

A close-up photograph of pink cherry blossoms with green leaves, serving as a background for the title.

STARTING AGAIN

ACTS 9:36-43

Catching Up on the Story

Over the last few chapters, the author of Acts has introduced several characters: Stephen, Philip, and Saul/Paul. In addition to the cast of characters who began the book of Acts, these new characters will serve not only to drive the narrative forward but also to drive the spread of the Gospel. Peter's storyline was prominent at the beginning of the book.

However, the attention has shifted away from him as we are introduced to Saul/Paul. Luke, the author of Acts, will now shift the attention back to highlight the two parallel missions in Acts: Peter's mission to the Jews and Paul's to the Gentiles.

Luke tells us that while Paul is undergoing his conversion from persecutor of the church to apostle, the churches in places like Judea, Galilee, and Samaria are being built up because of the Holy Spirit's work in their midst.

In this climate, Peter travels the countryside. He makes his way to Lydda, where he heals a man who has been paralyzed for eight years.

This second—separate yet connected—healing story begins with describing a disciple who was dearly beloved in her community. We should note here that Luke likes to tell stories in pairs.

The two stories include men and women who are healed, which points to Luke's desire to indicate that the good news and all aspects of salvation, including the healings being told about here, are intended for women as well as men (Witherington III, 328).

Today, it might seem foreign to us that women would not receive the full benefits of salvation. Remember that during the time of Acts, women were not on equal ground with men.

Indeed, in a whole host of countries today, including at times ours, women are still not on level footing with men. Luke believes, as I believe Jesus did and Paul will, that women are full recipients of God's good and full salvation.

Women will not be the only ones who will be fully included in God's Kingdom. In the very next chapter, we will see God's plan to include the Gentiles as well.

Acts 9:36–43

³⁶ In Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha (in Greek her name is Dorcas). Her life overflowed with good works and compassionate acts on behalf of those in need. ³⁷ About that time, though, she became so ill that she died. After they washed her body, they laid her in an upstairs room. ³⁸ Since Lydda was near Joppa, when the disciples heard that Peter was there, they sent two people to Peter. They urged, "Please come right away!" ³⁹ Peter went with them. Upon his arrival, he was taken to the upstairs room. All the widows stood beside him, crying as they showed the tunics and other clothing Dorcas made when she was alive.

⁴⁰ Peter sent everyone out of the room, then knelt and prayed. He turned to the body and said, "Tabitha, get up!" She opened her eyes, saw Peter, and sat up. ⁴¹ He gave her his hand and raised her up. Then he called God's holy people, including the widows, and presented her alive to them. ⁴² The news spread throughout Joppa, and many put their faith in the Lord. ⁴³ Peter stayed for some time in Joppa with a certain tanner named Simon (CEB).

Tabitha Dies

Tabitha, as her name was in the Aramaic language, or Dorcas, as her name was in Greek (both of which mean gazelle), was a woman who was greatly devoted to good works and acts of charity.

The Greek text literally tells us that she is "full of good works and charitable giving." That is, the good works and charitable giving that she did were not just something that occupied her time. They were in her. It was her nature as a follower of Christ that spilled out of her for the benefit of her community.

During the time that Peter was in Lydda, Tabitha became ill and died. After her friends and family had washed her body, a part of the normal burial practices, they laid her body in an upper room.

Here, we must infer that Tabitha was a person of means. She was likely a widow who, upon the death of her husband, remained in her house. It is also likely that her house became the meeting place of the community of believers in Joppa (Witherington III, 331-32).

It is curious that her friends only washed her body. The next step in the burial practice was to anoint the body with oils and perfumes. They have not done this. Instead, they call for Peter to come to Joppa. Lydda is not that far from Joppa.

life through the power of Christ's own resurrection.

You and I, who have been raised from the dead, like Tabitha, find now that it is our place to perform acts of resurrection in the lives of those around us.

This does not mean that we will physically raise people from the dead. It does mean that we become individuals and a community of faith through which people are continually released from the power of death to new life in Christ.

We know what this looks like. We can already see it happening around us. The drug addict receives care and is supported in their quest to be free.

