

Easter 4-C
May 12, 2019
St. John's Cathedral

Tabitha might not be the first name that pops into our heads when we think of women in the Bible. We might think about Sarah from Hebrew scripture and her amazing late-life pregnancy, or Mary the mother of Jesus, or maybe the women at Jesus' tomb, but not Tabitha, also known as Dorcas. Tabitha is at center stage today in our reading from the Acts of the Apostles. Acts, an Easter season companion in our New Testament readings, is a sequel to Luke's gospel that tells the story of the early followers of Jesus as they organize themselves for mission and try their wings at being what we call the Church.

Tabitha, called a disciple here, was one who took care of those who most needed care: widows, orphans, the poor – a compassionate woman with energy to serve many needs. If Tabitha were a member of this congregation, she would likely be taking a night shift when our Family Promise families are staying here; or cooking a meal at the West Central Mission's Dinner Table, or rounding up socks for a homeless shelter. We do have Tabithas among us.

Tabitha also reminds me a bit of my mother, who was so often eager to take a pot of soup to a sick neighbor or start a thrift shop in a church basement so people with limited incomes would find a good place to shop.

Tabitha, we are told, became ill and died. She was washed and prepared for burial by her friends. She was surrounded at her deathbed in an upper room by some of those she had helped, and they were weeping in grief and showing the clothes Tabitha had made for them. It is a tender scene of deep loss and sorrow. You can almost feel its power.

Earlier, perhaps in desperation, someone had sent for the apostle Peter when Tabitha became sick. He was nearby, and he arrived to find the women grieving and Tabitha dead in her bed. Peter knelt down and prayed, then said, “Tabitha, get up!” And she did.

It was a resurrection-like occurrence in an upper room. It’s hard to miss the connection with Easter. It is an alleluia moment for sure. A God moment, as we are accustomed to saying in this diocese. It feels like the power and presence of the resurrected Jesus is in that room, bringing forth life and healing.

This healing moment – a moment of life returning to Tabitha, is certainly the center of this story. But there are a couple of things around the edges that are interesting to explore a bit as well. I am intrigued by the women at Tabitha’s deathbed as they showed Peter the clothing that she had made and given to them. These were not the rich and powerful, but rather some of the most disadvantaged in that community. Widows in that culture had little they could fall back on. They were most often poor. The fruit of Tabitha’s kindness was caring for the poor and widows who so desperately needed it.

In Tabitha, both the giver and the gifts had enriched their lives and they were grateful. Their grieving before she was healed came from the heart. If you have ever been in that place where grief, shock and gratefulness intersect, you know what was going on here. Some of us had a similar experience last weekend when we learned of the death of Rachel Held Evans.

Rachel, a young writer so gifted that she could help us embrace our faith in new and sometimes surprising ways, died last weekend at the age of 37 after a sudden illness. She wrote “Inspired,” a book that we read together here in Lenten book groups this year. In a way, Rachel, through her writing, was our generous companion on the way during our Lenten journey. A

Tabitha of sorts. As we read along, we got a deeper sense of scripture as story that shapes our lives and emboldens us to embrace life's challenges.

This past week Rachel has been remembered in publications like the New York Times, the Washington Post and New Yorker, among many. I had no idea she had been so well known and admired. There were comments from Michael Curry, our presiding bishop. And social media has been filled with favorite bits of her writing and remembrances from friends --and also those like us, who she befriended through her writing.

I felt a bit like the sorrowful upper room companions of Tabitha last week, not quite ready to receive such sad and shocking news. Rachel, her husband and children became a part of my prayer life. I gave thanks for life eternal that now surrounds her in God's loving welcome.

I also reflected, like the women who showed the clothing that Tabitha had provided, on our gratitude for those things Rachel had given us during Lent. Here are a few: Certainly she enlivened our time with scripture. She helped us see with new eyes some of its stories and stimulated deeper questions from us as we read. She also gifted us with her own story of her migration from the evangelical churches of the South to the Episcopal Church and the change in perspective that grew within her.

And as we read her book together, she also gave us another important the gift: the of talking and listening to one another about things that are very important – our lives, our faith, our hopes. She helped us to share our stories by sharing hers.

She also had an honest and enlivening view of what the church is for. As a writer, I was almost envious of her way with words. These sere words that made me continue to be thankful

that I am a part of the Church -- writing laced with an undercurrent of alleluia and some prose that is both serious and playful.

One of my favorites is, "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."

"The gospel," she wrote, "doesn't need a coalition devoted to keeping the wrong people out. It needs a family of sinners, saved by grace, committed to tearing down the walls, throwing open the doors, and shouting, 'Welcome! There is bread and wine. Come eat with us and talk.' This isn't a kingdom for the worthy: It's a kingdom for the hungry."

Those are not subtle words. They are words to give us courage. Enlivening words for us as we move ahead to open our church doors and the doors of our hearts in welcome. To open our doors to the refreshing breath of the Spirit.

As we return to Tabitha's story from Acts, we revisit Peter's words to her as she lay lifeless in that upper room. "Tabitha, get up!" he said. "Arise." He doesn't speak timidly or even say, 'please.' Those words bid her to wake up from her lifelessness and get on with her life.

This resurrection moment and this Easter season give us more than a nudge to get up. It's more like a mandate-- To arise. To get off our pews or our easy chairs, or lawn chairs or wherever we are lounging and get out there to share good news in whatever way we are able -- through our compassion, our enthusiasm, our generosity, our welcome, our activism or whatever gift we bring to the table. It is a time to witness to new life. This is a time of Easter joy. A time to share the energy of resurrection, new hope, new directions.

In short, it's an alleluia moment. Let's get on with it.

