

Celebrate the Gifts of Women Sunday
March 9, 2025



The Raising of Dorcas by Saint Peter, final sketch, Violet Oakley. La Salle University Art Museum, Philadelphia, PA

SAINTS AND WIDOWS

A Mildly Subversive Reading of Acts 9:36-43

BY REV. DR. LAURIE KRAUS

It's easy to encounter Luke's story of Peter resurrecting Tabitha and think, "Wow, isn't God amazing? Isn't Peter wonderful?" Once merely a scared and impulsive disciple, Peter has become the leader of the church, a man through whom Christ's power—even over death—can be expressed. But the story is also about how in our determination to be an agent of God's love, we sometimes brush past the people who need us or whom we need. Consider Peter, whose mission sometimes got in the way of simply being God's person in the world.

I hope you'll forgive me for drawing attention to it, but the evangelist Luke does have an unfortunate tendency to be a tad dismissive about the women in his church . . . even in this amazing resurrection story about Tabitha. It's odd, since Luke—out of all the gospel writers—is the one who reliably champions the outsiders, the vulnerable or forgotten. But we are human. And sometimes, even when we are passionately committed to the broadest, most expansive vision, we lose sight of the small yet vital truths and practices that inspired us in the first place. We see

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the forest, but not the trees. Maybe that's how in this story about a woman *any* of us would have called a saint, Luke calls the men "saints" and "disciples," but the women, merely "widows."

We all have saints in our lives; and we also have widows. We have people we see, and people we don't. Strangely, sometimes, even when we think we *are* "seeing" them, we really aren't. They are objects of our charity, an obligation we need to support. Or they're supporting characters, a set of "extras" filling backstage, atmospheric background to enhance the primary narrative, which is the hero's journey. With so much need and hurt in the world, it's understandable that sometimes we miss seeing the whole picture. Yet, as I read this story I wonder: what does it take for us to move beyond our preconceptions and ordering of reality to see that "widows" are also disciples and saints? And that quiet work in communities that is invisible to us can help us refocus our understanding of how God's love is at work in the world?

Peter experiences this shift when he takes time in his busy schedule to make a pastoral call. As he arrives at the house where Tabitha has died, he encounters a community, described as grieving widows, who are eager to show him who their friend Dorcas/Tabitha really was. They want to share her amazing legacy of generosity and to welcome the apostle to their proud and strong community, formed out of giving and deep solidarity. "All the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them" (Acts 9:39b).

This is an extraordinary little sentence, put in as an aside when Luke really just wants us to rush up the stairs, on our way to the juicy core of the story Luke

thought he was telling—the resurrection of Tabitha. Peter was sure he knew what he was there to do; and with little thought and less care he ushers the women out of the room so he can pray. What happened then, when he finally stilled his heart and began to listen?

As Peter prayed by Tabitha's deathbed, perhaps he heard the voices of Tabitha's friends, as they figured out who needed clothes, and which families, food. Who was lonely, and which one had something to celebrate. Maybe he walked through the doorway into thanks, and was grateful simply to be. To see. To listen. To set his agenda aside, and let others take him where God needed him to go. Is *that* the moment, do you suppose, when Peter changed, and the whole church turned itself around with him? When he stopped seeing those women as "widows" and began to see them as "disciples" like himself?

When Tabitha rises up, so does Peter. Together they go back to the saints and widows—who now, Peter sees, had actually been disciples and saints all along. Of course, the story doesn't tell us what went on in the heart of Peter as he prayed by the bedside of Tabitha, but it does tell us, almost in an aside, that directly after he leaves her house, he stays with Simon, a tanner. The observant Jew Peter was *before* would never have become ritually impure by staying with a tanner . . . but now, he does, because once God starts to open us up, there's no going back. And not too long after that, Peter has a dream, a Roman soldier arrives, and the next thing you know, water and the Spirit are splashing everywhere. They are all baptized, and a room that had been crowded with widows and "others" suddenly became a communion of saints (10:34–48).

A Service for the Worship of God

Call to Worship

(If desired, fill the font or play the sound of splashing water as the Call to Worship is spoken.)

In the morning of creation, when chaos reigned and the earth was formless and void, the Spirit of God moved over the face of the waters and whispered, “Come, you are welcome in this place.”

In the dry and desperate desert where the people fled, seeking freedom, the daughters of Miriam danced, water burst forth out of the rock of Horeb and Holy Wisdom beckoned: “Come, you are welcome in this place.”

By the waters of Babylon, where exiles wept bitter tears and could not find their voices, the Spirit of justice spoke: “Come, you who long for home, you are welcome in this place.”

Out of the River Jordan, where the prophet called, brother Jesus arose, dripping, from the waters of baptism, calling: “Come and follow me—you are welcome in this place.”

Near the crystal river that flows through the new Jerusalem, by the tree of life, whose leaves are for the healing of the nations, the Spirit and the bride say, “Come, all you who are thirsty, drink from the springs of the water of life and know you are welcome in this place.”

Let us worship God!

