

May 11<sup>th</sup>, 2025

## Acts 9:36-43 “Get Up, Tabitha!”

During this season of Eastertide, we’ll be studying passages from the book of Acts until Pentecost. It’s strange how the lectionary leads us through Acts. Last week we started in the middle of Acts, or at least in chapter five, with the conversion of Saul of Tarsus. We learned about how his encounter with the risen Christ turned his life upside down and he became Paul the Apostle to the Gentiles. For the next couple of weeks, we’re going to be bouncing back and forth between stories about Peter and stories about Paul, and then on Pentecost we’ll go all the way back to the beginning of Acts in chapter 2 which is the story of the birth of the church. This may seem a little backwards, but it works out in the big picture.

For a brief time when I was six and seven-year-old, I went to Vacation Bible school during the summer. It wasn’t held at a church like we sometimes do, it was held in the home of Eldora Flick, a sweet older widow who loved kids and had a gift for teaching Bible stories. She was a firm believer in memorizing scripture. She said that when we memorize scripture it was like God writing God’s word on our hearts. Which is funny because Eldora’s spiritual gift was *knowing* the hearts of children. She knew that goodies were the path to kids’ hearts. And she was a multi-talented baker. She made the best cookies. But the treat that set her apart from mere mortals didn’t involve baking at all. It required only a cup of breakfast cereal mixed with melted marshmallows and butter. Eldora Flick was the master of Rice Krispy treats. I don’t know how she did it. I don’t know if she had a secret ingredient or if it was just the love that she put into making them that made them so delicious. But kids would memorize huge chunks of scripture to earn one of those delectable treats. Of course, we’d memorize some of the classics like John 3:16 – “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” Sometimes she’d say, “Do you want to try to memorize a bigger passage of scripture?” And we’d say, “If it involves getting our hands on some more of those Rice Krispy treats, then challenge accepted!” We worked our way up to Psalm 23 which was six verses long! That’s a lot for a six or seven-year-old kid to memorize, but Eldora had the key to our hearts, and we would gladly accept any challenge she’d throw our way.

Then one day she challenged us to memorize the Books of the Bible. That's sixty-six books! We struggled with that one because that's a lot for a little kid to memorize. So she broke it down into more manageable chunks and had us start with the New Testament. She said it was easier because the Old Testament had 39 books with long hard-to-pronounce names like Leviticus and Deuteronomy. The New Testament was easier because it was only 27 books although it had its share of strange names too like first and second Thessalonians and Philippians. She had us start by reciting the books together as a class – "Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts." I raised my hand. "So, Ms. Flick, why is there a book in the Bible about axes?" She said, "No, not 'axe.' Acts." What does that mean? "It's short for actions." "I still don't get it." She said, "The full name of the book is the Acts of the Apostles. We just shorten it to Acts so it's easier to remember." Got it.

The actions of the Apostles. This made sense, because this book was filled with stories about Peter and Paul, two of Jesus' apostles who took the gospel message to the Gentiles. But when I got to college, our New Testament professor George Knox said, "I'm not sure if this book should be called 'Acts of the Apostles.' This book should be called the 'Acts of the Holy Spirit,' which made even more sense because that's the whole point of the book. The Holy Spirit fell not only on the apostles in Jerusalem, but *all* who were gathered there on the day of Pentecost. A lot of folks don't realize that the Book of Acts was written by the author of Luke's gospel. Luke's gospel is all about how the Good News of Jesus wasn't just for the Jews, it was for the Gentiles too. And here's the Book of Acts which is filled with stories about the challenges of bringing the good news to people who weren't even raised in the Jewish tradition. How did they do it?

First - They did it by the power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is that which gives us an extra boost of faith, stamina, wisdom, patience, confidence – whatever we need to fulfill the great commission.

Second – They imitated Christ. What's the old saying? "Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery." Jesus' followers, especially the apostles – the ones who walked with him during his earthly ministry – the ones who were sent

and commissioned fulfilled their part of the great commission *by doing what Jesus did*.

So, with that in mind, let's take a look at today's text and see how it applies. In Joppa, which is where modern-day Tel Aviv, Israel sits, there lived a disciple named Tabitha. Her Greek name was Dorcas, but I'm going to stick with her Hebrew name if that's okay with you. She was devoted to "good works and acts of charity" as the author writes. People today might have labeled her as a bleeding heart or a do-gooder. But that's just who she was. It appears that she was a widow and that she had a ministry looking after other women who had been widowed too. One day Tabitha got sick, and she eventually died. The people of this church in Joppa prepared her body for burial, but they found out that the Apostle Peter was only about three and a half miles south of them in a place called Lydda. Peter had just healed a man named Aeneas there, which isn't unusual because the book of Acts has other examples of people being healed by the apostles. So the disciples in Joppa sent two men to go to Lydda to tell Peter that Tabitha had died.

