

# NEW WITNESSES

*The Rev. Geoff Parker to Foreside Community Church - Falmouth, ME*

Sunday, May 12, 2019

Scripture: [Acts 9:36–43](http://bible.oremus.org/?passage=Acts+9:36-43) (<http://bible.oremus.org/?passage=Acts+9:36-43>)

## INTRODUCTION TO THE SCRIPTURE

It is a joy to welcome new friends into the church through new life in baptism and the remembrance of baptism that connects us through all the settings of the church. It's a good to time ponder the power of our connections, and how they give us life and hope. Today we hear a deep cut in the book of Acts, a story that is not well remembered. And that's a bit sad, because it is very interesting, and might teach us a lot.

It made me think of this Bible stand, which was given to us by the Church of the Redeemer in New Haven, CT... the church that helped raise me, and ordained me, and that I went back to close with my family a few weeks ago. The stand was made by a carpenter in the congregation, John Kordak. He built railings for the sanctuary, and quite honestly the bookshelves in my childhood living room. He showed the love of God through the work of his hands... and I am thankful for his gift, and Redeemer's gift to us.

This story from Acts is not a Jesus resurrection story in Easter, it's another kind of new life. Just before the apostle Peter is transformed, just before his ministry is dramatically expanded, calling him to not just serve Jewish communities, but all who seek to know Jesus... Peter is called to a community in grief... and there he hears an amazing story of a woman, who is called by many names, who shared many gifts.

## SERMON

So, did you hear it?

Tabitha, who is called Dorcas, who is called something very unique: disciple. Tabitha is called *mathetria*, a word that appears nowhere else... She is a full disciple. She served and ministered so faithfully to her community that when she died, they went running to Peter come and bear witness to their grief.

See, widows and orphans had no way to hold property and space in the same way other might in the culture at this time. They were, by definition, without family connections and resources...

So as Peter walks into this house, he sees the very people that Jesus came to sit with, and they show him Tabitha... they show him by showing clothes... how she literally used her hands to wrap them in care and love.

This is not a story about stuff, though, this is a story about how we touch and shape lives. And how sometimes, *stuff* may be a tender residue of that real true impact.

Sometimes, love comes creeping through the things we gift people with, and so I went straight to the source this week: I went to the knitting group. You should too, if you ever have the chance.

They told me about knitting clothes for children and grandchildren to treasure through their lives, nephews and nieces, the whole array... they told me about prayer shawls, about making blankets that would hold a stillborn children and stay with their parents through all the complexity and weaving of grief, about knitting soft prosthetics for women who have had mastectomies in the midst of battles with breast cancer.

They told me about grandmothers, mothers, friends, about members of this very church who taught them how to knit. And they show me every week how much it matters to them to gather together to keep knitting.

They made me think of *this prayer stole* that was made for me by an intern who studied with us at Brunswick. She is a wonderful pastor and servant of the church now, but she was a baptist seminary student who couldn't find a place to serve her intern year because many local congregations still weren't ready to accept the leadership of a woman. I think Tabitha would know a thing or two about that.

Like those beloved members of Tabitha's congregation, we can sometimes be overwhelmed by all of the tender stories behind all the things of our lives. How each one points to the ways someone has wrapped us up, or comforted us, or held up the word of God.

This is not a story about stuff, this is a story about how we touch and shape lives. This is about how we take our gifts and our talents, and make them ways to share the heart of Christ... sometimes people need things, the basics, like those widows and orphans that Tabitha clothed... sometimes we simply need to know that someone loves and cares enough to shape that caring into form that we can hold and touch.

And this is also a story about how the people we touch and gifts we share carry the imprint of our lives. In their grief, the friends of Tabitha held up all the ways that she had held them up, wrapped them up, clothed them with honor and dignity. And as the Apostle Peter walks in... it is the first hint that this story of a disciple named Tabitha is not at an end... even if she did not rise up out of that bed, she would not cease to be alive... alive in the hearts and hands, alive in the teaching she had shared with her community.

Here in this congregation, we celebrate and give thanks for all the gifts you have and all the gifts you are. Here we challenge one another to discover how our gifts may show the love of Christ.

On this day, this Mother's Day, which can often be so complicated for so many... instead, I give thanks for those disciples in the lineage of Tabitha, those women, who led, and taught, and clothed me... and I give thanks for the chance for us all to do the same for others, ensuring that Spirit lives on for all.

Tabitha was a disciple, through and through, who showed the love and life of the risen Christ in any way she could... and so, in the end, she could not help... but rise. May we rise to life and love the same. Amen.