

A GAZELLE OF CHRISTIAN LIVING

[Acts 9:36-43](#)

Fourth Sunday of Easter, c; April 25, 2010

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Prayer: Startle us with your truth, O God. Startle us as you did those first disciples trying to figure out if the good news was really Good News, with a capital G and capital N. And then, move us with your truth, O God. Move us as you did those first disciples to care for each other, and to love each other, and to embrace life with hope and courage. Amen.

It has become fashionable these days to use the Catholic Church as our favorite whipping boy, and for good reason. It seems stuck in a patriarchal rut, addicted to male domination, celibacy, and rigid hierarchies, which has led to scandal, cover-up, and the clumsiest self-defense since Watergate. ¹ To paraphrase Senator Howard Baker during the Watergate hearings the primary question seems to be: “What did the pope know, and when did he know it?”

It is such a shame for so many reasons, not the least of which is that Jesus himself was anything but dogmatic, focusing instead on the needy, the hungry, “the least of these,” the Kingdom of God, rather than tightly constructed dogmas. He was the Light that came in the shadowy darkness, and went out of his way to engage women and children and treat them with respect.

But another reason this is so tragic is that it takes attention away from the Catholic Church that I admire so deeply, far away from the walled confines of the Vatican. This is the grass roots church that does not get nearly the credit it deserves, because these laborers in the vineyard are not after power or status or fame. They just want to do the Lord’s work.

Like Sister Diane, who we met last week here, and who has labored lovingly in a small, poor village in southern Mexico for 23 years, teaching, praying, and helping our own Jerre Freeman bring sight to the blind, and helping us bring clean water to the thirsty.

Or like the nuns and priests toiling in obscurity in Congo, feeding and educating children amidst the terror of civil war. Or the priest in Brazil fighting AIDS who said that if he were pope, he would build a condom factory in the Vatican to save lives. Or the Maryknoll Sisters in Central America and the Cabrini Sisters in Africa.

And just down Belvedere, one of our neighboring churches is a wonderful parish, Immaculate Conception, with a priest, Father Val, who is not only one of the best preachers I know, but a man of deep compassion, humor, and faith. Worship there and you will see members of Central Gardens worshipping alongside Vietnamese and Latino Catholics.

All of which is to say that the church is a divine/human proposition. Sometimes we fail miserably being beacons of light and hope and love, but other times, there are those who are a little lower than angels, doing divine work.

And its always been like that. Read some of these vignettes of the first century church, and you'll find followers of Christ behaving ... all too human. They fought over what kind of food they should eat, who they should eat it with, how many Old Testament laws they should follow, sexuality, economics, you name it. As Anne Tyler once said, "It's a shame that so close upon the heels of Christ come the Christians."

But if we take a closer look we find in this Book of the Acts of the Apostles a story that somebody felt ought to be told to future generations about the church in its earliest days, so that it could look back and laugh at its naiveté, and marvel at its idealism, and be inspired again by its teachers and saints.

Against the grand backdrop of the travels of Peter and Paul and their preaching and imprisonments, there is this one photo in the album over which Luke, the author, lingers. The story is that of the raising of one of the saints in Joppa, Tabitha was her name; in Greek—Dorcas, whom Peter raised from the dead.

Peter was in Lydda visiting at First Church there, had already healed Aeneas, when word came to him that Dorcas was failing. "Come to us without delay," was the message he got, so he came as quickly as he could.

When he arrived in Joppa where Dorcas lived, the scene at her house was one of despair. It seems as though Dorcas had succumbed to her illness and lay lifeless in her bed.

The wake was underway. Her friends have lovingly taken her body, washed it, and prepared it for burial, and then returned it to her bed for a viewing. The small house was overflowing with mourners, people just couldn't express enough the emptiness they felt without her. They came bearing the gestures of love for her family that their hearts wanted to express. And so the table in the dining room was jammed with plates bearing homemade banana bread and casseroles, potato salad and sliced cold cuts, brownies and a chocolate coconut cake; there were jello molds and cut vegetables with dip.

