

April 17, 2016

A Disciple Whose Name Was Tabitha

Annette Hill Briggs

Acts 9:36-43

[Peter in Lydda and Joppa]

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.

Tabitha is the only woman in the New Testament for whom the Greek feminine of the word "disciple" was used – which really is a big deal in and of itself, because it's there. Right there. No one can say it's not there. But apparently she was also the only disciple important enough to die twice.

Unlike all the other disciples at the time, the Lord and the church could not do without Tabitha. Why, do you suppose? I don't think it's complicated. It was the widows, I'm guessing. Given that Tabitha kept them clothed, I imagine it's safe to guess she also kept them fed and sheltered. She either had the money or raised it. My guess is that she ran the *Ministry to the Widows* operation the same way women have run these operations since time began.

Nothing in the Scriptures touches me more deeply than these women showing Peter the clothes Tabitha had made for them and him taking it in – taking it in and understanding that Tabitha was Christ incarnate to these women, that they could not and need not do without her. Not yet.

So he sent them out of the room and closed the door – and then what? What, besides what Luke tells us, do you suppose happened?

Use your imagination. Did he feel like throwing up? Or did he swagger with confidence, “Oh, I got this!” We aren’t given to know how long he was alone with her body. Only that he got on his knees. He prayed. He told her to get up. She opened her eyes. Seeing it was Peter, Luke said, she sat up. He gave her his hand and helped her up. Peter fetched her friends who greeted her, then told everyone, *everyone*, they knew, so that many of those people believed in the Lord too.

Verse 43 says, “*Meanwhile Peter stayed in Joppa for some time with a certain Simon, a tanner.*” This verse I’ll ask you to keep in your pocket until next Sunday, because we’ll need it again then.

As promised on social media, the question I bring for today is this: “Can the church actually die?” What do you think? I think that it can. I think, “of course, it can.” But, the next question is: are we not also Christian? And being Christian, do we believe death has the last word about anything?

Does the world still need the risen Christ? For all the crazy, goofy, embarrassing ways the church has attempted to convey the message of God’s redeeming grace in Jesus Christ – ways that have made me, at times, want to hide my face and my seminary degree – does the world still need the Lord?

In South Sudan, of late, when the army runs out of money, they rob villages to pay the soldiers in cattle and little girls. Just this week I was visiting one of our Global Women, and we got to talking apartment life, which led us into talking about government corruption, which led me to tell her about the lead poisoning in Flint Michigan. “How long ago did this happen?” she asked. “It’s happening right now,” I said.

You should’ve seen her face. Total shock. “I cannot believe this thing,” she said. “In China we think no such things ever happen in the US.” “Mostly they happen to poor people,” I said. “Oh yes, in China too,” she said.

Do the poor people need the Lord? Yes. Do the rich and powerful people who swindle and shaft the poor need the Lord? Most especially yes.

Friends, I don’t know or care what the difference between a dead and a living church is, if a dying world never hears of the Risen Christ. So, yes. Of course. The church CAN die. And already has, insofar as it no longer preaches the risen Christ.

But nothing dead needs stay that way.

Know what I wonder? I wonder if Tabitha, all cozy and clean in her cuddly soft, eternity jammies – sleeping the sleep of angels – opened her eyes, saw Peter and said, “Are you kidding me?” And if he backed up and said, “I know! I know! I knew you’d be mad, and I’m sorry. But you’re not done yet.” And if Tabitha sighed and smiled, and gave him her hand and said, “OK then, you’d better go get them.”

When they came in they were beside themselves, of course. Far too excited to notice the wistfulness of her own joy. For having been there and back again, seeing what she'd seen, knowing what she knew, and loving them as she did, all the more determined to be Christ among them for as long as the Lord saw fit to keep giving her breath.

Would you pray with me?