

Psalm 23 ~ Acts 9:36-43

Tabitha, Get Up!

4th Sunday of Easter ~ Infant Baptism ~ Mother's Day ~ May 8, 2022

The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis

Introduction

Rarely are women named in the Bible. Even more rarely do we read in the Bible about a woman who is named not only in one language, but two. Yet this is how our story begins today. It's about a disciple named "Tabitha," an Aramaic name, whom we are told was also known as "Dorcas", the Greek version of the same name. This suggests that she must have been known and loved across two different cultures, known and loved and revered by two groups of people with two different points of view and ways of thinking. Another rarity, then and now. One final unique and rare feature I will point out in the story you are about to hear, is that Tabitha, also known and loved as Dorcas, is identified as a "disciple." It is not apparent in the English translation, but the Greek word that is translated as "disciple" in verse 36, is the only place where the feminine form of the word, (*mathetria*) it is found in the New Testament.

There is mystery here. Unanswerable questions like: how did Tabitha become a disciple? Nor do we really know her marital or social status. Not important. What we *do know* is that Tabitha lived her life in the model of Psalm 23. The Good Shepherd was the voice she listened to and followed. Her right paths were life-restoring. Her tangible love and care for the vulnerable widows, were evidenced by the beautiful clothes her widow friends were likely wearing as they gathered around her body. If only Tabitha's kind of discipleship: boundary-crossing, and action-based, was not so rare. May her story work upon our hearts and minds today as I read Acts 9:36-43.

Sermon

It was the autoimmune disease of Multiple Sclerosis that forced cellist Jacqueline du Pré to stop performing at the age of 28. Already she was regarded as one of the most gifted cellists the world had ever known. I was 16 years old in 1973, the year Jacqueline du Pré was forced to stop performing because of her MS. I vividly remember my utter dismay when we heard that her USA tour that included a performance with the Wichita Symphony, to which we had tickets, had been cancelled.

By then I had been studying the cello for seven years and was a definite groupie. Her meteoric rise as a young, British, female cellist with long, blond straight hair captivated me. I practically wore the grooves off of the two vinyl records I had of her playing the concertos of Hayden, Boccherini, and Elgar. Remember how, back in the day, you could set up your stereo for the needle to automatically play the record over and over again? Okay, she was my idol. I loved the way she played with such energy and radiant joy. I wanted to play just like her. Of course, that didn't really happen. But if you listen to one of her recordings you will hear her extraordinary approach to the instrument for yourself.

Jacqueline du Pré entered her first cello competition when she was only six years old. As the story goes, at this first cello competition, six-year-old Jackie she ran down the hall, carrying

her cello above her head, with a big grin on her face. A man standing in the hall surmised that her grin must be a sign of relief at having finished performing. So, he said to her, "I see you've just had your chance to play!" To which she responded, "No, no, *I'm just about to.*"ⁱ Yes, her cup even at age six, was running over with the sure knowledge, that she had all she needed. And even better than that: she was about to get to share it with flourish.

As talented as she was, Jackie did not get to this moment on her own. All of you who have young musicians in your family, know this first hand. She had been raised, nurtured, and supported within a family and a community that believed in what she could do. No matter how outlandish or outsized. When interviewed about her choice to play such a large and challenging instrument she said. "When I told my family I wanted to play the cello, they could have fobbed me off with a recorder, but they didn't!" Outlandish, outsized, but exactly the right path for young Jackie. Yes, she was born to play the cello and her loved ones made that happen for her. Even when forced through the valley of her heart breaking, performance-ending disease, that became more and more difficult to manage, she continued to teach. "*I have to share it,*" she said in an interview. She had not given up. With the love and support of a helping community, she "got up" and continued to live into the fullness of what was "just about to" happen.

I believe many Wisconsinites displayed this same attitude yesterday. But it wasn't in anticipation of a musical performance. It was the first Saturday in May: opening day of the fishing season! Perhaps all of our most avid anglers are out there casting in a lake right now. Those who don't fish, sometimes wonder about those who do. Sitting in a boat all day, casting, waiting. Why? I think part of it, is that voice inside which says, "*I'm just about to catch a fish.*" That spirit fuels the fun, the suspense, the lure (if you will) of fishing. One more striking example also occurred yesterday at Churchill Downs. Yes, at the Kentucky Derby. You've likely heard the surprising news that the horse named Rich Strike, the 80-1 long shot won the race. Apparently, no one saw it coming. Watch the race, if you haven't already. Listen to the commentators. No one is even talking about Rich Strike. Until the last seconds. However, I believe that Sonny Leon, the jockey, and perhaps the horse, Rich Strike, at the starting gate heard that voice and somehow knew, "*I'm just about to*" run this race and win it.

