouring in or tracing a finger over a labyrinth - that helps to focus the mind while you sit and listen and pray.

Perhaps Tabitha prayed for these widows when she stitched clothes for them and their children?

We don't know how Tabitha died.

We don't know how Tabitha died – what made her ill..

However it happened, her friends were devastated. They had gathered around her, preparing her body for burial grieving through tears and by sharing memories, showing Peter the clothing she had made, putting together items to help remember.

Just as we today collect photos and treasured items to display for the funeral

Perhaps there was a memorial like the ones we see today with teddy bears and flowers and candles outside her front door?

The friends rush in to show their love for their friend. They are described as widows, a nameless crowd of women who knew their own kind of loss, through the loss of their husbands. And here they were to care for Tabitha upon her death

When Peter arrived at Tabitha's bedside he found these people offering love and presence in the face of death¹

Peter

Put yourself in Peter's shoes...

When he first arrived, it was a response to a pastoral care call. A friend dies, and they call for a minister, and there was Peter close by. He arrives quickly. He's most likely greeted with solemn faces and many tears. There are hugs and loving touches for all those who grieve. The house appears full of mourners -these widows who had received Tabitha's love and compassion.

Once Peter makes his way through the crowd, the widows begin telling stories. Isn't that what we do today? we tell stories of our loved ones when they are gone. We remember together. And apparently remembering Tabitha meant remembering her craft. I imagine many were wearing the clothes Tabitha made for them

It seems a wonderful tribute to her. The work of her hands walking around while stories are told of her love and compassion. They are showing her off by showing off her handiwork. It reminds me so much of Pam Silby - I didn't meet her - but I have seen glimpses of her through her handiwork.

Just as I'm sure one day – hopefully a long way into the future – when we'll remember Glenda and Nola and Joy and Jeanine and Wendy and Sharyn and Janet and Julie and many others here through their handiwork.

¹ Based on words by Marci Auld Glass found in Abingdon's Creative Preaching Annual 2016

How will people remember you? Through the work of your hands? Through your crafting of words? Through your teaching or serving or cooking or care or ... How will people remember you?

Anyway.. Peter has been listening and he asks for some space. Something has happened in Peter. Was it his heart that was moved by these stories? Was it the Spirit moving in him? Alone, he entered the room where Tabitha lay. The last time he had done something like this, he wasn't alone. He was with their friend Jesus and a couple of other friends. They had entered the room of daughter who had died. Jesus told her to get up and she did. So Peter imitates Jesus. He tells her to get up. And she does.

Then, calling in the believers, especially the widows, he shows them Tabitha. Can you imagine the scene? Disbelief ? Shock? Turning to joy and tears?

This time not the work of her hands but the work of God's hand, the work of the Spirit to resurrect, to give life, to recreate, to lift up. Peter shows them God's handiwork.²

What happened to her?

So, what happened to Tabitha?

We *do* know that the news of her resurrection became known all over Joppa, and that many people believed in the Lord. her resurrection began a revival in the town.

But that's it, we don't hear about Tabitha again after that. What happened to her?

Did she continue the same good work she had been doing before she had fallen ill? Or did God have other plans for her?

And another question:

Why did Peter make sure the widows heard first?

It would have been an appropriate pastoral response as they had been the ones who had been grieving and telling him stories.

² Based on words by Beth Scibienski from Abingdon's creative preaching annual 2016

But I wonder.. was he also being strategic? If you want to get news to spread, who do you tell? A group of widows – who know how to tell a story, that’s who!

The hard question

And here’s the hard question:

Why is it that Tabitha was raised from the dead and so many others were not?

So many others are not?

It is one of the toughest questions we face in our lives. And one that many try to answer with greeting-card replies:

It was their time.

God needed them in heaven.

They’re in a better place.

Those answers just don’t seem to do when you’re in deep grief.

