

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter  
Sermon 5.12.19

### **Acts of the Apostles 9:32-43**

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.<sup>37</sup> At that time she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs.<sup>38</sup> Since 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."<sup>39</sup> So 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.<sup>40</sup> Peter 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.<sup>41</sup> He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive.<sup>42</sup> This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord.<sup>43</sup> Meanwhile he stayed in Joppa for some time with a certain Simon, a tanner.

As many of you know, I spent two days last week at my 30<sup>th</sup> high school reunion.

High school was complicated for me, as is the case for lots of people. A boarding school where I was a day student, Phillips Exeter was at once among my favorite places and one of the worst. The excellence among the student body made the experience of being in class stimulating, even exciting. Plus it's where I learned to love rowing. But social life among the students could be brutal—typical mean-spirited stuff but supercharged because there was no escaping campus life, there weren't any parents around to love and discipline you into not being a monster, and quite a few people had quite a lot of money, which meant they could torment on a whole other order of magnitude. For example, one boy got a printing press for his birthday or something, and he proceeded with his roommate to publish an unfunny, not to mention misogynistic, newspaper parody of our regular weekly *The Exonian*. I was in it, along with lots of other girls who'd met with disapproval for being too much or not enough or out or reach. It was all very isolating, and by the time I graduated I didn't have a single friend, though I've made some very good friends as an adult working back.

A number of things in recent months have converged to put me in mind of wondering whether on the balance Exeter has contributed badly to the world. More and more, I question the rightness of private schools in general. I also question the health of homo-social environments, which Exeter obviously wasn't by the time I got there, though it was but 15 years into being "co-ed" after nearly two hundred years of being for boys only, not a quality gently surrendered. I watched in horror Brett Kavanaugh's time in the spotlight, he a prep school student when I was one. And I

felt like I'd known versions of the boy he was accused of having been. Indeed, the very things that made some people incredulous about the accusations—that a nice boy at a “good school” could ever do the things Dr. Ford accused him of doing—were things that made it all the more believable to me. The topper came during the time when my family was watching the television show “Smallville” this winter, a show about Clark Kent before he fully became Superman. One episode featured a villain who was introduced by way of his resume, which one of the good guys had obtained by hacking into some computer mainframe (as you do). This evil genius (his only “superpower”) had studied at MIT and Exeter. “Uh-oh,” I thought. “We’re shorthand for ‘jerk.’”

It wasn't supposed to be this way. When John Phillips dedicated the school, he wrote a deed of gift that outlined his hopes for the endeavor. Going on at some length, he concluded thus: “Above all, it is expected that the attention of the instructors to the disposition of the minds and morals of the youth under their charge will exceed every other care; well considering that goodness without knowledge is weak and feeble, yet knowledge without goodness is dangerous, and that both united form the noblest character, and lay the surest foundation of usefulness to mankind.”

This coupling is something we had repeated at us as students as I remember it, that goodness without knowledge is weak and feeble yet knowledge without goodness is dangerous, but I don't remember it ever going beyond this repeated declaration. I don't remember ever having the question asked: does Exeter live into this charge? Does it take seriously this dual task, to impart knowledge *and* goodness; and if so, how does it do it and how would we know? I mean, you can test the success of imparting knowledge. But how do you test the success of imparting goodness?

So I decided to propose a panel for reunion—a panel of four graduates who've become educators and two current faculty members. I wanted to ask them and really hear from them, do you see it as your task to impart goodness as well as knowledge? If so, did you get that sense here? If not, where should goodness come into the frame? And while we're at it, what is goodness?

I returned to this question again and again in the months, then weeks, approaching the reunion. I worked myself up to an expectational pitch that this panel discussion was going to feel like seeing the Beatles felt back in the day (from what I hear). I'd scream and faint and that would be the end of it.

The funny thing is, it's right there in the deed of gift, an answer to the question, an attempt anyway to measure or evaluate it, what goodness is and how you can tell it: usefulness to

mankind. It's sort of like Jesus' measure of religious practice—like a tree, you can tell it by its fruits—don't you think? Or like Tabitha, a widow who'd go right on living resurrection—and not just after she died.

