

“Stitched Back Together”

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The Reading: Acts 9:36-43

³⁶ 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 he stayed in Joppa for some time with a certain Simon, a tanner.

The occasions when Jesus raised people from physical death are rare in the Bible. Only three times are recorded in the Gospels: 1) he resuscitated the widow of Nain’s son as he was being carried in his funeral procession; 2) Jesus lifted Jairus’ 12-year-old daughter by the hand from her deathbed; and 3) he called Lazarus to come forth out of his tomb, four days after his death.

Then, there are only two recorded times when his followers did the same. After Jesus’ resurrection and ascension, Christ worked through Peter to bring Tabitha back to life, and later through Paul to resuscitate Eutychus, who had fallen asleep during Paul’s sermon and fell out the window onto the ground!

I wonder if the experiences of these deceased were similar to the testimony a young person recently gave. He had overdosed and had been declared dead, but in the ensuing moments, felt himself rise above and observe himself lying on the hospital bed below. Then he had the sensation of moving down a dark tunnel toward a light, until he was abruptly revived and brought back to consciousness. He was changed forever after this experience, never doing drugs again!

All of these situations I’ve described were *dramatic* rescues that took the survivors and the witnesses by surprise. In all of these cases, the individuals also resumed their physical lives on earth, later succumbing to death for real. In the meantime, however, they were profoundly changed.

So what do we mean when we claim that Jesus Christ brings *us* back to life?

It could be a sudden, dramatic resuscitation, I suppose, but more likely, it happens another way, one that we can see in the background of the story of Tabitha, because Jesus Christ brought people to life through her too.

Tabitha was an incredible seamstress. She apparently did sewing projects for the church community and particularly for those in poverty. She repaired and mended old clothing and created new garments for those in need. At the same time, she knitted together in relationship with them. In other words, Tabitha diligently healed people in Christ's name, clothing them with dignity, and **stitching their lives back together**.

Tabitha may have been a widow, and, research on the first three centuries of the church has shown that there was an order of ministry for widows.¹ It was like a diaconate of women who took care of others in Jesus' name. We can tell that she was a prominent leader in Joppa, because of those who mourned her, because the female word for "disciple" is used for her, and because when Peter, the apostle, heard that she had become ill and died, he dropped everything and came to her bedside, where others spoke of her and proudly showed him her handiwork.

This order of diaconal widows was *not just involved in charitable deeds and donations*. They were righting wrongs and leveling the playing field for the vulnerable. They were doing justice work in a society that didn't care for the least and the lost – bringing others back to life in Jesus' name.

When I reflect upon the ministry of Tabitha, I remember my mother patching up the holes in my jeans and teaching me how to sew. I recall myself sewing on many buttons and darning socks. I *also think of* the breast surgeon who did my lumpectomy and the new lease on life that I was given!

Jesus Christ often brings us back to life by stitching us back together. Like a seamstress, he mends what has been torn apart, reinforces the places in us and in our world that are worn down, and heals what seems beyond repair. Christ may also be like a surgeon, carefully, precisely doing repairs to our body and to his body – the Church. **Essentially bringing what is dead back to life.**

Maybe you recall the story of Deloris Van Cartier in the movie *Sister Act*? Whoopi Goldberg plays a washed-up club singer, on the run from her mafia boyfriend. She is put into the witness protection program in an inner-city order of nuns that is attached to a run-down parish. To remain safe, Deloris has to disguise herself as one of the sisters. She is reluctant at first, of course, but she takes on the challenge of leading the choir and shapes it into a dynamic asset. Deloris also leads the nuns into the surrounding neighborhood, establishing life-giving relationships with the people. Over time, all these acts bring more folks into relationship with Christ and the Church. You could say that Deloris herself is stitched back together into new life!

Some branches of the Jewish faith call this kind of resurrection work "tikkun olam." These two Hebrew words point to acts of kindness that "repair" or "mend" the world. In modern Judaism tikkun olam refers to action steps toward social justice in God's name.

Jesus Christ can bring us back to life too. He is able to stitch people together across race, gender, culture, language, politics, and faith! He will bring us through the grief and back to life through little, disciplined steps, as this week we have crossed the threshold of a million deaths from COVID! We must also hope and trust that it is possible

¹See Bonnie Bowman Thurston, *The Widows: A Women's Ministry in the Early Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989).

through Christ and us through him to mend the tears in our society that lead to mass shootings!

Today, if you find yourself at odds with your family, falling through the cracks of social safety nets, or holding on by a thread to your mental health, **the Good News is that Jesus Christ has a strong needle and thread!**