

May 17 [Dorcas- also know a Tabitha] “Given to Good Works”



Acts 9:36-42

36 In Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha (in Greek her name is Dorcas); she was always doing good and helping the poor.

37 About that time she became sick and died, and her body was washed and placed in an upstairs room.

38 Lydda was near Joppa; so when the disciples heard that Peter was in Lydda, they sent two men to him and urged him, “Please come at once!”

39 Peter went with them, and when he arrived he was taken upstairs to the room. All the widows stood around him, crying and showing him the robes and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was still with them.

40 Peter sent them all out of the room; then he got down on his knees and prayed. Turning toward the dead woman, he said, “Tabitha, get up.” She opened her eyes, and seeing Peter she sat up.

41 He took her by the hand and helped her to her feet. Then he called for the believers, especially the widows, and presented her to them alive.

42 This became known all over Joppa, and many people believed in the Lord.

Special Music:

“Screen Door” – Rich Mullins

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rJgpU-43CD4&t=32s>

My parents are buried in a small country cemetery not far from Cumby, Texas. The cemetery is miles away from anything and set back far enough from the highway that you would never find it unless you were looking for it. And even those people looking for it, often get lost or never find the cemetery. There is a section of the cemetery with multiple, non-descript graves and an effort has been made to at least mark the locations so that people will know that someone has been buried there. This is usually done with small makeshift crosses made from tree limbs. These graves are there because the people who buried their loved ones could not afford to acquire actual plots and the dead are usually buried without ceremony at a time when no one else is at the cemetery. It does not mean that the deceased was unloved or uncared for. But, since there are no tombstones to mark the graves, there are no epitaphs to those once vibrant human beings telling us who they were and when they lived.

Epitaphs can be enlightening. They can relate the ideas and deeds of the deceased or they can give encouragement to the living. Some are written to make the survivors either reflect on their own lives or to express their grief for their lost loved one. Others can give you a smile. Still others are written by the deceased as a perpetual parting message or words of wisdom to those who should happen by their tombstones.

I have to admit that there must be a little darkness in me in that I enjoy reading epitaphs. I have seen everything from jokes, to recipes for cookies and brownies, to warnings of things to come, to validations of statements of the living like “I told you I was sick.” I have always thought that a person might want to write their own epitaph, even if it does not show up on the tombstone. Mostly because, after you are gone, you really don’t have a say in what people tell others about you so you may as well make an effort to put your best foot forward, even if it is a quote from the Bible or a favorite movie. Having said that, I want to share a few epitaphs that I have found interesting if not enlightening:

George Washington Carver

A life that stood out as a gospel of self-forgetting service.

He could have added fortune to fame but caring for neither he found happiness and honor in being helpful to the world

The centre of his world was the south, where he was born in slavery some 79 years ago and where he did his work as a creative scientist.

John Wayne

Tomorrow is the most important thing in life.

Comes into us at midnight very clean.

It’s perfect when it arrives and it puts itself in our hands.

It hopes we've learned something from yesterday.

Joe DiMaggio

Grace, dignity and elegance personified.

Winston Churchill

I am ready to meet my Maker. Whether my Maker is prepared for the great ordeal of meeting me is another matter.

Harriet Tubman

Servant of God. Well Done

You don't know Bernard P Hopkins, and neither do I, but he passed away in 1993 and I just had to add it to these Epitaphs

Legacy of BPH

Liar * Thief * Cheat * Selfish * Unsharing * Unloving * Unkind * Disloyal *

Dishonorable * Unfaithful

And just the opposite

Frank Barton

A Beloved Husband, Father & Grandpa

Fell Asleep 19th September 2011

Aged 60 years

A million times I'll need you.

A million times I'll cry.

I sit and wonder every day

Why the Lord Chose to call you away

I think he saw you needed rest

He only takes the very best.

Now, isn't that the kind of message that you would want people to read as your epitaph. The really strange thing about epitaphs that are written for the deceased by other people, whether it be a spouse, child, sibling or friend, is that they reflect the image of the deceased as seen by the person doing the writing. I will say that in most cases, people do not write their own epitaphs so when you see a message on a tombstone it is a reflection, not of the deceased personality but of the perception of the deceased by the person writing the epitaph. And the truth is that most epitaphs are only a shadow of the truth.

