

*A sermon for the Episcopal Diocese of Maine by the bishop, the Right Reverend Thomas J. Brown, for the Fourth Sunday of Easter, 8 May 2022, offered as a resource to the entire diocesan community following clergy conference 1-3 May. To God be the glory.*

About a decade ago I led a Bible study focusing on the women of the Bible. We had a secondary resource, the title of which I cannot remotely recall, and of course as a primary resource we had the Bible itself. I knew most of the women's names, even if I didn't know their stories. I knew about Esther and Judith, and Rachel and Rebekah and Leah, and Mary Magdalene, and Mary the Mother of our Lord, but there were women whom I met for the first time in that months-long Bible study. Among them was Dorcas, her Greek name, or Tabitha, her Aramaic name.

We meet her, along with several other women, in the Book of Acts. A few things to note at the outset: think of Acts as the second volume in a two book set, the first being the Gospel of Luke. Acts picks up the story just after Easter and carries it through the church's early years. Much of the narrative in Acts centers on Peter and Paul, figuratively panning the camera back and forth between each of them, focusing sometimes on Paul (who used to be Saul) and other times on Peter, the somewhat impulsive and klutzy-speaking fisherman. These two—one of whom was a deadly foe and the other a betrayer—become the leaders of the first generation of Christ followers.

But like it is in most faith communities it's not the celebrated rectors, certainly not the bishops, who build up the church. Let's face it: it's faithful women—and a few faithful men—who work to bring-in the reign of God.

St. Luke takes time to tell us Dorcas's story. Peter had been visiting a church in a nearby town when bad news came that in nearby Joppa there was a pastoral crisis, somebody was dying. Peter hurries to get there, and his arrival is both too late and just in time. Dorcas has died. The upstairs room is turned into the funeral parlor and the widows, whom Dorcas had loved and served so generously, were there grieving. Here we're reminded of how powerless and vulnerable, even disgraced, widows were in those days. And there they were crying and telling stories, holding emblems of her good works and acts of charity: clothing and blankets and coats which evidently Dorcas herself had made for them. Think about the times loved ones in your parish are given a prayer shawl or a little knitted square to carry in their pocket—a talisman to connect them to healing, to the Good Shepherd himself.

Then something happens, something which eludes our modern empirical mindsets. Peter kneels at the bed and prays. Dorcas is raised from the dead.

Whatever happened and however it happened the story is remembered because it was a snapshot of the life-giving power of God which didn't disappear with Jesus's resurrection, as if that was a once-and-for-all moment. *The point of this story is to remind us that new life continues, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.*

Here's one truth hidden in this tale: the small stuff for which Dorcas stands really matters. Oh, big stuff like theology matters, but we all know that the church of Jesus Christ would have been dead as a doornail ages ago if all we had to offer was sound theology. Fine architecture matters, but the church would have been disintegrated if our only offering was great buildings. Exquisite liturgical music matters, but again, the church would've unraveled if all we had was fine music. Preaching matters, but the church couldn't have survived if all we offered were sermons. As important as they are it's not the great ideas, the stunning art, the wonderful programs, the charismatic and grounded leaders—those haven't kept the church alive. For two millennia it's been the Dorcas— their endless and often unsung graces and kindnesses. Those actions have and do equip us to be the good news.

Joy Popke died a few years ago. She taught my Sunday School class every Sunday, and she did that for over 40 years. I can't remember her teaching me about Dorcas. I suppose that's because she was Dorcas. She'd drive us around in teams of four in her Dodge K Car station wagon so we could deliver blankets to farmers—many of them widows—who couldn't afford their fuel oil bills. Joy Popke was also the person who attended every church committee meeting, and stayed afterwards to make sure the church was locked up, and the coffee pot was turned off.

Dorcas and Joy Popke point us toward Jesus, who is risen from the dead. It is he who calls us to love God with our entire beings; it is he who shows us how to love our neighbors as ourselves; it is he who demonstrates how to love enemies; and it is he who proclaims the arrival of God's commonwealth right now.

Friends: Jesus Christ lives on today as well, right here in our midst. If we allow him Christ will empower us to do things we never thought possible. What's that?

Well, it's loving like we never thought we could, caring like we never thought we could care, forgiving like we never thought we could forgive, giving ourselves away like we're crazy about God. My guess is we'll never literally raise someone from the dead, but, there's plenty of death in this world—and in our own live that needs new life.

And so God calls us to play a part to bring forth new life. Dorcas herself, raised as she is from death into life, would draw us toward the Good Shepherd: for surely goodness and mercy shall follow us all the days of our lives and we shall dwell in the house of the Lord for ever. Amen.