Funny, it's this very thing that has some people object to this story of Tabitha being revived—the story's clarity that she was “good.” Some scholars hesitate with this story, the ways it differs from other healing-the-sick and raising-from-the-dead stories. With its lingering on the storied fact that Tabitha had been devoted to good works and charity there seems an implication that she was especially worthy of reviving. It seems to imply she'd earned the privilege of being raised. But isn't this works-righteousness, these people worry. Isn't this to say that you have to *earn* what grace you receive—a move that would make it not grace but payment, and would cast God who is behind such miraculous action not as gracious but simply doling out just desserts.

But it isn't only the emphasis on her “good works and charity” that trouble. It's also the emphasis on her simply having been an important person. For starters, she's called the feminine form of “disciple,” *mathitria*. This is the only time the word appears in the New Testament; Tabitha is the only woman to have been called a disciple (which shouldn't imply she was the only woman considered a disciple, just that she was alone in having been written as such).

Add to this the fact that she's twice named, once in Aramaic, Tabitha, which would have been the language spoken in her immediate community and again in Greek, Dorcas, which is the language of her larger context, the language of the empire. Meaning gazelle, of all things (powerful, graceful, swift), this means she'd have been known by name in different contexts, not just that of neighborhood but also that of nation.

The worst part, though, is that Tabitha was beloved. The story discloses details of her life that we get of almost no one else who's instrumental in miracles throughout the gospel narratives. We know nothing of Jairus' daughter, or of Jairus for that matter but that he was a leader in the synagogue. We know nothing of the woman with the hemorrhage but that she's spent all her money on physicians and to no avail. We know almost nothing of Lazarus. We know nothing of the lame man on the palate lowered through a roof to reach Jesus or the blind man at the Sheep's Gate who could see only to the degree that people in the courtyard looked like trees walking. We know nothing of any of these people, who are instrumental, except Tabitha, who is notably not “instrumental,” is somehow more of an agent than an instrument. And this is what we know, that

the widows of whom she was one are stricken at her death. They wash her body and lay it out, they call for Peter when they hear he's near, and they gather round him when he comes, gather to show him the clothes they were wearing which Tabitha had made for them.

We should know that widows in this context might well have been women whose husbands had died. They might also have been divorced women, which is to say those who'd been divorced since there were nearly no circumstances in which a woman might rightly initiate a divorce. Or they might have been women who never married in the first place and never would at this point. Really, a widow was any woman grown who was now unclaimed by any men (father, husband, brother), any woman who had no household to find membership in or protection among, which they'd have needed because women were vulnerable in a way we're wise to remember or recognize.

It wasn't simply a matter of patriarchy that a woman should be in a man's care. It was also, and more fundamentally, a matter of survival. Absent a strong state, as we now live with, women can typically be overpowered. Worse, they can be raped, which incidentally is why rape is considered a war crime. Major-General Patrick Cammaert, former commander of UN peacekeeping forces in the eastern Congo, explains it thus: "You destroy communities. You punish the men, and you punish the women, doing it in front of the men. It has probably become more dangerous to be a woman than a soldier in armed conflict." And, when it comes to pregnancy, however that might have come about, women find themselves in the most vulnerable condition any otherwise healthy adult can be in.

Womankind: we're a tangle of power, potential for exploitation, and deep vulnerability.

Incidentally, there was one time when a parishioner was provoked out of his pew here, which some of you might remember. He charged the pulpit yelling, which surprised me but didn't frighten me. What got him going was mostly, I imagine, his own psychotic state. But I was nine months pregnant at the time, and I'm convinced contributing to his inability to manage his mental state was my own obvious physical state.

Didn't see this sermon coming, did you?

I'm reading the book *Blueprint: The Evolutionary Origins of a Good Society* by Nicholas Christakis, in which it's clear that the question as to how social groups of mammals of all types manage their group's reproduction is the thing from which nearly all other social structuring flows.