Several years ago, Orson Scott Card wrote a series of five science fiction novels surrounding the life of Andrew Ender Wiggins, the first of which was called Ender's Game. The award-winning book was immensely popular and was made into movie. But it is the second book that intrigued me the most. In this second book entitled "Speaker for the Dead", Ender takes on the role of, well, I don't want to call him a priest but he kind of functions like one. He believes that when someone dies, it is a good thing to have a proper eulogy and truth be spoken about the deceased life. No condemnation and no flattery. Just speaking plain and simple about the accomplishments, dreams, actions and truth regarding one's life as spoken in such a way as to give credence not to their mortality or immortality, but to the mark they have left on the world before their passing; the things that they will be remembered for, good and bad.

Which brings me to the story of Tabitha, also known as Dorcas. This story, which is found in the 9th chapter of Acts, and if it did not contain a miracle, it would be easy to overlook. Luke was the author of both the book of Luke and the book of Acts. If you read the two books straight through, the storyline seems almost seamless. Most of the time, when people discuss this particular passage of scripture that we are looking at today, they focus on the passing of Tabitha and how Peter comes to Joppa from Lydda and performs the miracle of raising her from the dead. And it is truly a note-worthy miracle, something to get excited about. There are only nine other incidents in the Bible where someone is raised from the dead other than Jesus.

Elijah raises the Zarephath's son in 1 Kings 17

Elisha raises the Shunamite's son in 2 Kings 4

**God raises a man from the dead whose body touches Elisha's bones in
2 Kings 13**

**In the town of Nain, Jesus raises the son of a widow and this miracle can
be found in the 7th chapter of Luke.**

**Jesus also raises the son of Jairus (Jairus was a synagogue leader). That
story can be found in Mark 5.**

Then there is the raising of Lazarus by Jesus, in John 11.

**Paul raises the boy, Eutychus, from the dead when he falls asleep as Paul
is talking and tumbles out of a window. Acts 20.**

**Then we have all those people that were raised from the dead at Jesus'
crucifixion. We read about that in Matthew 27.**

**But the resurrection of Tabitha is unique because the very first verse of the story
is this:**

**36 In Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha (in Greek her name is Dorcas);
she was always doing good and helping the poor.**

In simple terms, we have an epitaph for Tabitha, and she isn't even dead yet. She has a reputation that precedes her demise. She is well known in the Christian community as a woman given to doing good things and helping the poor. She is not giving lip service to her beliefs. Instead, she was involved in her community by helping others. And because of her actions, she had become well known. She exhibited her faith. She exemplified her Christian values. The King James version puts it like this:

This woman was full of good works and almsdeeds which she did.

Isn't that how we all want our Epitaphs to read? That we were full of good works? Doing our part? Making a difference in the lives of the people around us?

Living her faith was not a pastime for Tabitha. It wasn't something that she did to get others to notice her. She was highly respected, not because of the praise she received, but because of the way that she lived her life. She lived for serving others, especially the poor, broken and helpless. She was the Mother Teresa of her day. She understood that good works were not the gate to salvation but the result of the grace of salvation. Because Jesus loved her, she could love others.

We don't know if Peter actually knew Tabitha before he was asked to come to Joppa, but he surely knew of her through her reputation. He doesn't hesitate to leave Lydda and go to Joppa when the disciples ask him to come. When he arrives and is taken upstairs where Tabitha's body has been laid out. All the widows that are there mourning her passing are excited to show him the clothes, robes and gifts that Tabitha had been working on to meet the needs of her

community. We don't really see an indication that a miracle is about to happen. Luke doesn't give us any insight here. What we do see is this:

40 Peter sent them all out of the room; then he got down on his knees and prayed. Turning toward the dead woman, he said, "Tabitha, get up." She opened her eyes, and seeing Peter she sat up.

It does not say that Peter performed a resurrection. When we look at the situation, we realize that Peter knows that this woman was truly a product of her faith. He was surrounded by the unquestionable evidence of her imprint on the community. But he also knew that this was not about him or what he could do. He does not walk into the room in front of everyone and say "Tabitha, get up." There could be no purpose in self-glorification especially when he was in the presence of the body of someone who obviously placed the needs of others over her own. I think he must have been somewhat in awe of Tabitha's accomplishments. We have to admit that it must have been somewhat overwhelming seeing this indelible mark that she had left on the people around her.

