

Communion Meditation – “Rising Up”

Scripture – Acts 9:36-43

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Today’s scripture reading, Acts 9:36-43, is the account of Dorcas rising up from the dead. During the first century the widows who mourned for her in Joppa were known for acts of charity; however, they were also vulnerable in the broader society where their rights were limited. We find in Peter an instrument of divine mercy to bring life out of death for their leader, Dorcas. Her rising up stands as a witness to the power of Christ’s resurrection to bring new life to all persons. Hear now, the word of God.

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

The title of the meditation: “Rising Up”

The text: “Peter knelt down and prayed. He turned to the body and said, “Tabitha, arise.” Then she opened her eyes, and seeing Peter, she sat up. Acts 9:41

Let us pray. Resurrection God, thank you for your call to each of us to “arise” and for the opportunities you provide to do good works and acts of charity. Now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable. Amen

Mother’s Day was declared a national holiday in 1914 by President Woodrow Wilson, however its beginning goes back to 1872 when American suffragist, abolitionist, and author Julia Ward Howe challenged women to join her in a Mother’s Day Proclamation for Peace. Julia who is best known for writing “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” was the inspiration to set aside a day each year to honor mothers. Saddened by the tragic effects of the Civil war, especially the pain of mothers losing sons, she called on women to unite in opposition against war in all its forms.

When our plan to present Carole Kennerly’s suffrage play, “Rising Up,” directed by Kelly Robertson, in 2020 on the hundredth anniversary of the ratification of the 19th amendment was displaced by the pandemic, we did not lose heart. Rather, we persevered and made plans to present the play this year on Mother’s Day Weekend. This afforded us the opportunity to reaffirm the original intent in setting a day apart to honor mothers, to affirm the suffragist woman behind the initiative, and to acknowledge the generations of mothers who continue to

rise up time and time again for a voice, for a vote, and for the virtue of the rights we continue to seek today.

How fitting that the scripture designated for this Mother's Day would be the miraculous raising of Tabitha, a disciple and widow who was known for rising up time and time again in doing good works and acts of charity and whose name (which means Gazelle or graceful deer) is Dorcas in Greek. Not only is this text an affirmation of the resurrection power of God, it is also a foreshadowing of the inclusion of Gentiles in this rising faith.

According to theologian Walter Brueggemann, *the structure of this narrative—the miraculous move from death to life—is clear and unambiguous. It is an epitome of the truth in the gospel that God—in Christ—has transformed the world toward well-being. It is indeed a “miracle,” which means that it is an inscrutable, inexplicable happening beyond all our categories of explanation.*

Clearly this Acts narrative attests that Christ's resurrection power to bring life out of death continues in the ministry of Peter, in the good works of the widows and saints within the early church, and in the acts of charity alive and well in our midst today.

One would not be worth her salt preaching this passage from the Westminster pulpit without mentioning the Dorcas Society, founded in 1840 by suffragist and abolitionist Abiah Hale, the wife of our beloved second pastor Rev. Albert Hale, a contemporary of Julia Ward Howe, and the foremother of Westminster's long and beautiful history of advocacy, justice, and service.

This interdenominational society of women gathered at the homes of their members. They ministered to the sick and the poor, made garments, and opened an industrial school for girls trapped in poverty with no other opportunity to learn.

When the Portuguese exiles from the Island of Madeira came to Springfield seeking an asylum from religious persecution in 1840, the Dorcas Society met them with swift, graceful, and generous relief, renting houses, furnishing them, providing food and clothing. Their acts of charity continue to inspire us today as we support our neighborhood, mentor nearby children, serve Springfield's hungry and homeless, and sustain Afghani and Ukrainian refugees around the world.

Our sanctuary has a Dorcas window honoring the work of this biblical woman and the work of the women in the Dorcas Society. In 1863, after 24 years of charitable services, their good works were merged into the Home of the Friendless which was renamed and expanded into Child and Family Services, the first service agency in Sangamon County.

How grateful we are for the Dorcas' among us who continue to gracefully rise up today, advocating for the most vulnerable among us and seeking justice and equality within the challenges before us.

Let us pause for nourishment at the table prepared by the Risen Christ who is both our Savior and our Shepherd. Amen.