

Sermon, Fourth Sunday of Easter, Year C, Acts 9:36-43 – Tabitha

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8 May 2022

You all know I'm a lawyer, but you may not know that lawyers have a thing about teeth. They like the law to have teeth, to bite on problems and make things happen. They want the law to have something relevant to say. So, when I put my Deacon hat on, I take a little bit of my lawyerly identity with me and approach readings with questions about teeth and bite too. (I ask other questions too of course, not just lawyerly ones!)

So where are the teeth in Tabitha's story? What does it bite on? How is this reading relevant to me or you or our community or world now?

Is there something/Can we find something in this story of a good woman who dies, then is brought back to life by Peter that speaks to us as we look forward to visiting HomeGround next door this morning?

I think there are three elements of Tabitha's story which have resonance for us and our relationship with HomeGround – community, faith and resurrection/restoration.

### *Community*

Looking at community first. Community is a huge part of Tabitha's story. Her resurrection and the path to it is deeply rooted in faith and community. She has lived a life of service to her community. When she dies, her community sends for Peter, asking him to come without delay. Tabitha's community clearly believes that Peter's relationship with Tabitha and with them is such that he will respond to their request and come. Peter returns to Tabitha in Joppa, an acknowledgment of his relationship with Tabitha and her community.

When Peter arrives, Tabitha's community is there weeping. Peter brings Tabitha back to life and then calls out to the saints and widows of her community, showing her to be alive. Tabitha's restoration to life is significant not just for her as an individual but for her community. She has been restored to them.

Tabitha's resurrection is all about community. It's a story about her life of giving to community, her community's grief when she dies, the action the community takes in response to her death and her restoration to them when she is brought back to life. It's about people who are woven together by relationship, people who rely on each other, who call on each other and find their calls responded to.

This story urges us to remember that as Christians we are called to community - to be in community with each other here at St Matthews, with our neighbour, the City Mission and her people, and with the world. It reminds us that our restoration and healing should also occur in community. It asks us to imagine what community might look for us, here and now and how we might make it real.

### *Faith*

Shifting our focus to faith - faith is a strong part of Tabitha's story. Since Easter the readings have focussed on faith – what it means to have faith, how hard it is to have faith, how much we long for evidence, proof, that what we believe is real, how faith can be made real in the world.

Faith comes at us from all sides in this story. We're told that Tabitha is a disciple so we can be sure she's a woman of faith. It's worth noting that this is the only time in the

New Testament the feminine of the Greek word for disciple – mathētria<sup>[1]</sup> – is used which suggests Tabitha was a significant figure in the Christian community.

She's described as a woman "devoted to good works and acts of charity." We can reasonably read in a link between her faith and her good works.

The disciples' response when Tabitha dies suggests that they have faith in the impossible and act on their faith. They know that Tabitha is dead, but they ask Peter to come urgently, they dare to believe that Tabitha's death is not final. They dare to believe that Peter could somehow transform the situation.

Peter's faith stands out too. The two men sent to Peter ask him to come to Joppa without delay and Peter gets up and goes with them. Maybe he knew what was expected of him, maybe he was worried about what was expected of him, maybe not—we're not told the details – but he got up and went to Tabitha, nevertheless.

### *Resurrection and the City Mission*

And then the theme of resurrection. There's something significant about the path to resurrection that this story gives us. Tabitha dies. The community sends for Peter. Peter responds by coming to them. Peter shuts himself in the room where Tabitha has been laid out and prays, then directs Tabitha by name to get up. She opens her eyes and sits up. Peter gives her his hand and helps her up. Then he calls to the community and shows her to be alive.

We can hear the echoes in this story of Jesus' raising of Jairus' daughter, and his own resurrection.

This morning we're going next door to visit HomeGround, the City Mission's new building. I don't want to force a parallel between Tabitha's story and the City Mission but there might be one! Tabitha was devoted to good works and acts of charity – think the Mission. She was known by both an Aramaic name – Tabitha – and a Greek name - Dorcas – which suggests that she moved between the Hebrew and Greek communities, working across cultures like the Mission. She provided practical support to her community – the widows weeping at her death showed the tunics and clothing she had made for them. A parallel with the housing and practical support that the Mission will provide at Home Ground perhaps.

We could think about Tabitha's resurrection in the narrow literal sense of being brought back to life, but I prefer to see it in the broader sense of faith leading restoration or transformation, of something that has been lost being restored or made new, or being given fresh insight or energy to go on, sometimes in a new direction but sometimes in the same direction, just deeper and further.

The story of Tabitha's resurrection speaks to what it means to be resurrected or restored - the hard work and the bounty of faith.

In terms of resurrection, Tabitha's story might reveal to us that we too have had a taste, a glimpse, of what it means to be raised from the dead, when suffering and loss have opened out into new life for us. Tabitha's resurrection doesn't mean that all our difficulties will be solved, there's still the problem of why our infinitely loving God allows us to suffer and I'm not the one to untangle that knotty problem. But given the undeniable existence of suffering, the story of Tabitha points to the possibility of restoration and transformation alongside that suffering.

I'm not being glib or Pollyanna-ish here about suffering either. It's real and awful and can drive us to despair. I've had my own tastes of it, and you will have had too. The world is full of it – the suffering caused by the war in Ukraine for both the Ukrainians and the Russian soldiers and their families, the violence which permeates Aotearoa New Zealand's society.

Like us, the Mission's people have also experienced suffering and loss. We share that with them and they with us but Tabitha's resurrection points to the hope of restoration or transformation for all of us.

Don't think either that I'm trying to brush any of this aside or to pretend that it's easy to have faith and see the potential for restoration when we're in the grips of terrible suffering. I'm not. Rather I am suggesting that the elements of Tabitha's story – faith, community and action working together - may point us towards restoration.

The Mission and HomeGround's very practical, hands-on work (like Tabitha's work sewing clothes for the widows) is part of that restoration for the many people it serves, part of the Biblical story of realising the Kingdom of God here on earth, part of making Easter joy real.

Finally, there are questions for us, the people of St Matthews. How will we be part of the Mission's community? How will we relate to HomeGround's people? How will we build real relationship and community with the people who live and work at HomeGround? How vulnerable are we prepared to be? Are we ready for the hard work and the joy of forming community and being part of restoration for the Mission's people? How will we demonstrate our relevance, our teeth and bite!

Amen

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[1] μαθήτρια