

EASTER 4: Acts 9.36 – 43: Peter's raising of Dorcas; Revelation 7.9 – 17: Who are these, robed in white; John 10.22 – 30: My sheep hear my voice. Theme: The Risen Christ at work today

WE DO MISS DORCAS!

Why? Why, one of my commentaries asks, did Peter raise Dorcas from the dead? I could call her Tabitha – but the alliteration's better if I call her Dorcas! Why did Peter raise her from the dead? Well, of course, he didn't. Not because it is one of those Bible "tricks" beloved of certain atheist writers and they were all too stupid to tell the difference between a dead body and someone in coma. Not because it's another one of those Bible lies, a fairy story inserted to convince the gullible. But no - Peter didn't raise Dorcas. He didn't raise her. God did. That is the key point that most commentators want to make about the passage that the Lectionary insists we hear – even if we hear nothing else – today.

Dorcas is raised from the dead in order to demonstrate the power of the Holy Spirit at work in those first days after Jesus' resurrection. It is quite clear from the way in which the story is structured that the writer wants to call to mind the time when Jesus raised Jairus' daughter. Peter uses the virtually same words, but first he kneels and prays. It is God who will make this happen. He also turns everyone out of the room. No witnesses, just in case nothing happens, perhaps? Nervous in front of an audience, maybe? Needing to be able to focus absolutely on what God wants him to do, certainly. It is quite clear that the story is about Peter, the great leader of the new church, demonstrating how God can work through those who believe in him. A great miracle happens. Many people come to believe in Jesus Christ. What more could you want?

But why? Why did Peter raise *Dorcas*? Well, that's easy! "She was devoted to good works and acts of charity." An exemplary Christian. The only woman in the New Testament specifically named as a disciple. Or as one commentary puts it: "Tabitha, unlike most other Christians, was allowed to return from the dead, to show us that the ministry to the poor is not one that the church should allow to die."

Yes – this is pretty well ingrained into our response to this story. But why *Dorcas*? There must have been plenty of disciples who were doing the same kind of thing – Acts itself tells us that they usually sold their possessions and held the proceeds in common in order to be able to minister where there was need. Unless Dorcas was really exceptionally active (as perhaps she was), we're still left asking – why her?

Well, she died. You can't raise people from the dead unless they've died. On the other hand, plenty of disciples must have died – by falling out of windows, disease, or simply of old age. What made *Dorcas* different? What was so special about her that the leaders of the church in Joppa sent for an immensely important person like Peter, actually interrupting the mission on which he had been sent to Lydda? It was clearly an urgent request, both from the wording and from the fact that 2 messengers were sent. It is commonly assumed in commentaries that they sent for him to raise Dorcas from the dead. But if you think about it, there was no precedent for this, no expectation that he could do any such thing. It is in fact much more likely that they were simply making sure that he would attend the funeral.

So why did Peter raise Dorcas from the dead? There must have been something in Dorcas alive that made a huge difference, something that marked her out, in a world

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that did not place much value on women, let alone widows. As one commentary puts it: "Dorcas was not a preacher, theologian or eloquent writer. She did not make her mark on the church with brave deeds or major financial gifts. But she did win converts and touch lives, and probably influenced more people than anyone else in Joppa." True – but we are still left asking why or indeed how she did this. Here are some ideas:

It is 11 o'clock on Monday morning in Dimitri's Deli Supermarket in the little market town of Joppa. In the staff room the girls are just finishing their morning break. The door bursts open. In rushes Lucy, the one who's never late. The conversation goes like this:

"Lucy, where have you been! What on earth happened this morning!"

"Doris happened. Or rather she didn't happen."

"But Doris isn't in today."

"Tell me about it!"

"Do you know where she is? Have you seen her?"

"No – that's just the point. Every day, for the last 2 years, Doris has called for me on the way to work. She never fails. She knew how bad I was at keeping time and so she called for me. Every day. Until today."

"But Doris doesn't live anywhere near you. She must have walked an extra mile to do that!"

It is 11.03 on Monday morning at the checkout in Dimitri's Deli Supermarket. A young mum is being served. The conversation goes like this:

"Oh, hi. You're not usually on this till, are you?"

"No – I'm filling in for Doris – she's not here today."

"Oh – I hope she's ok? Lots of people are off work with this bug that's going round."

"She's never been ill before. Strong as an ox, if you ask me. More the type to look after other people than get ill herself."

"That's true. I remember when I had our first baby. She was always had time to ask about how I was getting on. She was always interested but she didn't give you a load of advice. And then, when I missed a couple of weeks shopping – I had a bit of a time when Sally was born – she popped round to see if she could bring me anything on her way home. I didn't even know she knew where I lived!"

It is 11.05 on Monday morning in the stockroom of Dimitri's Deli. The conversation goes like this:

"Good grief! Is that the time? We've missed our tea-break!"

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"Yeah – we're missing Doris. Always a cheery good morning as she goes through. Regular as clockwork she is. Never takes a minute more than she's due."

"Well, blast it! (Actually it was **** !) – we'd better get a move on now or we'll get no break."

"Too right. But watch the language – I haven't heard you swear like that for ages."

"That was Doris, you know."

"She told you to give up swearing?"

"No. It was something I saw. She was in here, getting one of those cases of peaches, the heavy ones. Lad who was helping her was a bit quick, a bit careless. Dropped it right on her foot. Must have hurt like hell. I'd have turned the air blue. She didn't . Didn't' curse the case or him. She was limping for a month after. I guess I learnt something."