This question becomes more and more pressing as you work your way up the evolutionary chain to the species for which the nurturing of young is more and more labor-intensive—longer incubation periods, longer processes of maturation. Among these species, particularly elephants and humans, for the one pregnant or nursing young, the other work of survival, namely the gathering of food, becomes all but impossible. So, someone else in the social group has to take on this work.

As to who that will be, some species or social groupings relegate this care-taking task to a community of females of the species, even a family of origin (grandmothers, aunts, female cousins). This means the males need to be sent out, away from the region of origin, out to find mates other than those whom they'd risk having be too genetically related. Other species or social groupings, mostly humans now, relegate this to a male of the species, someone ideally to be understood as the father, which then, when it comes to people, necessitates all sorts of taboos and structures to safeguard that is indeed the case.

Regardless, though, all these societies need to account for the fearsome power, and the unnerving vulnerability, of female re-productivity, this astonishing and essential capacity and the dreadful vulnerability to violence, exploitation, or neglect that comes with it.

These widows, obviously, weren't gathered in community for the sake of caring for the next generation. Pregnancy and child rearing weren't what these women were about—unless such things were imposed on them by violent force, the prevention of which is part of what they *were* doing together, living in this community. Unclaimed by any man who might see to protection, they had sought each other out, had formed a family of sorts. They would find safety in numbers, care among their sisters, like Tabitha, for example, this beloved woman who had sewed them their clothes.

“See, my tunic? She made this years ago.”

“My cloak: she embroidered it with purple thread. I keep it at the foot my bed when I sleep.”

How strange it is that it's likely no one here is wearing anything that could be said to be handmade by someone expressing anything for us like love or care. Our obtaining of clothing is strictly transactional. But clothing used to be about something more—an expression of care, a nurturing act to cover and protect.

So, these storied women: they were no paid mourners. No, the women gathered at Tabitha's death, they were heart-feeling in their grief. That's how some funerals would go—with paid mourners there to weep and wail as testament to the worthiness of the one lost. But these women were there for something truer than paid performance. These weren't undertakers at a funeral; these were family, something Tabitha might once have thought she'd never have.

...which makes the disapproval of biblical scholars of this story that much more irritating. Lewis Mudge of a seminary in San Francisco writes of this: "So the account of the raising of Tabitha omits elements that are present in most other New Testament miracle stories and adds at least one element that is not...If we read it just as it stands and in isolation, its theological yield is both meager and confusing."

Gah.

But I get. To hear of the worthiness, the belovedness of the one now dead but soon to be raised is to make the mistake that such miracles of grace only go to a certain few. It's like when I'm officiating at a funeral for someone I didn't know. People assume that's really hard and also inauthentic—for how could I have anything at all to say if I'd never had a personal connection with the one being memorialized? But not to have had those could mean that the funeral won't devolve into just such a show of worthiness, that there will be at least one person to stand and say, "This person is beloved of God and will rejoice with all creation at the Lord's table in glory, though not because of who this person was but because of who God is." This means that the funeral won't simply be a toast to yet another jolly good fellow but a chance to recite the promises that are for all. That's just good theology.

But, look, not all stories in scripture have a duty to yield good theology. Some stories in scripture are up to something else, and, as it happens, one of Luke's narrative bents (he who also wrote the Acts of the Apostles) is the question of the wider community, the question of how to live according to grace and of what life in Christ is supposed to look like. Really, he's often got an eye on what's outside the focus, what is just beyond the frame. Like, his Pentecost story isn't just about the Spirit coming to the disciples but about it coming with implication for the wider community, the whole world. And his healing stories: they aren't just about the actual healing itself, but also about the context in which that healing will then play out, what purpose it will put to, grace upon grace.