It’s one of those questions that we can’t answer easily. The more appropriate response is to listen to people’s pain and to walk alongside them through the valleys – to offer a meal, a tissue, a smile,

As Rachel Held Evans said:

“As Brené Brown puts it, “I went to church thinking it would be like an epidural, that it would take the pain away . . . But church isn’t like an epidural; it’s like a midwife . . . I thought faith would say, ‘I’ll take away the pain and discomfort, but what it ended up saying was, ‘I’ll sit with you in it.”³

“.. there is a difference between curing and healing, and I believe the church is called to the slow and difficult work of healing. We are called to enter into one another’s pain, anoint it as holy, and stick around no matter the outcome.”⁴

³ — Rachel Held Evans, [Searching for Sunday: Loving, Leaving, and Finding the Church](#)

⁴ — Rachel Held Evans, [Searching for Sunday: Loving, Leaving, and Finding the Church](#)

Rachel Held Evans

Let me tell you more about Rachel Held Evans -

Perhaps, a modern day Tabitha – but in this case, sadly with a different ending.

I've been following Rachel Held Evans on Twitter for some time. I have really enjoyed her thinking and wondering about God and the church.

Rachel, popular writer, blogger and Christian thought leader, wrote four books, one ending up on The New York Times' best-seller list. She wrote a popular blog that often tackled some of the heavier theological questions and was like a breath of fresh air for many, particularly Christian women on the internet, like myself, with her writing and sense of humour. She shared openly about her Christian journey and asked tough questions which ruffled lots of feathers.

In April as we were preparing for Easter celebrations, Rachel came down with the flu and a urinary tract infection. Hospitalized for complications from the flu, doctors realized that she was experiencing seizures and placed her in a medically induced coma. For nearly a week, thousands and thousands of people around the world were praying for Rachel but sadly, last Saturday, Rachel died.

Rachel was just 37 years of age and leaves behind her husband, Dan and two children, aged 1 and 3.

There has been such an international outpouring of grief – so many loved and respected her for her honesty and vulnerability and her deep love of Jesus.

So in honor of Rachel Held Evans, I want to show you some of her craft: her way with words, and read you two more of her quotes:

“They reminded me that Christianity isn't meant to simply be believed; it's meant to be lived, shared, eaten, spoken, and enacted in the presence of other people. They reminded me that, try as I may, I can't be a Christian on my own. I need a community. I need the church.”⁵

⁵ — Rachel Held Evans, [Searching for Sunday: Loving, Leaving, and Finding the Church](#)

“This is what God's kingdom is like:

a bunch of outcasts and oddballs gathered at a table, not because they are rich or worthy or good, but because they are hungry, because they said yes. And there's always room for more.”⁶

When Rachel Held Evans passed away last Saturday, it marked the end of a life and ministry dedicated to bringing marginalised people into the fold. Her death has been marked by a hashtag on Twitter acknowledging how her legacy had enabled others to return to church, or find their gifts, #BecauseOfRHE.

Just some ways she is being remembered.

Dealing with grief

Nearly every one of us has experienced the grief of loss of a loved one –recently or long ago. We all process our grief in different ways.

Somehow it seems harder when someone dies suddenly. Unexpectedly. We haven't had a chance to prepare ourselves for the huge hole they leave in our life.

Mother's Day is one of those days when the memories and the accompanying grief well up from within us.

Be gentle with each other today. So many are grieving – loss of a loved Mum, loss of a loved child, loss of unfulfilled dreams of parenthood or grandparenthood.

The Psalm for this week is the 23rd psalm. Hang on to the comforting words of the Shepherd who cares so very much for his sheep. Who leads us beside quiet waters and refreshes our souls. Who is with us even in the darkest valleys, there to comfort us.

And let us follow the Good Shepherd's lead in caring for one another.

Shoes

As I close, I invite you to look down at your shoes.

Where are your feet going to take you this week?

As you continue to watch your feet, let me read to you these words all the way from the 16th century by Teresa of Avila:

⁶ — Rachel Held Evans, [Searching for Sunday: Loving, Leaving, and Finding the Church](#)

Christ has no body now on earth but yours;
no hands but yours; no feet but yours.

Yours are the eyes through which the compassion of Christ must look out on the world.

Yours are the feet with which He is to go about doing good.

Yours are the hands with which He is to bless His people.

Amen

Brother, sister, let me serve you,
let me be as Christ to you

- Let us sing this beautiful song together..