It is 11.07 on Monday morning in the supermarket car-park. The conversation goes like this:

"Hey, Jo – have you seen Doris today?"

"No, mate. Why d'you want to see her?"

"I got my place at the college! I just wanted to tell her. She'll be over the moon for me!"

"You've always had a soft spot for Doris."

"Yeah, well she sorted me out, you see. I was always mucking about, stupid dares and things, and one day the dare was to nick some vodka. She stopped me. I knew she's seen me, so I put it back."

"You've got to have eyes in the back of your head these days."

"But it was afterwards. She caught me up, right here in the car park. She talked to me. She didn't lecture me on stealing. She just said "Get a job. Work for what you want. There's jobs going here." And she came with me to help me apply.

"And here you are, pushing supermarket trolleys."

"Yeah – but I work for what I want. Enough to get me through college."

It is 11.10 on Monday morning in the manager's office of Dimitri's Deli. Mr Dimitri is talking to his store supervisor. The conversation goes like this:

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"Everything running smoothly, Mr Cohen"

"Yes, sir – fortunately we're managing without Doris, but we do miss her. She's an excellent worker in every respect."

"Doris?"

"Yes, I can't remember when she last missed a day."

"Unusual woman, Doris. Did I ever tell you about that time with the chops, Mr Cohen?"

"I don't think so, sir."

"I had a windfall – bankrupt butcher – lots of prime chump chops going for nothing. I was going to sell them at premium prices. Excellent profit for no effort. Doris came to see me. She said I should sell them cheaper than usual. She pointed out that chops are really good for a meal for one person. That a lot of our elderly customers simply couldn't afford premium prices. That I'd still make a good profit at a cheaper price. She was quiet, like she always was, but insistent. Very insistent. She was right too. Profit for me and a treat for the pensioners – that's why we do Pensioners Specials now. Doris is not in today, you say? I wonder if I should just pop round?"

It is 11.15 on Monday morning outside Doris's house in an undistinguished street in the little market town of Joppa. The ministers of the local church have just arrived to pay a pastoral visit. After all, Doris was on a lot of committees and did excellent work for the fabric fund and then there was her involvement with Sunday school and the coffee rota and – well, she was a good member of the congregation. They are somewhat surprised to find it difficult to get a parking space anywhere near the house. In fact it is difficult to get into the house at all. It is crammed to overflowing with people. They are standing in the garden and spilling out on to the street. Old people, young people, and everyone in between. People from every part of the town from posh bit on the hill to the bit by the waterworks that everyone says should be demolished. People they've never seen in church. People talking, sharing stories. People saying "Do you remember? We do miss Doris."

And pretty soon it becomes evident that a routine pastoral visit is not enough. The crowd want more. They want to honour Doris, who is dead, but lives in their hearts and lives. Something special is in order. Not just a funeral but a funeral taken by the top man. Send for him at once. And make sure he knows how important she is. Now! Because we do miss Doris!

The rest, as they say, is history. But history raises the question: why did Peter raise Dorcas from the dead? After all, she was only a woman who worked in a supermarket.

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NOTES:

Dorcas was not a preacher, theologian or eloquent writer. She did not make her mark on the church with brave deeds or major financial gifts. But she did win converts and touch lives, and probably influenced more people than anyone else in Joppa.

Tabitha sets a great example to us of making the most of your gifts. She was skilled at making clothes, hardly the most glamorous spiritual gift, but she looked for an opportunity to use it for the service of others. The widows, who were probably already receiving food handouts from the church, had no money to buy themselves new clothes or replace worn out garments. Tabitha made a habit of "good works and acts of charity", so when she saw that these people needed something she could offer she took the initiative.

When thinking about what our own "spiritual gifts" are, do we overlook some of the more mundane practical skills or resources that God has given us? Offering to give people a lift, to babysit for them, to help with a DIY task, to teach a skill, to donate second-hand goods are examples of the types of thing that we can all easily do, particularly in the context of small groups. We ought to spend more time thinking about how we can serve others in practical ways so that like Tabitha, we can be a blessing to many.

Often ministries in church life are energised by people with great vision and passion for the work, and when they are gone the work can be in danger of falling by the wayside. Obviously not every ministry can be kept going indefinitely, and some are more worthy of sustaining than others, but helping the poor is not a matter for indifference. Had the church in Joppa simply decided that they would drop the program of help for the widows now that Tabitha had died, it would have seriously undermined their witness and integrity in that town. Perhaps the reason that Tabitha, unlike most other Christians, was allowed to return from the dead, was to show us that the ministry to the poor is not one that the church should allow to die.

Tabitha, Arise
open your eyes!
You've had your rest
from doing what is best.

Take these needles and thread
for women who need to be led.
Now that you're alive
you'll help others survive.

The church leaders left them out
but you will help them, no doubt.

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You're following Jesus – it is true ,
we see him working through you.

As ages pass you're alive today
in the hearts of people as they pray.
As they look around and take heed
to locate people who are in need.

As long as people do as you did
and not keep their lighted candle hid,
your passion will echo throughout the land
where the serving of others is in demand.

Dorcas implies "the female of a roebuck" or gazelle, which was an emblem of beauty. Whether she was a beautiful woman or not we are not told but she certainly lived a lovely life.