

*Resurrection Weavings**

Acts 9: 36-43

Thomas H. Troeger
Iliff School of Theology, Denver, Colorado

I suppose it began as grief usually does,
in disbelief and denial.

“Tabitha dead?
Just the other day we sat down,
had something to drink together.
A long, lovely conversation.
Dead?
No, it cannot be.”

Then the reality begins to settle in.

We do not know for sure that this is what happened.
But Luke has strewn the text with many clues
about the importance of Tabitha to her community of women.
We have good reason to believe that they felt the shock of grief.

This story is the only place in all of Luke’s writings
where he calls a woman a “disciple.”
The Women’s Bible Commentary traces
how Luke has difficulty in dealing with strong women in the early church.
But not here.
In this story Luke acknowledges the woman’s rank and stature.
Tabitha is nothing less than a “disciple.”

Consider also the woman’s proper name.
It means “gazelle.”
Gazelles were the symbol of beauty and grace in the ancient world.
Whether this was her given name,
or people nicknamed her that, we do not know.
But I would like to think that people remembered her as graceful and beautiful.

Luke gives the name in two languages:
in Aramaic, Tabitha; and in Greek, Dorcas.
Why?
Perhaps he is simply translating for his Greek readers.

* Troeger preached this sermon at Columbia Theological Seminary’s Colloquium in April 2000.

Another possibility, which doesn't rule out the first,
is that the woman was bilingual, speaking both Aramaic and Greek.
It is not far-fetched to think so.
She lived in Joppa,
a cosmopolitan seaport in the global economy of the time.

Tabitha was evidently a woman of means.
Luke reports "she was extremely generous."

Emerging from all these clues
is a powerful, graceful, wealthy, generous woman,
a disciple of Jesus Christ,
living in a cosmopolitan city in a global economy.

When Peter arrived,
he found the community of women surrounding Tabitha's body,
which they had washed and laid out in a room upstairs.
The women were showing various garments that Tabitha had made for them.
This is a small detail with great significance.
In the ancient world a piece of clothing was very valuable.
It took immense effort to produce one garment:
spinning by hand, weaving by hand, sewing by hand.
The very poorest people might be lucky to have two or three garments at the most.
Tabitha had provided her entire community clothing.

You can imagine the sharing of memories
as the women stood around Tabitha's body:

"This cloak:
she wove it for me two winters ago when we had that long cold spell,
and I could never get warm."

"Look at the fine needlework in this gown.
Tabitha made it for my grandchild, when she was baptized."

"My son wore this tunic day in and day out until he outgrew it."

And so the stories flow on and on,
the stories of spinning and weaving and sewing
wrapped up with the spinnings and weavings and sewings of the women's lives.

There is a point in the text
where I become suspicious of Luke.
Luke says that Peter sent all the women out of the room
and then raised Tabitha to new life,
as if Peter were the sole vessel of God's restoring power.
I do not believe it.

I believe the women had already released the power of new life into the room,
because when they touched those garments
they touched more than a piece of cloth.
They touched the spinnings and weavings and sewings of a life
that was dedicated to Jesus Christ —
so dedicated that the woman was called “disciple”
even by a patriarchal writer like Luke.

Touching those clothes, Tabitha’s community touched the fabric of their existence.
They reclaimed their connection to this lovely, generous woman,
who was connected to Jesus Christ, the risen Savior.
When the women brought out those stories,
brought out the spinnings and weavings and sewings of their life together,
the Risen Christ joined them,
the Christ who had lived in this woman,
the Christ by whose power Peter said, “Tabitha, get up.”

I suppose it began as grief usually does,
in disbelief and denial.
McDonald dead? McDouglas dead?
It was the end of April 1746 in Scotland.
The Battle of Culloden had just been fought.
You may remember from European History 101
how the British, using the most advanced warfare of their day,
slaughtered one thousand Scotsmen in less than forty-five minutes.
Afterwards, the British Crown,
in an effort to make sure that the Scottish identity never emerged again,
outlawed wearing the Tartan in public,
outlawed doing Scottish dances,
outlawed any custom that reinforced the Scots’ unique character.
It is the classic story of oppression that goes on again and again and again.

The response of the oppressed Scots was just as classic:
forbidden to wear the tartan in public sight,
the people wore it beneath their outer garments.
When prayers were offered in church,
the Scots would reach underneath and touch the tartan.
Like Tabitha’s community, they were touching far more than a piece of cloth.
They were touching the spinnings and weavings and sewings of their identity.
Touching those memories and praying in the name of Christ,
they sensed the Risen One was with them even in their oppression.

Nowadays there is a service called the “Kirkin of the Tartan.”
We celebrate it in our church, every year.
People who are of Scottish ancestry often come in kilts
or bring tartans forward to the table of the Lord as a way of presenting to Christ
the spinnings and weavings and sewings of their life stories.

I suppose it began as grief usually does,
in disbelief and denial:
the grief you have known.

Your grief for one you loved whom you have lost:
a spouse, a friend, a classmate.
At first you questioned:
Dead? How can it be?
But with time the reality began to sink in.

Maybe, like Tabitha's community,
you still possess a sweater that person knit for you,
a pillowcase embroidered for a wedding gift,
an outfit made for you when you were a child.
When you touch it, you touch far more than a piece of cloth.
You touch the spinnings and weavings and sewings
of that person's life as it was interwoven with your own.

And if that person were someone like Tabitha,
a strong, generous, graceful disciple of Jesus Christ,
then recalling those memories awakens in you a renewed sense
of the living Christ.

We bring our sacred spinnings and weavings and sewings
to Christ's table this morning.
We present them to Christ with our grief and our hope,
and we hear in our hearts what Tabitha heard: "Rise to new life!"
And we do.