

In Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha (in Greek her name is Dorcas); she was always doing good and helping the poor. About that time she became sick and died, and her body was washed and placed in an upstairs room. Lydda was near Joppa; so when the disciples heard that Peter was in Lydda, they sent two men to him and urged him, "Please come at once!" Peter went with them, and when he arrived he was taken upstairs to the room. All the widows stood around him, crying and showing him the robes and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was still with them. Peter sent them all out of the room; then he got down on his knees and prayed. Turning toward the dead woman, he said, "Tabitha, get up." She opened her eyes, and seeing Peter she sat up. He took her by the hand and helped her to her feet. Then he called for the believers, especially the widows, and presented her to them alive. This became known all over Joppa, and many people believed in the Lord. Peter stayed in Joppa for some time with a tanner named Simon.

Acts 9:36-43 (NRSV)



A Life of Beauty and Goodness

As I read this passage, I was reminded of the conversations I have with my 80 year old buddy, Jerry. He's a bit of a film buff. He maintains a list on his computer of who sang what song in which film, and if it was used on Broadway, he can tell you the actor and in which play it was performed.

Recently, Jerry moved back to his hometown in Ohio to be closer to family, but we still chat regularly by phone. At some point in our conversation I can count on Jerry to say, "Guess who died?" If I don't happen to know the answer immediately, he'll prod me with clues like: "She was married to John Astin. She won an Academy Award for her part in the Helen Keller Story. She had that TV show about the identical cousins." "Oh yeah!" I'd say. "Patty Duke." Our usual banter would then shift to a review of the life of the deceased – chronicling their accomplishments and their failures. It's amazing how much you can recall about the lives of others. Have you ever wondered how you will be remembered?

In our text we read about a great miracle and pivotal point in the growth of the church. But, we also read about the death of Dorcas. The author of Acts tells us that she was "always doing good

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and helping the poor” and her friends and loved ones had gathered in Joppa to remember her - crying and showing off the fine robes and other clothing that she had made. Apparently, Dorcas had lived a life of beauty and goodness, and her friends were telling everyone about how she affected their lives.

There is a quote often attributed to Maya Angelou - though it probably didn't originate with her - and it goes something like this:

“They may forget what you said — but they will never forget how you made them feel.”

That quote haunts me. The nature of my work, IT tech support, often brings me into situations that are tense - computers malfunctioning, printers stop printing, the world-wide-web gets tangled up. As a result, my presence in a classroom is often perceived as being a sign of a problem. The expressions on people's faces, as I enter an office, often reflects how well I did my job last time I visited that location - their expressions show how I made them feel.

The prophet Micah has good advice in this context:

He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

(Micah 6:8 NRSV)

I remember seeing a letter of recommendation that a principal had written for one of the

teachers in my school district. I was struck by a phrase the writer had used. “When situations arise, Miss Smith (not her real name), is always part of the solution, and never part of the problem.” What a great way to be remembered.

It is only natural, when thinking about others or reminiscing about those who have died, that our conversations develop a “tone”. Some people we remember fondly - they were kind, or funny, or good looking, or talented. Others, if they didn't strike our fancy, might make us groan or wince.

The greatest commandment, according to Jesus, is to love the Lord with all your heart, soul, strength and mind - and your neighbor as yourself. When I cause people to wince, I have to wonder how well I'm following that command.

Dorcas, on the other hand, must have loved well - she made people remember her fondly.

We don't know much about Dorcas, but Scripture has a richness in its brevity. We're told that Dorcas is this woman's name “in Greek” - Tabitha being the Jewish or Aramaic version. She was a disciple of Christ. And we read that “Tabitha... was always doing good and helping the poor”. The image that the author paints in our mind's eye is enhanced when we discover the meaning of her name. Both “Tabitha” and “Dorcas” mean gazelle.

A gazelle is in the antelope family. They are small and swift. And, if you've ever seen videos of gazelles they leap into the air and hit the ground running. My image of Tabitha is of a woman of great energy - gathering her weavings and



dashing off to the market to sell her wares. She is someone who prepares the meals for her family and runs to her sick friend's home to bring them a little extra food and maybe a gift, and then hurries home so she can continue sewing her latest creation. We all know people like that – nonstop energy.

But Tabitha fell sick and died. This energetic disciple is suddenly motionless. No smile. No laughter. Her weavers loom was still. Her thread bobbin wasn't spinning. And her friends are mourning her death. So what do we do when a loved one dies? We reach out in faith for answers and send for the pastor.

The passage tells us that Peter was in Lydda - about 12 miles away – and word of his healing ministry may have reached Joppa. So they sent for Peter. We're not given all the details of what Peter said during his visit. Often mourners expect pastors to say the magic words that will make everything right again. We long to hear a eulogy that will honor the deceased, recall memories of happier times, and in some way give us back the one we have lost.

Through tears, and sometimes laughter, friends and family rebuild from memory a life lived. Often new information is shared during the grieving process. Mourners write letters and friend travel long distances to reconnect with memories. In my own experience, sorting through old papers and photos when each of my parents died, actually expanded my memories of

them. In a way, there was a new person forming in my heart that started to fill the gap that the old person who had left.

Clearly, though, something special happened in Joppa. The Scriptures tell us that Peter chased everyone out of the room. Then, in prayer, Peter turned to the body, and Tabitha opened her eyes and he helped her up. There is no question that something occurred that is beyond simple explanations, and word of the event spread throughout Joppa, but explaining miracles is beyond the scope of this message.

There is one detail, however, that we should not overlook. In verse 41 we read that Peter called the friends and family back into the room and he “showed her to be alive”. How does one restore a once dead person to their family and community? After Jesus' death and resurrection he appeared to his disciples and had to prove he was alive. He showed them his wounds and even ate some fish. One might wonder how Tabitha experienced the event.

Do you think she was aware of the gentle way the widows had treated her when they washed her body and wrapped her in burial clothes? Did she thank everyone for their kind words? Did she even know what was said in the eulogies? We don't really know exactly how long she was dead. Keep in mind that Tabitha was resuscitated, not resurrected – no glorified body, yet. Did the smell of death linger?



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We also don't know how the remainder of Tabitha's life on earth played out. Was she in some way different? I imagine a slightly more pensive woman – someone who treasured every person she encountered and every moment of life she was given. Others might envision Tabitha with even greater zeal than she had previously – seeking the most out of life.

Do you think Tabitha thought about how others remembered her? What difference does it make how others remember you? Are we supposed to be perfect? Do we think Tabitha's beauty had no blemishes – that her goodness had no flaws? Probably not. I'm sure she was a lot like you and me. But Tabitha's life – her first and second life – led people to Jesus. In the first sentence of the passage we read, she is described as a "disciple". It was her faith that was the primary cause for hearing about her beauty and goodness.

The story of Tabitha's death is justifiably overshadowed by the miracle of her being raised. But in those brief details, we're given a glimpse into the life of a Believer - a life fondly

remembered by others. A life of beauty and goodness that may cause us to wonder how our lives will be remembered?

Amen!