Hymn

“Here in This Place” (GTG¹ 401)

Prayer of Confession

All: Weaver God, we come to you, or—more the truth—you find us, disconnected and out of sorts. We are disheartened by our failures, discouraged by our weakness, and little that we do seems worthy of your grace. Restore our fortunes. Restore our future. Weave for us the tapestry on which our lives are stretched. Give us patience with the endless back and forth of shuttle, hand and effort. We look too closely, seeing only strands and knots and snarled threads of too-much-trying or none-at-all. Grant us eyes to see the whole of which we are a part. In the end, we ask for gentleness with ourselves, acceptance of our less than perfect ways. We pray that what we do and what you weave form patterns clear to all, of mercy in the warp of it and love throughout. Amen.²

Assurance of God’s Love

One: Good people, most royal
greening verdancy,

Rooted in the sun you shine with radiant light.

In this circle of earthly existence you shine so finely,

It surpasses understanding.

God hugs you. You are encircled by the arms of the mystery of God.³

Siblings in Christ, children of creation, believe the good news:

All: In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven!

Old Testament Reading

Psalms 131

New Testament Reading

Acts 9:36–45

Sermon/Meditation

Consider using one of the following poems to highlight how ordinary moments from the lives of contemporary women align with Tabitha’s ministry. These two poems provide a supportive counterpoint to the preaching text from the book of Acts, lifting up moments of transfiguration experienced when we see and receive the gifts of women.

“Ladies Come”⁴

by James Autry

Ladies come with sad faces
and baskets of sweets
teacakes, pecan pies, puddings,
memories
and we choose and they serve
telling stories and God blessing the children

*I declare that Miss Anne
was the sweetest Christian person
in the world*

Saying all the things to be said
doing all the things to be done
like orderly spirits
freshening beds from the grieving night

poking up fires gone cold
filling the table and sideboard
then gathering there to urge and
cajole
as if the dead rest easier on our full
stomachs

*Lord how Miss Anne would have loved
that country ham*

No sadness so great it cannot be fed
away
by the insistent spirits

*That banana cake is her very own
recipe*

*I remember how she loved my
spoon bread*

She canned the berries in this cobbler

and suddenly we are transformed
and eat and smile and thank you
and the ladies nod and know they
have done well again
in time of need
And the little girls watch and learn
and we forget the early spring
cemetery
and the church with precious
memories
and farther along we do understand it
the payments and repayments
of all the ladies that were and are
and we pray ever will be. Amen.

OR

“Wise Women Also Came”⁵
by Jan Richardson

Wise women also came
the fire burned
in their wombs
long before they saw
the flaming star
in the sky.
They walked in shadows,
trusting the path
would open
under the light of the moon.

Wise women also came,
seeking no directions,

no permission
from any king
They came
by their own authority
their own desire,
their own longing
They came in quiet,
spreading no rumors,
sparking no fears
to lead
to innocents’ slaughter,
to their sister Rachel’s
inconsolable lamentations.

Wise women also came,
and they brought
useful gifts:
water for labor’s washing,
fire for warm illumination,
a blanket for swaddling.

Wise women also came,
at least three of them,
holding Mary in the labor,
crying out with her
in the birth pangs,
breathing ancient blessings
into her ear.

Wise women also came,
and they went,
as wise women always do,
home a different way.

Hymn

“Though I May Speak” (CtG 693)
“Come and Seek the Ways of Wis-
dom” (CtG 174)

Prayers of the People

The Lord’s Prayer

A feminist recasting⁶

Our mother, you are everywhere
Hallowed be your many names
Your fullness come
Your desires be known
In our lives as they are in your heart
Give us today our daily bread
And forgive us when we cause harm

As we forgive those who injure us
Urge us toward greater wisdom and
compassion
And deliver us from false thoughts
and desires
For the heart, the whole, and the radi-
ance of life are yours
and ours, now and forever. Amen.

Hymn

“A Prophet-Woman Broke a Jar”
(GtG 201)

Blessing and Benediction

Life is a precious thing to me,
and a little thing. . . .
And the world is a little thing
But it is in God’s ever keeping,
it is in God’s ever loving
it is in God’s ever making.

How should anything be amiss?
Yes, all shall be well
And all will be well.
And thou shalt see thyself
that all manner of thing shall be
well.⁷

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Notes

1. GtG indicates *Glory to God! The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville, KY: Geneva, 2013).
2. Pat Kozak and Janet Schaffran, *Life Prayers: from around the world*. Edited by Elizabeth Roberts and Elias Amidon (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 1996), 93.
3. Hildegard of Bingen, quoted in *Life Prayers*, p. 14.
4. James Autry, *Nights under a Tin Roof* (Oxford, MS: Yoknapatawpha, 1985), ?.
5. Jan Richardson, *Night Visions*, (Cleveland, OH: United Church, 1998), 94–95.
6. A feminist recasting of the Lord’s Prayer by Martha Weathers.
7. Julian of Norwich, “Revelations of Divine Love,” or “Showings.”