

Grace Lutheran Church
Fourth Sunday of Easter + May 8, 2022
Pastor Nancy M. Raabe + “Dorcas, Clothier of Righteousness”

There is good reason that the book of Acts devotes part of an important chapter to Tabitha, or Dorcas, in the Greek form of her name. Dorcas was not merely a disciple. She was not merely a disciple known for her good works and acts of charity. She was a leading disciple—a leader in the early Christian community. In fact, the feminine form of the word “disciple” is used only once in the entire New Testament—here, to describe her.



Women played active roles in the early Christian community. They were not only benefactors but presiders in worship. They opened their homes for religious gatherings, known as house churches, which included a meal, and they led the time spiritual reading, reflection and discussion.

Wealthier women were also benefactors of associations dedicated to helping those in need. But something set Dorcas apart from others who performed good works and acts of charity.

Something made her special in her community, so that her death prompted an urgent request to Peter 10 miles away to come as quickly as possible. What was that?

All we know about Dorcas is contained in this text, and it’s right there in black and white: Dorcas sewed clothing -- not just for herself or her friends, we must assume, but for the poor, since hers was a heart of charity.

It’s clear, from what happens when Peter arrives, that she was known and loved for this special form of service. The women immediately take him upstairs to where Dorcas’ body lay. What did they do then? Not regale him with stories about her acts of service. As they wept, they showed him tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made. Tunics—simple articles intended to clothe widows and children who might otherwise have dressed in rags. Assuming that Dorcas was an uncommonly skilled clothier, these were not just simple pieces of cloth stitched together but garments of shimmering fabric designed to bring elegance to every size and shape of body, as in the image above.

I am not a stitcher myself, but I was told it would take 10 hours to crochet a small prayer shawl for a newly baptized child. So Dorcas must have devoted countless hours to this labor, in addition to everything else she did for the poor. Somehow, she managed to find several hours each day to sit in her upper room with needle and thread, surely praying as she worked.

How devastating for that community in Joppa, then, to lose someone like Dorcas, who literally and figuratively stitched that community together. They had not only lost a friend, a companion and a benefactor, they had lost their clothier of righteousness. Dorcas blessed people with the

labor of her hands, she blessed them with the kindness of her heart, she blessed them with the faithfulness of her commitment to following Jesus Christ. She was the consummate disciple. Through the love of Jesus Christ in her heart, she held the entire community together.

How hard it is to lose such a clothier of righteousness from our midst! In the wake of such a loss we wonder, how do we go on? How do we survive? What is to become of us, now that the person who held us together is gone?

I imagine each of us has suffered at least one such loss in our lives. For our family it was Bill's mother. When she died in 2014, just weeks after her official cancer diagnosis, suddenly we found ourselves rudderless. She was the one who kept everyone informed, who kept us all talking to each other, who knew what was going on with every member of the family. I'm sorry to say that eight years later we have still not fully recovered; we struggle to stay in touch, to hear what is going on with one another, although we are getting better at it little by little.

I am sure many of you can tell me stories of people like this in the Grace family, those whose death left a seemingly irreparable breach in the life of the church. Many of these women are listed in the back of our bulletin, those in whose memory white carnations or sunflowers have been given. With each death, the question may well have been, as in our family: How are we going to manage to go on? Who will hold us together? Or will we come apart at the seams?

That cannot be the outcome, though, if the clothing of the community was done in the love of Jesus Christ, because in his death always brings new life. We suffer devastating losses, but we persevere because the departed person would want us to, because they have showed us what to do by their example, and if we cling to their memory we discover new ways to cultivate life-giving connections.

In Joppa, with Dorcas' untimely death, the course of action was clear: Call Peter! He will know what to do. How *did* Peter know what to do? Because he was one of the three Jesus took into the room when Jairus' daughter had died, back in Mark 5. Jesus was called to the girl's deathbed and spoke virtually the same words Aramaic that Peter speaks here in Greek: "Talitha, kum," which means, "Little lamb, arise!" Here Peter says "Tabitha, anastethi," which means "Gazelle, arise!" Tabitha and Dorcas mean gazelle, and in fact there is an elegant species of gazelle in Africa and the middle east named for Dorcas.

Peter's act of compassion didn't just bring a dead person back to life. He brought a community back from the brink, so they could be once again clothed in righteousness to carry the message of the gospel into the world. When we find ourselves faced with the loss of the one who had always stitched us together, when we do not know which way to turn, let us listen for the sound of the voice of our Good Shepherd that we know so well, calling us to him, leading us in pathways of righteousness for his name's sake and for the sake of the world that God so loves. In him there is always new life, if we will only turn to him and follow.

Amen.