

Maqhtia

(Mathetia)

A Sermon Expositing Acts 9:36-43

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These are the ones, our tradition tells us, through whom the power of God in Christ was passed on to the rest of the world. High atop the largest church building in the world are thirteen stone sculptures of men so large in scale as to be intimidating, but so high above the ground as to be hard to see. In the center stands the redeeming Christ and radiating in both directions out from him stand Thaddeus, Matthew, Phillip, Thomas, James, Andrew, John, James, Bartholomew, Simon, Matthias, and instead of Peter - because the whole building is named for Peter – John the Baptist. The men through whom the power of God to redeem each of us and all the world was passed to us all. If pride of placement is anything, obviously these patriarchal figures are of utmost importance. The same story has been told by centuries of Christian art, church tradition, and theological education – that in the days after Jesus’s death, resurrection, and ascension, the work of redemption in the world was passed to twelve men who followed him in his time on earth and it was their work of taking the good news to the outer limits of the known world that sparked the movement we now know as Christianity and perpetuated the healing, redeeming, resurrecting, unbinding, just, charitable, and loving power of God in the world. It’s a story, the beginning of which is told us by the gospel writer Luke in his second volume, which we call the Acts of the Apostles or “Acts,” which Marcia read to us a moment ago. If you’re looking for someone to thank for carrying the work of Christ into this world, look no further than our reading this morning.

In a time not long after Jesus had died, risen, and ascended, the continuing work of Christ was threatened in a place called Joppa. There was a woman there, a caretaker of all who needed care named Tabitha. The story is content to tell us generally that, “She was devoted to good works and acts of charity,” but that sparse description is amplified by later details. Women who had lost their husbands and therefore, in that culture, often their link to the economy and commerce, flocked to her bedside aching to show the clothing Tabitha had made them, weeping because one who provided for them had fallen ill and died. Contrary to a terse description seemingly about kind gestures, Tabitha was a person whose life was interwoven with that of vulnerable people, whose resources stretched out for their care, whose hands were kept busy providing. She was integral to her community, deeply loving and deeply loved and when she died, in their grief and despair they sent for Peter, one of those patriarchal figures whose life links us to God’s powerful love through time. When he arrives, he prays for Tabitha and tells her to get up and *she does!* Life is restored, Tabitha is restored, the community is jubilant that her caretaking and love walk among them again! Peter has brought the resurrection of Christ palpably into their midst – so Luke says.

There’s a problem with this story though. There’s a problem actually not just with this story, but with the bigger, wider story that arises from it and these centuries of retelling it through art and education and statues on top of buildings – that these patriarchal figures are the ones who began and perpetuated the movement to share God’s powerful love globally. It is possible that the problem isn’t so much a sin of commission, but more of a sin of omission. The writer we call “Luke” told us in Acts, the story of the first generation of the sharing

Note: Sermon manuscripts are written for the ear rather than the eye. If grammar or punctuation seem unconventional and the meaning unclear, try pronouncing the sentence aloud phonetically.

and spreading of God's incarnate love after Jesus and he told that story in the way his culture, his *patriarchal* culture would have had him tell it. A disciple of Jesus showed up where there was hurt and need and death and brought along resurrection.

Fortunately for us, and thanks, I think, to the presence of God at work all along and through the otherwise flawed process of telling then writing then preserving then canonizing this story into scripture a little nugget suggests that we peel back the layers and find the story underneath. "Now in Joppa there was a disciple"...a *mathetes*, we would expect in the Greek as that's the word most often used for "disciple." But here, at the beginning of today's reading a little shimmering bit of God's truth peeks out from behind the grammar and if we pull just a bit at that little nuance we can peel back one story to reveal another. You see Greek is a more gender-specific language than English and when Luke tells us there was a disciple in Joppa he had to use a word that isn't found anywhere else in all the New Testament. It's a shame it isn't found anywhere else, but the gospel writer was forced in this place to write not that there was in Joppa a *mathetes*, disciple but a *mathetia* disciple. Here, in all of Christian scripture – sadly – is the lone example of the feminine form of the word disciple.

Here is the sin of omission. We don't hear and therefore we don't tell enough stories of women as vessels of resurrection. What is the impact, do you think, of the adoption of a sacred text that almost always identifies the presence of God's power in the world with men? Do you suppose that might be at least a little bit of the reason that a culture which prides itself as a melting pot, that boasts a diverse population, and celebrates the freedom of *all* people hasn't yet found it in them to draw presidential leadership from more than one gender? Do you think that a sacred text that finds God's power almost exclusively in men might train up generations to look for salvation almost exclusively in powerful men? Do you think that it might be harder for young women of faith to become community leaders, to become *faith* leaders when all of their biblical heroes are men? Well, no more.

Here in Joppa, before the patriarchal disciple of Jesus arrived, before he'd even been notified there was *already* a disciple of Jesus present – Tabitha.

But of course, Tabitha was dead. So two men among the community thought they knew what they should do, they went to get Peter, a disciple *mathetes* to see what power he had to intervene. Seldom though, do we ask why. Tabitha wasn't the only one in the region who died that day, that's just a statistical reality. Death is ubiquitous, so why would the men choose to go in search of Peter for this woman and why would Peter bother to venture to another town for *this* woman in particular? We know only one thing about her and it may be all we need to know. She was integral to her community. Her service to, at least, the widows in her town if not others also kept them clothed and fed and loved. Her love and care and provision for them was indispensable and a compelling reason for another of Jesus's disciples to respond to calls for help. And when he arrived he found there with her a company of saints, a host of witnesses to the magnitude of her life showing him the physical expressions of her love – the clothes on their own backs. It was on that display that Peter put them out, prayed for her, and helped her get up – up from the grave. Yes, Peter made the journey and yes, Peter prayed a prayer. Let's not take that from him, men can get so fragile when you don't give them their kudos – so I'm told. But let us not leave hidden the story revealed behind that little bit of grammar. Tabitha's faithfulness was no less a cause of her own resurrection than that of Peter. Peter's care for Tabitha wasn't even an approximation of the love that Tabitha's community of women had for her. Sure, a patriarchal figure was present in a scene that played out in an extremely patriarchal world, no surprise. But peeling back the layers of this story lets us see that on this day resurrection didn't come through the patriarch, it came through a relentlessly caring, amazingly strong woman and her sisters with her. On that day resurrection didn't come through a patriarch, it came through a matriarch.

On this day, as we give thanks to God for the women who gave us life and who raised us, let us not forget to give thanks to God for the matriarchs – be they mothers of children or not – who usher God's resurrection into the world.

Amen.