

Rev. Lecia Beck

May 8, 2022

Saint Thomas Evangelical Lutheran Church, Bloomington, Indiana

God Sees You

Acts 9:36-43

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. At that time she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs. 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."

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. 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. He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, Peter showed her to be alive.

This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. Meanwhile Peter stayed in Joppa for some time with a certain Simon, a tanner.

You may – or may not – have noticed my absence for the last couple weeks. After Easter, I traveled to Uganda to see family who I had not seen for the last two years. There's nothing quite like the pressure of staying with my mother-in-law for two weeks, when I had only briefly met her once before. What if she doesn't like me? I guess it's too late now!

Anyway, it is good to be back among you as we continue to celebrate Easter. Today, we celebrate the fourth Sunday of Easter. Easter is too big of an event, the resurrection so life-changing, that we cannot fully celebrate it in just one day. We celebrate the season of Easter for fifty days, and beyond, celebrating the resurrection every Sunday when we gather. The resurrection is more than an event, but a lifelong invitation to practice.

Our first lesson today came from the book of Acts, formally known as the Acts of the Apostles, which is part two, the sequel, to the Gospel According to Luke. As the Gospel closes out the story of Jesus' actions on Earth, Acts turns to the actions of the Holy Spirit acting among the followers of Jesus. The book of Acts opens with Jesus' ascension into heaven, followed by stories about the power of the resurrection in ordinary people's lives, how they experience and practice resurrection.

Today, we heard about some widows in the early church. Throughout the Bible, widows are mentioned many times, with calls to care for them. Once a woman's husband died, she was often relegated to the margins, overlooked, with no one to advocate for her.

Yet in Joppa, Tabitha saw these widows, saw their need and clothed them.

Like Tabitha, we too want to clothe those in need. The average American disposes of 70 pounds of clothing each year, donating much of it. We often drop our donations anonymously in bins that seem to pop up everywhere, gladly dumping things we would not wear because they are out-of-date, torn or stained. We comfort ourselves, believing someone will be glad to receive it because, surely, it is better than nothing, suitable for the nameless, faceless hoard we call “the needy” or “the poor.”

Much of what we donate ends up packed into huge bales and shipped across the world for someone else to deal with. In Uganda, Owino Market in Kampala claims to be the largest market for used clothing. Beyond the market, shops for used clothing abound. Everywhere you go, there are women sitting on mats along the road selling used shoes and clothing. With so much used clothing dumped in such places, their landfills are full of unusable items and their own textile production is unprofitable.

Designer Bobby Kolade has something to say about that. After a career as a designer in Europe, he returned to his native Uganda to try something new. When he could not find locally made fabric, though Uganda exports much raw cotton and once produced fabric, he turned to what was abundant – used clothing. His clothing line is called Return to Sender because he takes clothing dumped in Uganda, reworks it and sells it for hundreds of dollars to Americans – the very people who discarded the clothing in the first place.

Neither one of these was what Tabitha did. The widows were not just the nameless, faceless hoard of “the needy” or “the poor.”

Tabitha saw these widows as individuals, women worthy of love and care. She didn’t just clothe them, but it says that she made the tunics and other clothing they had.

She clothed them beautifully, carefully, not in what was leftover or discarded, but individually, with her own handiwork.

No wonder the widows grieved when Tabitha died. Not just for the clothing, but because Tabitha had seen them and cared for them.

Tabitha practiced resurrection. By having their humanity acknowledged, the widows experienced life again. No longer did people look right through them as if they did not exist, like many of us do when we encounter a homeless person at a stoplight.

Tabitha saw them – and because she saw them, they knew that God also saw them. And having experienced resurrection, they wanted to share that with Tabitha.

Through Peter, God answered their prayer. Though she had died, Tabitha was alive again.

Hear this good news, siblings in Christ - God sees you. Just as Tabitha saw each of these widows as an individual human who deserved her love and care, God sees you – each one of you – as an individual human who deserves love and care.

Whether Mother's Day fills you with joy or grief, God sees you.

If the potential of overturning Roe v. Wade fills you with fear or anger, or maybe relief, God sees you.

If depression and anxiety threaten to overwhelm you, God sees you.

If rising prices and lack of a livable wage worry you, God sees you.

When you don't know what to do next, God sees you.

God sees you at your best and at your worst - when you feel on top of the world or in the darkest depths. God sees you - even when you don't see God, or aren't even looking. And God will never leave you.

Our God knows every hair on your head. The Good Shepherd calls you by name. The Psalmist praises God, saying, "You hem me in, before and behind. You keep me from unraveling. You knit me together and I am fearfully and wonderfully made."

God sees you, not just a nameless, faceless hoard of humanity. God sees you - not because of the good you do or don't do, not for judgment but for love. God sees you because you are God's creation and beloved.

While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Resurrection is for the world - and for you. The body of Christ is broken - for you.

Yes, you. Each one of you.

God longs to bring new life, healing and wholeness to all of creation, to each one of us. The resurrection is not just an event that happened once, it happens again and again – not just for Jesus but for each one of us.

Resurrection comes with every new day, with every chance to try again.

Resurrection comes when it appears that the end has come, yet God brings you through.

Resurrection comes when someone recognizes you as a valuable child of God.

And like the widows, when we have experienced resurrection, we want others to know it too.

Who are you being called to see, not just as a nameless, faceless horde, but as a beloved child of God?

Maybe it's a youth who needs someone to walk with them and listen to their concerns.

Maybe it's the person experiencing homelessness who needs more than food, but a meal shared with someone who cares.

Maybe it's the parent who is struggling, who needs the support of others.

More than just donations of money and things, people need to be seen.

May God open our eyes to see, that we may experience resurrection and practice resurrection like Tabitha and the widows.

Amen.

<https://www.rd.com/article/what-happens-used-clothing-donations/>

<https://open.spotify.com/show/67bF1umdhkZxIVaquscWjl>

In Uganda, 80 per cent of clothing purchases are secondhand, and despite producing high-quality raw cotton for the rest of the world, its own textile industry has failed to bounce back from the near collapse of production in the 1970s

(<https://www.dazeddigital.com/fashion/article/55969/1/uganda-bobby-kolade-second-hand-clothing-trade-landfill-africa-buzigahill>)

<https://www.voguebusiness.com/sustainability/return-to-sender-bobby-kolades-new-collection-upcycles-ugandas-secondhand-clothing-for-the-global-north>

Easter 4C

Acts 9:36-43