The naked are clothed.

The hungry are fed.

The homeless find permanent shelter.

Those mourning are comforted.

Children are taught and told the story, over and over again, of how we were once slaves to sin and death, but now we are alive in Christ.

He is risen, he is risen indeed! Let us go forth to proclaim this truth to our world in word and deed!

Works Cited

Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998).

We must assume that the community of faith in Joppa was not calling Peter to officiate at Tabitha's funeral or to comfort the community during the loss of such an important person, but that they expected Peter to do something tangible about her death. They expected a resurrection.

Peter Arrives

Upon hearing the request to come without delay, Peter gets up and travels to Joppa. Upon his arrival, they take Peter immediately to the upstairs room where Tabitha's body has been laid. As they are all gathered around Tabitha, the community's widows, for whom Tabitha had done so much good, show Peter all the things she has made for them, including the clothing she has made.

It's likely that these widows, who had benefited so much from Tabitha, were sad not only because they had lost someone who had cared deeply about them, but also because they now had lost an advocate.

During this time, widows were very vulnerable. If they had no family or no male to provide for them, they quickly became destitute and often fell into prostitution. Tabitha was one of the only people who took care of these widows.

Peter then puts everyone out of the room. He is about to do something about Tabitha's death, but would like privacy to do so.

The next thing Peter does is to kneel down to pray. Peter has learned that if God is going to work through him, he must dedicate himself to prayer.

When he finishes praying—we are not told for how long—he turns to Tabitha's body and simply says, "Tabitha, get up."

That instant, Tabitha opened her eyes, as if she had only been asleep, and with Peter's help, she got out of bed. Peter then calls the believers and all the widows whom Tabitha had so greatly helped to come and see that Tabitha is now alive.

This miraculous story spreads throughout Joppa and the surrounding area. For his part, Peter remains in Joppa, staying with a certain tanner named Simon.

Discussion Questions

Read the text aloud. Then, read the text to yourself quietly. Read it slowly, as if you were very unfamiliar with the story.

1. Luke tells us that Tabitha was “devoted to good works and acts of charity.” The original Greek means something like, “full of good works and charitable acts.” What might it look like to be “full of good works?” What does this imply about the inner state of a person?
2. Tabitha’s friends wash her body and lay her in an upper room. The washing of the body was a normal burial practice along with anointing it with oils and perfumes. Why don’t they anoint the body also? Why would they then send for Peter?
3. Why would the widows of the town stand around and show Peter all of the things that Tabitha had made for her? What do you think they were hoping would happen?
4. What does Peter do before he tells Tabitha to get up? Why was it important that Peter do that? On the importance of this act, see Luke 9:37-45.
5. Tabitha is raised, not only for herself, but also for the sake of the needy community around her. How is her story an example for us who have been raised to new life through our baptism?

6. Have we been baptized and brought to new life for our own sake? How then should this shape how we act as individuals and as a church?

So What?

It should be no surprise to us, so soon after Easter, that we encounter a story where the dead have been raised. That is, after all, what Easter is all about: new life, life from death, victory over death. The believing community, our believing community, has announced (as we do each year, indeed each Sunday) that death has been defeated. It has not won; it will not win. Life has the final say.

What’s so special about this specific act of Christ-empowered resurrection is how it ripples throughout the Joppa community.

Sure, word spreads all through the town and probably the region. More importantly, the ripples that emanate from this event are the ripples of the continued work of love and service that Tabitha will do with her newly restored life.

Luke doesn’t tell us that this is what happens, but we can imagine that Tabitha will not stop the life-giving mission she was on before her death.

Indeed, we can imagine that her efforts will only intensify. The resurrection power of God tends to have that effect on people.

Tabitha has not been raised from the dead for her good. No, she has been raised from the dead so that she might, in her own way, through the manufacture of garments for the lowest of the lowly, be an agent of resurrection to those around her.

Not many of us, if any at all, have been physically dead and then brought back to life. However, we have all been dead in our sins and transgressions. By virtue of our baptism, we have died with Christ and have been raised to new