In the Book of Acts, where Luke tells fantastic stories of the Holy Spirit working tangible wonders, Peter's raising of Tabitha, is no exception. The whole book is chock full of this spirit leading, surging, surprising and shocking those who experience the "*I'm just about to*" power of the resurrection. Today's story hinges on a community that had not yet given up on Tabitha's life. Even though she had died, her community did not believe this was not the end of her story. The first hint, is that they after she died, they washed her and laid her in a room, but they did not anoint her body, as was the custom with the corpse of a loved one. Perhaps this decision not to anoint her body signaled the confidence her friends had that Peter could do something to save her. The second sign was the urgency with which the two disciples dispatched their message to Peter: "Do not delay. Come quickly." Even though she had died, they did not believe that was the end of her story. The final shadow of death's dark valley comes for us all at some point, but in today's story, this community knew otherwise. They believed as a community that the Spirit was about to revive and restore her.

In the baptism we just had for Jamie, did you notice all the promises that we made? The children made, two, plus the parents' promises, two, and the congregation's promises, two, that comes to a total of six promises that we just made, as a family and community to share in the raising of Jamie spiritually. You may not have realized it, but we all promised to be the people who say to Jamie, to Dottie, to Ted and Kelsey and to one another, "Get up!" We are Easter people, called to share in the power of the resurrection to revive and restore: one another, our church, our community and our world, and all creation. We need one another to be the voice of the Good Shepherd. That is how we help each other to live in the light of God's providence and protection so poetically proclaimed in Psalm 23.

Did you know that Psalm 23:3, "He restoreth my soul" can also be translated, "He causes me to come back?" Yes: God's power through others to raise people from the dead did not begin with Jesus. Recall the story of Elijah's raising the widow's son; and Elisha raising the Shunammite woman's son. The work of Jesus, the work of Peter, continue the work of the prophets before them. And so can we. As Christ followers, we share in this same power made known through the resurrection. Work that cannot be done alone. Easter people know there is no such thing as a "self-made man" or woman or person. That is not a thing in all of God's good creation. We were made by God. Not by ourselves. And we make it through each day by God's grace, made known through one another. Even Jesus did not raise himself from the dead. God raised Jesus. Nor did Tabitha raise herself back to life. Peter, with the help of the Holy Spirit and Tabitha's community of disciples, raised her. She heard the Good Shepherd's voice calling to her through Peter's voice, "Tabitha, Get up!"

The same verb in the Greek that was used to tell the story of Jesus' resurrection. The word in Greek means literally, "again, get up!" Perhaps you know some one or who needs to hear those very words, today. Someone for whom the bright early Spring sun did not penetrate the death's dark shadows through which they are walking. Someone, perhaps who hears other voices more loudly. Voices of self-doubt, self-destruction. Voices of fear and guilt. Voices that tell us we are empty, no good. That we need more. Those are not the Good Shepherd. Those are not the voice of the one who calls us to "again, get up! The voice that says, "I am about to do a new thing" through you that only you can do.

I just learned a fascinating fact about sheep: Every day they approach their shepherd to be touched on the nose. This is the sheep's way of acknowledging their shepherd and an opportunity for the shepherd to acknowledge them in return. No one ever tells sheep to do this. They do it instinctually.ⁱⁱⁱ God knows, we face danger, destruction, and darkness lurk all around and within us. Our scriptures are infused with the reality of ever-present danger. We find it at the theological center and heart of the 23rd Psalm. Yes, there is ever-present danger, even while under the Shepherd's care. Even while following the right paths. The question isn't avoiding danger, nor is the goal to create a safe life. The question is to whom will we entrust our care? My fellow sheep: Whom do we approach to have our nose touched? To whom we really go to get the answers and the direction that our souls need in order to be revived and restored? Is the Lord really your shepherd?

Last Wednesday, when I was over at the Krohn's home to talk about Jamie's baptism, I watched Dottie, his big 2-year-old sister, do a whole-body leap from the couch into her mother's arms and lap: not once or twice, but at least 10 or 15 times. She would get this big grin and throw her entire body vaguely in the direction of her mom. (Don't worry, her dad, Ted, was holding Jamie at that point.) The only word to describe this move is "fearless." Which according to her parents, Ted and Kelsey, apparently describes her approach to life at this point. It reminded me of six-year-old Jackie as she got ready to play her ¼ size cello, for the judges at her first competition.

I will close this sermon, not with a poem or a prayer as I often do, but rather with a joke. It starts with this question: What's the best time to plant a tree? I read it in Richard Powers' Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *Overstory*, (an amazing book I highly recommend, by the way) Here's the joke: So, what's the best time to plant a tree? Twenty years ago. What's the second-best time? Right now. I share this with you, not just because the Green Team has tree seedlings for you to pick up on your way out of church this morning and plant, or give to a friend to plant. I'm wrapping up this sermon with this joke because it speaks of a deep truth that I hope you will take with you today. (Along with a tree seedling.) We can and we must share this life-giving, life-restoring hope now. Today. What is the Spirit *just about to* do through you, through us?

This is the day the Lord has made for us to walk together in the right path of the one who came to give life to us all.

ⁱ Kirk Byron Jones, Reflections on the Lectionary, *Christian Century*, April 22, 2020, p. 23.

ⁱⁱT. Denise Anderson, Living the Word," *Sojourners* May 2022, p. 48.