Her friends, mostly widows stood around helpless. They had brought with them their prized possessions, frocks and coats and blouses, things Dorcas had made on her sewing machine, necessities and niceties that Dorcas had provided them when their husbands died and they needed some help to get by.

One woman showed Peter the sweater that Dorcas had knitted one cold January when the evenings had a bite to them. Another kept running her fingers over the layette Dorcas had made for her youngest when she was born. Another placed at her feet of her body the afghan Dorcas had crocheted for the woman's mother so that the aging woman could put it over her lap and sit by the fire all cozy in the evening.

Every one of them seemed to have a story of how Dorcas' life had touched theirs, of some kindness rendered, some selfless act of devotion that she had offered. Dorcas, whose name means *gazelle*, was a tireless disciple whose devotion to others had inspired a network of welfare support and emotional under-girding. And you can see her almost darting about like a gazelle, first

here and then there, looking after others, taking food, dropping by with some flowers, spending an afternoon with some elderly friend so that she might have some company, or sitting with a grieving widow telling her how lost she now felt in the midst of her loneliness.

In short, she was a simple woman who decided she could do some good in her life for people in her village who needed some help. And in her simple way of doing what was kindly and right she participated in the gift of eternal life. For it was resurrection faith that fueled her, and Easter strength that sustained her as in her own way she helped to make that little town of Joppa a bit more like the Kingdom of heaven. For surely in her caring and love for others something of heaven was made known and made manifest.

One more thing about Dorcas. Verse 36 of the passage tells us that “in Joppa there was *a disciple* whose name was Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas.” And you don’t get it in English, but in the original Greek you can’t miss it. The word *disciple* in the sentence is feminine in gender. And it is the only place in the entire New Testament where the word *disciple* is feminine. There were other women who were disciples, but Dorcas alone among them has the distinction of that feminine gender in translation.

I don’t know what to make of that, except to send that bit of exegesis to the Vatican and the Southern Baptist headquarters. And except that in a man’s world as the ancient world was, in a religious tradition like ancient Judaism/Christianity which has a distinctly masculine spin to it, and in a culture in which women were second class citizens and widows especially were suspect, the life and work of Dorcas had a singularly important meaning to it that Luke did not want us to miss and so he described her as a disciple using the only feminine gender ending in the whole Bible, just so we wouldn’t miss it.

It was by the body of this gazelle of Christian love that Peter knelt and prayed for the power of resurrection healing. Prayed so strongly and fervently that in fact Dorcas was raised from the dead, in the same way that Jairus’ daughter and Lazarus had both been raised by Jesus.

That’s not an easy thing for us moderns to understand so I’m not going to try. I’ll just say that this was the first such miracle performed by any of the apostles after the resurrection of Jesus and so it is a clear sign that the power of the resurrection had been passed on to the church, and that the church itself and its apostles and disciples would be the vessels of God’s continuing work among the people of God. This power would fuel and strengthen the church in the years to come. It strengthens us still.

Now that’s a fact that is shot through Luke’s account of the work of the Spirit in the early church. But he especially wants us to associate it with Dorcas. And why? Because of who Dorcas was and because of who she was not.

She was not a preacher, not a theologian, not a gifted or eloquent thinker or writer. She was not destined to make her mark on the church for her brave deeds and unusual insights. Women were not permitted that place in the early church. But she did something, nonetheless, that won more converts, touched more lives, influenced more people than any other had done in that little town of Joppa where she lived.

She took care of people. She made tunics and knitted afghans and baked cookies and held hands and went and visited people and listened to folks when they told her their story, and she got her friends to help her, and she organized her own form of welfare system, and established her Little Sisters of the Poor. And it all had a human face to it, because it had her hands and her feet and her compassion.