Tabitha lived resurrection in her life. She made a community of outcasts. She generated life where there was no otherwise consideration of generation. She clothed in beloved garb those who would, as promised, be at last clothed in garbs of glory. And this is all to suggest that her being revived is more about continuity than it is about the miraculous—a suggestion in which there is theological implication to be found so, Mr. Mudge, take note. The resurrection of Jesus, according in particular to Luke, consists of Jesus appearing back among us doing exactly the sort of thing he did before he died. Really, there's terrific continuity in the resurrection of Jesus, and so there is also in the reviving of Tabitha, who lived not according to death and could therefore be well expected to die not according to death.

I will tell you, in case you're curious, I was heartened by much of what I encountered at my reunion. The process of education at Exeter involves round-table discussions, every class conducted in conversation instead of lecture. The students, then, learn how to listen and to respond, how to rely on the fact of the text for what argument they're putting forth or what question they're risking to ask. There is no time for fixed ideology, talking points, or unmoored opining; the material simply comes too fast, frequently, and stubbornly for anything but thinking on your feet, receiving correction when you've gone wrong, and trying a new line of thought when you've run out that other line. The teacher moderates, and good teachers do that with a light touch but a mind for fairness, even kindness, you might say goodness; but the students do the real work or creating ideas together, building something up that wasn't there forty minutes earlier. And I'll confess I've had renewed an almost religious faith in that process to produce something good.

That said, I was dismayed by one classroom discussion. A course on religion and pop culture, it had the students considering as text an app for download featuring Buddhist meditations that you could do on the go, at your convenience, sorted according to the length of time each would take. The app is free, indeed there seems cost to it at all; and the question they were to consider is whether this provided what could be understood as an authentic religious experience.

It was a divisive question, dividing the class nearly in equal halves. Those who argued against it did so in terms of cost—that religion should cost you something, an argument I joined in the making of. Religion itself, the word, calls to mind binding, *re-ligio* meaning to bind back or to bind again. Those who argued in favor of it did so exclusively in terms of the first person singular,

what the app does for “me.” If it were to help me cope with stress or to call to my mind values I feel are good, then that makes it count as an authentic religious experience—something largely interchangeable with an authentic spiritual experience.

But, no, I kept more and more thinking. The “religious” demands something more of us than just good feelings, psychological comfort, or spiritual revival. Though such things might come into a religious experience, there is also the call to accountability, response and responsibility, self-giving, self-restraint, self-binding for the sake of others. There is also the imperative to be useful to humankind, and to measure that usefulness by some standard established beyond yourself.

Tabitha was useful to humankind. And the storied fact of this doesn’t mean to justify why God loved her and why God would empower Peter to revive her, but it can indeed tell us what such revival might be for, what such grace might be in service of, what “good” looks like when lived out and poured forth. God doesn’t necessarily “reward” this, but God might well ordain this or favor this. No, Tabitha’s goodness shouldn’t be understood as a means to an end, a way to get a prize of some sort; but it can be taken as an illustration of when the end that is God’s glory and grace finds its way into the now. So, do that, not because you’ll get a treat, but because you’ll find that *is itself* the treat. This is a story not about how you can get the goodies that Tabitha got, but of what you can do with the goodies you already have, which you’ll want to do because that’s good, and good feels good.

Live resurrection now.

Dwell amidst the beloved community now.

Our task has never rightly been about “getting into heaven.” It’s always been about getting heaven into the world. “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

I will also tell you, in case you’re curious, the members of the panel brought their most devoted thinking to the question I posed. And we can feel happy that they’re out there doing their thing—bringing to those lucky enough to find themselves in their classrooms a similar devotion to truth and dedication to goodness in the world, however they each might cultivate that and by whatever meaning-making frame they do that within.

There is the question, of course, not just of intent but also impact. There is the frustrating fact that even if we mean to judge things by their fruits, we can’t always know so clearly what the fruits of our labors are. Yet much of life for people of faith is about entrusting our good intent to

the Holy Spirit of God that it might make a good impact as well, that it might bear good fruit even beyond our control to see to that and to measure it.

So, does it help to hear that we have a deeper bench for this good game we play than we might otherwise know? If yes, then rest assured we do.

Thanks be to God.