

Woven with Resurrection
Sixth in a Series on the Acts of the Apostles

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Acts 9:36-42

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 ³⁷At that time she became ill and died.

When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs. ³⁸Since 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.”

³⁹So 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.

⁴⁰Peter 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. ⁴¹He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive. ⁴²This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord.

Novelist and English professor at Tulane, Jesmyn Ward, suffered the sudden death of her thirty-three-year-old husband last January. She wrote of her tragic loss last month in *Vanity Fair* describing her heartbreak – how her Beloved cried at the birth of their children, and danced in the driveway to make their kids laugh before they drove off to school. Ward said that one of her most favorite places in the world was beside him, under his warm arm, and how her own grief was magnified by her children clinging to her, rubbing their faces into her stomach while crying, “I miss Daddy.” “The absence of my Beloved echoed in every room in the house,” Ward said as she described details of her grief with poignant sorrow.

Then the pandemic hit with COVID deaths surging across the world, and the deaths of individuals began to command the country’s attention, calling us anew to grapple with violence and poverty, the injustices of inequality and the complexities of systemic racism. Ward says she began to awaken from her own grief as people across the country began to witness to the deaths of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd and so many others, and take to the streets for the cause of respair – for hope at the end of a long season of despair.

As her personal grief merged with the larger, despairing anguish of COVID-19 and the violence plaguing our nation, Jesmyn Ward remembered something the doctor told her when her beloved husband died: *The last thing that goes is the hearing*. Then, as if to honor the multi-layered sorrow of a nation on edge, she repeats those precious words we want everyone to hear before dying: “I hear you. I love you. We love you. We’re here.”¹

Here we are on All Saints Sunday, with the terrible news that the pandemic cases and death are on the rise, and our city raging at another police shooting victim with the death of 27-year-old Walter Wallace,

¹ Jesmyn Ward, “On Witness and Respair: A Personal Tragedy Followed by Pandemic,” *Vanity Fair*, September, 2020.

Junior. He was a man with mental illness in need of help, his mother desperately calling to de-escalate the violence, and once again law enforcement is caught in the crossfires of their own injured and a city reeling in mourning and anger and in desperate need for reform.

It is an All Saints day like none other – with our church’s tradition of remembering the saints who have died in the last year, sadly compounded and magnified by so many other tragic deaths. With English professor, Jesmyn Ward, we acknowledge a corporate grief on behalf of all who have died saying, “I hear you. I love you. We love you. We’re here.”

There were a lot of people grieving when Peter entered the house where Tabitha had died. Her death was devastating for her community. Luke goes into great detail to make sure we know how important she was, beginning the story with: “Now in Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha. This is the only time in the entire New Testament when a woman is named a disciple.”

Though many women often go unnamed in the gospels, we are also told this woman is known by two names. Tabitha is her name in Aramaic, and Dorcas in Greek. Her name means Gazelle; for she was swift in service to the most vulnerable people – widows. She was generous and kind, devoted to good works and acts of charity. So beloved by her friends and neighbors, at her death all the women showed up with the tunics and other clothing she had made for them. Her care and compassion was woven into the very fabric of her community.

In the cosmopolitan port of Joppa, the disciple named Tabitha, Dorcas, bridged the divide of race and religion, culture and language with a generosity of spirit and resources, sewing clothes for any who had need. No wonder they summon Peter when she dies, desperate for the risen power of Christ to enter that house and those grieving hearts. They want her to hear those precious words of the grieving at the bedside, “I hear you. I love you. We love you. We’re here.”

Biblical scholar, Willie James Jennings, writes, “Whether this vignette is evidence of Luke’s positive view of women or not, he has certainly given us a plateau from which to view a new future in which men and women in Christ have a different way of seeing themselves – as disciples. As with every death, James says, “there is glory and grief at the end. The glory is a life lived well, lived in service to others... Here, glory shares strong grief because to lose someone who cares for the weak and vulnerable, whose life is turned toward making a difference in the world... is a bitter loss.”²

So Peter steps into this scene in Joppa to offer this unmistakable truth: This woman matters, and the work she does for the poor and vulnerable matters to God. It matters so much that God will not allow death to be the last word. When Peter says, “Tabitha, get up,” he is reminding them all – You have not been abandoned in your loss and your grief. Peter is repeating the words of Jesus and we are assured that Tabitha lives again in resurrection power.

One of the things I love about our All Saints traditions, and that I love about this story is that Tabitha is not raised to new life because of an extraordinary or exceedingly miraculous presence among her village. She simply sewed clothes for the poor. So too, Presbyterians celebrate All Saints recognizing that the life of faith is so often made up of small, humble, daily acts of kindness and charity. We do not need to enact a big miracle to become a saint in the eyes of God. We are simply invited to be faithful – in small and daily acts of humble service.

This coming weekend I am privileged to lead a virtual Memorial Service for one of the saints at North Decatur Presbyterian Church, where I served as pastor for thirteen years. Burt Vardeman chaired the Search Committee that called me to be their pastor nearly thirty years ago. Raised in the segregated south of Covington, Georgia, Burt answered the call of his country, serving the Army Air Corps during

² Willie James Jennings, *Acts: A Theological Commentary*, p. 100-101.

World War Two. He was the Flight Radio Operator on B-24 Liberator Bombers and survived thirty-one combat missions over Nazi-occupied Europe. On one of those missions, the Nazis destroyed three of the engines on his plane and, preparing to parachute into the Aegean Sea they spotted an airstrip where they were able to land and be housed by the Tuskegee Airmen, those African American Red Tails and often under-sung heroes of the war. They made Burt an Honorary Tuskegee Airman Red Tail. Burt spent the rest of his life crediting the Tuskegee Airmen for saving his life.

After he graduated from Auburn in construction management he used those skills to help build up Stillman College, until that Presbyterian historically black college was fully accredited. Then his family moved to Atlanta where he served in our denomination's headquarters and committed his life to work for Civil Rights, gender equity, peace and justice.

He sewed into the fabric of the North Decatur church and every other sphere of his life, profound sense of inclusion, and hospitality to any who would enter in. At his death at ninety-five-years old he's not remembered for a big miracle, but rather for just countless, daily expressions – as one of his grandchildren said – “of unconditional kindness.” The very last line of Burt's long obituary read: He would also want you to vote in November.

Our Christian calling – is a calling to daily, practical, even public measures of faithful living in the way of Jesus. In a moment, we will recall the names of the Beloveds of this congregation who have died in the last year. As with my friend Burt, and the friends of Tabitha, we will remember their lives as a testimony to call of Jesus Christ, to live our lives in countless acts of kindness, hospitality, humility, love and charity.

We will testify to the power of God to raise the living from the dead, and to instill in us that the power of sainthood for the living of our days is an enactment of these words: “I hear you. I love you. We love you. We’re here.”

AMEN.