The thought that must have been running through Peter's mind at this time was probably something like: "Okay, they brought me here. But she is already dead. What do they want me to do? What does God want me to do? I need be alone so that I can pray and discern what God is wanting to accomplish here." So, he sends everyone out of the room, not so that he can perform some kind of miracle,

but so that he can pray without being interrupted and determine what God is trying to accomplish in this situation.

It is important that we look at what we do know about the situation and not assume that we understand all the motives and interactions going on. We know that Peter prayed, and we know that he turned to the body of Tabitha and told her to get up. I would love to have a copy of the prayer that Peter prayed, but we just don't have that. It would be somewhat enlightening if we knew that Peter had prayed "Lord God, please raise this woman from the dead." But we don't read that here. What we do have is a fairly good understanding of who Peter was and who Tabitha was.

Peter was not given to arrogance. He was slow to catch on sometimes, and he could be somewhat stubborn, but arrogance was certainly not a part of his nature. So, I imagine his prayer was along the lines of an epitaph and praising God for the life of this woman, her accomplishments in the name of Christ, and her example to others. I also see him seeking God's guidance with regards as to what God expected of him in this situation. And I believe that God felt that Peter's declaration had a great deal of merit and that it was too soon for the termination of this woman's ministry. Bringing this woman back from the dead would both extend her ministry and strengthen the resolve and beliefs of Christians everywhere.

And with that, God decided to bring her back and He tells Peter that he should command her to get up. Peter doesn't wave his arms around. He doesn't shout. He doesn't cite some mystic incantation. There are no rituals performed, candles lit, oils poured or dances performed. He doesn't even touch her. He simply finishes praying and tells her to get up. And she opens her eyes, sees Peter and sits up. With that, he helps her to her feet and then tells everyone that is waiting that she is alive. And many people believed and came to know the lord.

Luke doesn't say anything more about it except that Peter stayed in Joppa for a while with Simon the tanner. But in truth, he really doesn't need to say any more, because we know these people. Their reputations precede them. And we know that because their faith is firmly planted in the story of Jesus Christ, that what they accomplished after the miracle was not much different than what they accomplished before the miracle. Peter continued to preach the gospel. Tabitha continued to feed and clothe the poor and underserved in her community. Luke doesn't have to tell us this. We know this because we know Peter, Tabitha and the God they serve.

So, if that is all true, what makes the story of Tabitha so very important. We need to understand that it isn't the miracle that makes this story important. The Bible is full of stories where someone performs a miracle and we never hear from the

receiver of the miracle again. And although the miracle may impact the lives of the witnesses, we often don't see that it made a great deal of difference in the lives of those who actually received the miracle. I'm not saying that it didn't make a difference, only that there isn't enough of a difference to become noteworthy by the authors of our scriptures.

And the same could be said of Tabitha. Nothing more is said about her. But remember, the uniqueness of this story is the character of Tabitha, not the miracle. Tabitha is given to good works before the miracle, and she continues to be given to good works after the miracle. Because, that is who she is. The miracle of her resurrection does not change who she is. If she had not been raised from the dead, people would still have remembered her as the disciple given to good works. She left an imprint on the lives of the people around her even without the miracle.

If Luke had written about each of us in the Book of Acts, what would he have said? Would we be pleased with the epitaph that encapsulates our lives and provides food for thought when people remember us. It is never too late to change the makings of an epitaph, but we have to do it ourselves. People's perception of us is a mirror image. It's not always correct but it is representative of the image that we present to them as exemplified by how we live our lives.

We are not called to mediocrity. We are not called to obscurity. We are not called to waste our moments and spare our spirits. We are not called to ignore those lives that intertwine with ours. We are not called to turn away from our neighbors in need. We... We are the children of the Creator of the Universe, the Lord of all that is and ever will be. We are unique in every way because God makes us unique. We are given a soul with a purpose. Like Tabitha, we are called to truth and we are called to excel. Like Tabitha, we are Limitless because of the grace we have received. Like Tabitha, we are Limitless because of the overflowing of God's love in our lives. Like Tabitha, we are limitless because we are called to make a difference.

AMEN

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