

## The Grace Of A Gazelle

Acts 9:36-43 (June 19, 2022)

by Paul Matheson

You may wonder why there's a picture of an animal on this morning's bulletin cover. Is this a church service, or a meeting of the Saskatchewan Wildlife Federation? What's happening here? Well, let's sort this out at the very start. Then we can move on to our scripture reading. In fact, the two are related.



“Now in Joppa,” our passage says, “there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas.” Notice that the Bible is doing some translation here: Tabitha is an Aramaic name. Translated into Greek, it changes to Dorcas. *And* if you follow the footnote, and translate it one more time, you will discover that both Tabitha and Dorcas mean Gazelle. So that explains the picture on the bulletin.

Gazelles are a variety of antelope – delicate, beautiful, graceful – just as I imagine the character in our story to be. But we'll say more about that later.

Tabitha was a valued member of the church at Joppa. She must have been a remarkable lady. This is the only place in the entire New Testament where the feminine form of the word “disciple” is used. Of course, many women were followers of Jesus. But to be given that title of “disciple” indicates just how respected she was.

When she died, the whole community was shaken. Here was a faithful sister who had touched the lives of many. She would be dearly missed.



Now it just so happened that the apostle Peter was visiting a neighbouring village. When they learned of it, they sent two men with a request: “Come without delay.”

Why would they call for Peter? Did they want him to do the funeral? Was there pastoral care to be given? Was it important to have this famous church leader among them through this difficult time? Or were they hoping for something more? Well, something more was certainly what they got!



When Peter arrived they took him to the room where the body of Tabitha lay. There she was, surrounded by a group of widows mourning.

In that society, widows were an impoverished lot. Having lost their husbands, they had little means to support themselves. But in the church, they were welcomed and cared for. Tabitha had been a big part of that care. Scripture says “she was devoted to good works and acts of charity.”



Now, as the widows mourn her death, they bring out some of the articles she'd made for them. “Look,” they say to Peter. “See all these beautiful things? See the love that went into every stitch! Oh how we'll miss our Tabitha!”



I remember when my Grandmother died. At her funeral service there was a table set up at the front of the church. On it were placed some things that characterized her life, physical reminders of who she was. There was a Singer sewing machine. My grandmother had sewn clothes for her family. Also on that table, was a nurse's cap. She had cared for many sick and elderly people.

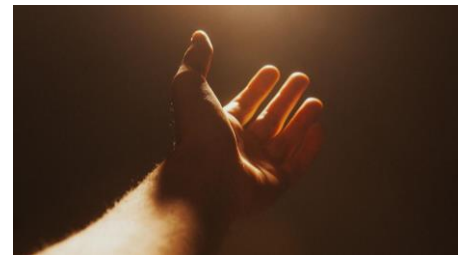
Obviously, Tabitha had touched the lives of her people in a very personal way. But now Peter puts the mourners outside and kneels to pray. Did he pray for those widows? Did he pray for the church? Did he pray for himself – that God would give him words to say? As a pastor, I often find myself in that position.

Before we describe what happened next, it's important to acknowledge this: We all die. Every one of us. Just like Tabitha. We may pray, sometimes, for loved ones to be healed. But it doesn't always happen. And even when it does, it's only for a time.



In our story today, something remarkable takes place. We call it a miracle, because it defies all expectation. And it reveals something about the very nature of God – which all miracles do.

Peter finishes his prayer. Then he turns toward the body – a body that is dead, remember – and say these words: “Tabitha, get up. Tabitha, arise!” She opens her eyes, and sees him there, kneeling beside her. And she sits up!



Peter gives her his hand. Then, he calls for the others. Calls for them, maybe in a bit of a panic, because he too is astonished at what has happened! Did he know she would be raised? Perhaps!

Tabitha, that beautiful gazelle of a lady, is not dead. She's alive. Fully and gloriously alive!



So what does it mean – this resurrection? Well, two things for sure (and probably more). But here's what I see.

First of all, it means the life of Jesus continues through the ministry of his disciples. Here, in the Gospel of Luke *Part Two*, (also known as the book of Acts) what we saw in Jesus, we see now in his disciples: His steadfast love and care for people. His fearless proclamation of the reign of God. His amazing gifts of healing. We even see the dead being raised to life!

Luke shows us that the story of God's love for the world is not finished. And that is important for us to hear! Because the power of sin and death so often seems to us to have the upper hand. We see so much poverty, famine, disease. Devastating conflicts that destroy human life. Power plays and treachery. It's all so commonplace, and persistent.