There's a couple of things I want you to notice here. First of all, there was no expectation of Peter when the disciples from Joppa went to get him. They said, "Please come to us without delay." They did *not* say, "Hey, could you come raise Tabitha from the dead?" In fact, they already prepared her body for burial. Why would they do this if they thought Peter could raise her from the dead? Maybe they wanted him to come up and provide some grief support. Maybe they wanted him to preside over the burial. Who knows. When Peter got there, the widows who were mourning Tabitha showed him the shirts and other clothing that she made for them. Mary would say that in their grief they were showing Peter their "linking objects" – the items they received from Tabitha that connected them to her. That lends some credibility to the idea that they may have been looking for grief support.

Then the author writes, "Peter put all of them outside." I can imagine him saying, "Can I have the room please." But why would he do that? Maybe he knew her and wanted to have a moment alone to grieve. The author said, "then he knelt down and prayed." Again, nothing unusual here. In my experience as a pastor, I've done this before. Mary has done this many more times than I have in her role as a hospice chaplain. But then the author wrote

that Peter turned toward the body and said, “Tabitha, get up.” Why would he do that? That’s the question on the table this morning. Now, for your assurance, dear parishioners, I have *never* said, “Get up” when I’ve been with someone who died. Nor *will* I ever do that even if you asked me. I’m not even sure how I’d respond if you *did* ask me. I’m sure Mary knows what to say in that situation, but that’s her wheelhouse, not mine. I’m the Bible guy on the team. You might be thinking, “Okay Bible guy, here it is right in front of us this morning in the Book of Acts, chapter 9 verse 40 – ‘Tabitha, get up.’” Clock’s ticking pastor. Why would he do that?

This is a troubling passage. It is so inconsistent with other healing and resurrection stories attributed to Jesus in the New Testament. There’s no mention of God’s power being involved in this resurrection. There’s no biography of the deceased. There is no explanation or even any conversation about the resurrection other than, “This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord.” Kind of nonchalant considering how few examples there are of raising people from the dead in the New Testament. So, what’s the takeaway lesson here? It doesn’t seem like it was, “Wow! Peter gathered the multitudes to bear witness as he prayed to God to raise Tabitha from the dead so that all who witnessed would be overcome with awe and amazement and say, ‘Behold! Even the dead are raised in the name of Jesus! We should all repent, be baptized, and do likewise!’” Because *that* would have made more sense. In all honesty, this looked like Peter walked into a situation where he wasn’t really sure what to do, and so he prayed, which, again isn’t unusual at all. And I imagine him thinking, “I wonder what Jesus would do in this situation?” Jesus told us to carry on his ministry. Jesus told us to go into the world and do the things he did. All disciples were called to be imitators of Christ. Maybe Peter thought back to the time when Jesus raised Lazarus from the tomb, or the time he brought Jairus’ daughter back from the dead. “Let’s see, with Jairus’ daughter he said, ‘Child arise!’ And with Lazarus, he said, ‘Lazarus, get up!’ I wonder ... nah. But what if?” Maybe he looked around the room to make sure it was still cleared. Then he turned to face Tabitha and said it, “Hey Tabitha. Get up.” And she *did*! *Then* he called folks back into the room and showed them that she was alive. And again, he didn’t seem to make a big deal of it but as Luke writes, “this became known throughout Joppa, and many people believed in the Lord.”

Peter was just doing what he believed Jesus would have done. Maybe he was expecting it. Maybe he wasn't. The scripture doesn't say one way or the other. And let's be clear that I'm not saying you'll be able to raise the dead too if you just imitate Jesus. But I *am* saying you never know what opportunities might arise when you imitate Christ. See, you and I may not ever witness a resurrection, but it is clear that Jesus wants us to imitate him. I'm not always crazy about that saying that was so popular back in the late 80s and 90s – WWJD, or “What Would Jesus Do.” We only get to see about 3 years of his life in the gospels, so outside of those examples, it's hard to make the kinds of speculations we often do. We start making guesses about what he would do based on the experiences of our faulty understanding of the world. “Well of course Jesus would have voted for this proposition,” or “of course Jesus would have wanted me to have this car” or “yeah, Jesus would have hated the same people that I hate!”

Tabitha was a disciple, a follower of Jesus, because she imitated him in love and service to others. Peter spent so much time with Jesus that he couldn't help but imitate what he'd seen Jesus do – even to the point of raising someone from the dead. Our lives should be imitations too. Not cheap ones either – but imitators like Eldora Flick, who helped me and countless other kids that came through her door to understand the goodness and faithfulness of the original. Christ is risen.