

May 12, 2019 4th Sunday of Easter
Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope

Acts 9:36-43, Psalm 23
Revelation 7:9-17, John 10: 22-30

[Wild Geese by Mary Oliver (1986). Jean Vanier's longer quote is from his book Brokenness to Community, the shorter one is found in his quotes on Goodreads but not attributed. Carrie Newcomer "You Can Do This Hard Thing." Rachel Held Evans in A Year of Biblical Womanhood. Background on Tabitha/Dorcas taken from Working Preacher Sermon Brainwave for this date.]

Beloved of Christ Jesus, grace and peace to you. Amen.

It's Tabitha (or Dorcas, we could say) and her community, in the first reading from Acts, that has captured me this week.

The book of Acts picks up after Jesus' death and resurrection.

The Holy Spirit alights on the people at Pentecost.

Then episode after episode it unfolds with the stories of the Holy Spirit and the community spreading the Jesus-story.

Acts is one of those books of the Bible that is best read with map of the Mediterranean wide open.

It crisscrosses the area, spreading from Israel and Palestine, to what we now know as Italy, Greece, and Turkey; even northern Africa.

The episode we hear this morning takes place in the areas around modern day Tel Aviv.

Much of Acts centers on a few male characters, Peter and Paul, and others, too.

This story today could be read much the same.

Peter had been in a small town called Lydda healing a man who was paralyzed.

The word is out that healings are happening, so when Tabitha/Dorcas becomes ill and then dies, her community of disciples asks Peter to come over to the neighboring town of Joppa.

Joppa is on the coast, it's the ancient port city around which Tel Aviv grows up; now days we call it Jaffa.

You can see it would be easy to focus on Peter in Joppa, the way he commands Tabitha/Dorcas, "Get up," another resurrection, not so different from Jesus resurrecting his beloved Lazarus.

But it's Tabitha/Dorcas and her people that intrigue me.

We don't know much, just bits and pieces from these eight verses.

The ones who spoke Aramaic, they called her by the name Tabitha.

But the Greek speaking community knew her by the name Dorcas.

It seems, she is multi-lingual: two languages, two communities, maybe more.

Two cultures, Tabitha/Dorcas runs in different circles.

She crosses the bridges, she builds the bridges. I like this woman!

It's Tabitha/Dorcas' community that gathers around her at her death.

Clearly she is much beloved by this group of widows.

Think of the combined grief this community has experienced.

Imagine their vulnerability, the oppression, probably even violence, they've faced.

All that, and together they've created community.

So when Tabitha/Dorcas becomes ill, when she dies, these women are all around her.

Weeping, but also murmuring about her good works, her acts of charity.

They are telling stories, showing the tunics and clothing she has created.

You can imagine them touching the pieces with admiration, noticing the careful handiwork.

Clothing, in that era, was one of the most difficult and time-consuming things for a household to make.

Her contributions, really, her vocation, are laid out next to her, telling her story, her labors, her love.

This Sunday we lift up the two women's circles in our congregation.

Back some years, we had more circles.

Now it's Gloria Circle and Dorcas Circle that each gather monthly for bible study and conversation, for prayer and fellowship.

Yes, you heard that right, Dorcas Circle, named, I'm sure, after Tabitha/Dorcas.

Both of these circles, began as groups of moms.

The kids would play; the moms would come together for study and conversation.

As the kids grew and changed, so did their moms.

As the twists and turns of life happened, and they did—joys and but also losses, many losses—
these women continued to meet, continued to share,

continued to empower and strengthen one other, continued to pray.

With the strength of these groups, people have joined in and others have stepped back.

You are welcome to come.

I had a chance to visit with the Gloria Circle when they met this past Thursday afternoon.

Some of them are in their 90s and goodness do they have a spark.

This Thursday was their last with Marilyn XXXXXX, a dear companion for many years.

Next Sunday we'll pray Godspeed for Marilyn as she moves to Duluth to be closer to her family.

Marilyn has been a strong voice in our congregation for mental health.

She knows from her own experience of losing her husband just how important it is to be a community that
can support one another, that can do education, that can be honest without stigma.

In the Gloria Circle, in our caring ministries, in our Sunday Forums, in the whole congregation, Marilyn leaves a legacy and I am thankful, we are thankful.

In thinking about these Circles, I'm remembering that powerful group of disciples who surrounded Tabitha/Dorcas in her death, and in her rising.

I'm thinking about how they cared for one another, but also for the ways they lifted up, valued her work. There's that line about how they praise her good works and her acts of charity.

As a woman-identifying person, as a mom of youngish kids, as a daughter, as a human,

I'm caught by the tension in that line...

I'm caught by my desire to do good works and also how impossible it can all feel, especially in this time in history: with a the incredibly fast pace of the world, with all the divisions, with the violence, with the pressure to do it all.

A few weeks ago Jane and I heard the musician Carrie Newcomer in concert—it was wonderful.

Carrie grew up Protestant, Methodist and now is a Quaker, and you can hear her faith in her music.

The lyrics of one of her songs has stuck with me, words she borrowed from someone else.

"You can do this hard thing."

You can learn this new skill, you can make this transition,

you can keep going when it's not what you expected..

You can do this hard thing.

I've been holding onto that.

And at the same time I've been thinking of the start of one of Mary Oliver's well-loved poems:

"You do not have to be good.

You do not have to walk on your knees for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.

You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves.

Tell me about your despair, yours, and I will tell you mine."

I've been holding onto the tension of these lines:

You can do this hard thing AND You do not have to be good,

and I've been mulling over the social pressures of Tabitha/Dorcas' communities,

and our communities,

and God's quiet, steady voice, God's grace threading through it all.

A voice that says: You dear one, are powerful, you can do hard things, I will give you the Holy Spirit.

And, you dear one are created in God's good image, you are enough, you are beloved.

The world, the church, has lost two strong voices these last days.

Jean Vanier (Jean VaneA) died on Tuesday.

In 1964 Jean Vanier (VaneA) founded the L'Arche community in France.

Over these years, L'Arche communities have spread around the world:

Communities that make a space for those with and those without intellectual disabilities to live and to work.

In one of his books, VaneA writes, "We feel small and weak,

but we are gathered together to signify the power of God who transforms death into life."

He continues, "That is our hope, that God is doing the impossible: changing death to life inside of each of us, and that perhaps, through our community, each one of us can be agents in the world of this transformation of brokenness into wholeness, and of death into life."

He also is one who said, "We are not called by God to do extraordinary things, but to do ordinary things with extraordinary love."

That's Jean Vanier (VaneA), beloved child of God, held in God's eternal love.

Last Saturday another saint died, Rachel Held Evans, a strange illness, a shock, at age 37.

Rachel was a mom, a writer and speaker,

and she grew up in the more conservative evangelical tradition that she challenged over and over.

With a clear reading of the Bible, she has made a space and empowered people of color, those who are poor, LGBTQ folks, women.

From her place inside and outside of the church, she was a prophet and a pastor for many.

She wrote, "...faith isn't about having everything figured out ahead of time;

faith is about following the quiet voice of God without having everything figured out ahead of time."

That's Rachel Held Evans, beloved child of God, held in God's eternal love.

Hear the voice of Jesus whispering in our ears,

beaconing us into deeper community, inviting us into hard conversation,

calling Tabitha/Dorcas and her community of widows, calling us, to get up, to rise again,

You dear one, Jesus whispers,

are powerful, you can do hard things, the world needs you, I will give you the Holy Spirit.

And, you, dear one, are created in God's good image,

you are enough, you are beloved

you are fiercely, fiercely loved.

Amen.