But this story shows a power at work in the world that brings *healing* – even to lost causes, and situations we think are impossible. If the dead can be raised ... If death is not the final word ... If Easter trumps Good Friday, and transforms human suffering into something redemptive for all creation – well, imagine that! That's gospel, good news!

What does the raising of Tabitha mean? It means we have *hope*. When death works its dark way in our midst, we *still* have hope for God's bright new world.



Tabitha, Dorcas, Gazelle – call her what you want, but she was a *leader* in her church community. She was greatly loved and held in high regard. Why? Because she *cared* for others.

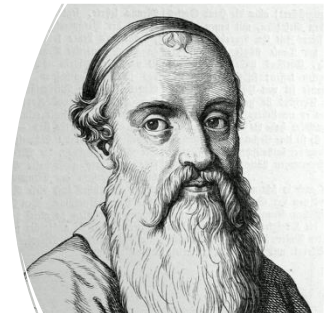
In particular, she cared for those who were down and out, people on the margins. Who was there to mourn her death? The *widows*, that's who! The ones on the receiving end of all her gracious generosity. "See what she's done for us?" they said to the apostle Peter – the first of the disciples, the head of the church.

It's a humbling experience, even for Peter, to meet someone who's lived the life of Jesus. I mean *really* lived it, in all kinds of practical, down-to-earth ways.

So here's the *second* thing the story shows us: The great ones of the church are often very ordinary folk, who go about their business in simple ways and bring much good to the world around them. They don't claim any honours for themselves. They wouldn't think of it. Yet we are grateful for all they do.

Menno Simons said: "True evangelical faith ... cannot lie dormant, but spreads itself out in all kinds of righteousness and fruits of love; ... it clothes the naked; it feeds the hungry; it comforts the sorrowful; it shelters the destitute ..."<sup>1</sup>

In other words, it cares for the very ones that Jesus cares for, the ones that God has *always* cared for. The writer of James says: "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress."



Which brings us to this morning, and the dedication of these quilts that adorn our sanctuary. These and many more – 200 of them, all tallied! Aren't they lovely?



They come from a group that meets downstairs on Wednesday mornings: some from this congregation, some from other churches, some who contribute their work from home. It's an effort that draws them all together. Fellowship is shared. And you can see the fruit that is borne.

"Look at all these," we might say, if Peter ever came to visit us. "See the colours and designs and stitching? See the love tied into the fabric of these creations?"

Who are they for? People in many places of our world. All of them in need, often in distress. Young and old. People in need of warmth. People who need to know that someone, somewhere, *cares* for them. And prays for them. Which we will do today.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/480244-true-evangelical-faith-is-of-such-a-nature-it-cannot>



When I see these quilts, I admire them for their beauty. But to a person who is desperate, they mean so much more.

Tomorrow is World Refugee Day. There are over 82 million forcibly displaced people worldwide, and those numbers have doubled in the last decade. Conflicts, climate disasters, food insecurity – all these have a devastating effect. 1 in 95 people – one percent of humanity – are now displaced. And the numbers are rising!

Last year MCC shipped 45,787 quilts to Burkina Faso, Canada, Ecuador, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Ukraine, the U.S., and Zambia. The women who made these quilts – well, they're not looking for recognition. But we do value them and are grateful for their ministry on our behalf.



[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ukrainian\\_refugees\\_from\\_2022,\\_crossing\\_into\\_Poland.jpg#/media/File:Ukrainian\\_refugees\\_from\\_2022,\\_crossing\\_into\\_Poland.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ukrainian_refugees_from_2022,_crossing_into_Poland.jpg#/media/File:Ukrainian_refugees_from_2022,_crossing_into_Poland.jpg)



The truth is we *all* have gifts to share – time, talent or treasure as we are able. The church is blessed with many gifted people. People willing to serve God and others in simple, practical ways: Using the work of their hands, sewing, baking, fixing something that needs repair, offering a ride, using their skills at organizing, accounting. Always willing to help.

Today we recognize all these saints of God, men *and* women, who follow in the footsteps of Tabitha, Dorcas, Gazelle. There's beauty and grace in what they do. It's *God's* beauty and grace – the power of resurrection working its way in us and in the world. We see death around us. But also see God's gift of life!

There's a powerful life-giving force in the church's ministry, this scripture reminds us. It's the work of God to bring restoration, renewal, re-creation. A power that will, one day, make all things new. On that day, the light and love of God will fill the earth. For now, we sew fabric, and act with generosity and kindness to neighbours near and far.

Glory be to God, the giver of all good gifts. May the love of Christ fill the church. May the life of Christ fill the world. May the Spirit continue to bless us as a community of God's people. Amen.