

Sermon series on 'Women in the Bible'

Week 4: Dorcas aka Tabitha.

(Acts 9:36-42)



Thank you for welcoming me to your church! I'm not going to spend any more time introducing myself, lest I lose all the glamour and mystery that comes with being a visiting speaker!

Let me get straight into this morning's focal point: a woman called Dorcas in a town called Joppa, who died and came back to life. As you do.

Oh how run-of-the-mill that sounds! And that's part of the problem – I can't help thinking that, if I was writing the Book of Acts, I'd have worked a bit harder on my plotline:

- I'd have spent more time describing Dorcas, seeing her generosity in action, watching her making clothes for the poor of the town, and seeing how loved she was. And then seeing how people reacted to the tragedy of her death.
- Then I'd have built up the funeral: the people of the town turning out, the rumour that the Apostle Peter had even been invited, the drama as Peter sent everyone outside, and then the moment when he emerges, and he's not alone.
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As a reader, that's what I need. Instead, we get an account that is so matter-of-fact that when we hear about this astonishing miracle, we barely flinch. We say, "Oh right, that's nice." And that's a problem.

The stories in the Bible often feel so alien to us, such a contrast to our lives, that they may as well have taken place 'Long ago, in a galaxy far, far away.' These aren't normal people, doing normal things – they live in a magical wonderland where astonishing things are normal. The things of Scripture are a long way away, if not a fairy-tale. Dorcas dies and comes back to life, and we aren't affected. What should we do?

Well, let me tell you a story which may help Dorcas feel a bit closer to home.

A guy I know called Martin told me about the time he was invited to speak at a church in west London called Holy Trinity Hounslow. This was in 2003. Martin was excited because Holy Trinity Hounslow was a church with a reputation as a place where God was 'really doing stuff', and Martin wondered why, so before the service started he asked the parish priest "How long has the church been like this?"

The priest replied, "Well it started on April 8, 1973."

Martin said, "Oh. And what happened on April 8, 1973?"

The priest said, "Well that was the day that Lottie died."

Martin nodded wisely, thinking about verses like, "Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies..." etc.etc. and wondering who this Lottie was, and why her death was so significant. So he asked, "Who was Lottie?"

The priest looked around and pointed to an old lady in the pews – a lady who was suspiciously not dead – and said, "That's her, over there."

In 2003, Lottie was in her nineties, but thirty years earlier, she was a normal lady in a normal Sunday service in a normal parish church. And halfway through the sermon, Lottie collapsed and died. She fell out of her pew, and was stone-dead on the floor.

Now, it is not an experience I have yet had, but I presume that if someone dies during your sermon, it kind of messes up your flow.

And if someone dies in your service, it wrecks your service.

Everyone looked around, wondering what to do. They carried her to a table at the back and started looking at each other. Should they sing a song? Should someone pray?

Then the vicar remembered that he'd been preaching from John 14, where Jesus says, 'You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it.'

He walked up the aisle, stood by the table and said "Lottie, you can't die now. Come back, in Jesus' name."

And she sat up.

Now, if someone dies in your service, it is likely to wreck your service. But if someone rises from the dead in your service, it's likely to wreck your life.

That church has never been the same again, because suddenly, stories like ours today, about an ordinary woman in an ordinary church, didn't feel like they were from long ago in a galaxy far, far away. Suddenly the Bible was coming to life. Suddenly the power that raised Jesus from the dead really was in them.

Suddenly "All things are possible for those who are in Christ Jesus."

Suddenly, "We are more than conquerors through Him who loved us."

Suddenly they believed that, "You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it."

It's not long ago and far away any more. Jesus is real and He is with us.

A little footnote to that story. Martin went to speak to Lottie, as you can imagine, and she said to him, "Do you know what the best thing is about coming back from the dead?"

"No, said, Martin, I don't!"

Lottie told him that before she died, she had terrible arthritis. But that when she came back from the dead, it was completely healed! Isn't that lovely?

So, what do we take away from this?

I'd suggest two things:

- Firstly, Dorcas was a normal person in a normal church. So was Lottie. So are we. Extraordinary things really can happen to normal people who know Jesus. These are not fairy-stories. This is real. Don't count yourself out.
- Secondly, if you are a believer, the power that raised Dorcas from the dead – that raised Lottie from the dead, that raised Jesus from the dead – *lives in you.*

"All things *are* possible for those who are in Christ Jesus."

"We *are* more than conquerors through Him who loved us."

"You may ask for *anything* in Jesus' name"

– but watch out, cos He might just do it.

Amen.

David Rowe, July 1st 2018

(David is a visiting speaker. He is from England (his parents live in West Hill) and is training for Ordination in the USA. He is on a Sunday placement with us while undertaking a hospital chaplaincy in Exeter as part of his training).