She never wrote a book. There aren't any epistles named for her. She didn't do theology with the scribes and Pharisees. She never had the time to pen a gospel. She just got busy and did the work of the Spirit of Christ in her church and among her friends in Joppa.

And without that, the church is not much. You can have a church with perfect doctrine, where people recited creeds flawlessly from memory, where everybody knows the Lord's Prayer and all can say in unison the words to the 23rd Psalm, where the adult education classes are packed every Sunday and there is lofty preaching with good theology and sound doctrine.

But without somebody in that church to give it wings, somebody who runs around like a gazelle, and takes care of the widows and those whom nobody else has time for, who goes and prays with the discouraged and comforts those who grieve, and get other folks to help her do the same, all the right doctrine and flawless theology in the world will scarcely have a chance. "You shall know them by their fruits," Jesus said.

Fortunately, here at Idlewild we have literally hundreds of "gazelles of Christian living" like that, most of them disciples of the feminine gender, but not all. I'm amazed at how often it is when I visit a nursing home or hospital, the patient says "Alan Cox was just here!"

I want to give you a little testimony as to how this works. I had left the ICU and it was my second night in a regular room, when the initial meds start to wear off and a little pain appears. It was 3:00 in the morning, and those of you who have been there know that a hospital room is no place for sleep. There was some commotion outside the door; I found out later someone had died, a rarity for that floor. The nurse had come in at about 2:00 to give me some pills, and I was still awake an hour later. I couldn't get up because I had more tubes and needles sticking in me than a voodoo doll. The IV pump was pulsing, it was dark; I was alone, and I knew it.

I suppose I was experiencing what has been called "the dark night of the soul." I was afraid for the first time. I was lonely, even despairing. Nothing to do but to lie there feeling sorry for myself.

But then I felt around my neck something that had been given to me the day before. It was a prayer shawl, knitted lovingly by Jackie Baker, who has started a prayer shawl ministry. When I heard she was doing that I thought, "That's nice, very thoughtful," but it wasn't until that night at 3:00 in the morning that I learned that it had the power of resurrection in my life.

For all of a sudden, fear turned its ugly head around and walked out the door. Loneliness gave way to the feeling of being surrounded by the communion of saints and their prayers. As despair flew out the window, hope came and took its place. And self-pity was replaced with the confidence that not only would everything be OK, but that life was good. And it was good to be alive!

If that's not the power of resurrection to transform my world, I don't know what is. I'll call it a miracle, something I don't spend time trying to understand, but just accept with gratitude.

Sometimes I think our world is transformed not so much by the great lights that walk this earth, but by the lesser lights, the likes of Dorcas and you and me who do what we can where we are and by what we do participate in something much greater than we might have imagined possible. And when all is said and done, ours might not be a state funeral or a 4 hour celebration down at Bountiful Blessings Cathedral, but there may be a few mourners who hold up the threads and the cloths we have woven and give thanks for what we have done.

I believe that we are surrounded by the power of the resurrection and that we live in a world where evidence of that miraculous event is still to be found, a world where the kingdom of God is still coming. It comes as we do what we can where we are to participate in its life and its power, to share with others in our lives what we know and believe.

And we do it in the name of him who was first among us to be raised from the dead, who raises us still. Him in whom and our hope and salvation lies, Jesus Christ.

To him be the glory and to us be the works of the reign of the kingdom of God, beautiful and full of grace, like a gazelle.

Amen.

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Acts 9:36-43

36 Now in Joppa there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas. She was devoted to good works and acts of charity. **37** At that time she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs. **38** Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, who heard that Peter was there, sent two men to him with the request, "Please come to us without delay." **39** So Peter got up and went with them; and when he arrived, they took him to the room upstairs. All the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them. **40** Peter put all of them outside, and then he knelt down and prayed. He turned to the body and said, "Tabitha, get up." Then she opened her eyes, and seeing Peter, she sat up. **41** He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive. **42** This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. **43** Meanwhile he stayed in Joppa for some time with a certain Simon, a tanner.