

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro
11 May 2025

10:30 a.m. MT Worship
Fourth Sunday of Easter

Calvary Baptist Church
Denver, Colorado

“Tabitha’s Testimony: Eulogy, Elegy, Easter 2.0”

Part of the Annual theme, *Thriving in Goodness for Good and for GOOD*
Touchstone words in Easter: BLESS and CHALLENGE

NOTE: A sermon is a spoken word event. This manuscript served as a guide but is not exact to what was preached in the moment.

Acts 9:36-43

New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

Happy Mother’s Day to Tabitha Dorcas, who was clearly a mother figure to so many women in her community, and who still mothers us all through her testimony.

Tabitha’s testimony became well known by the world because she died and then came back to life. But before that viral moment, Tabitha was known and celebrated locally in Joppa for her business and generosity. And even more personally, she was known and loved by a community of women and widows with whom she shared life.

Tabitha’s Testimony is ultimately a resurrection story. But before resurrection must come death. And death is perhaps our best teacher on how to value life.

Today I invite us to look at Tabitha’s testimony through the

lens of her impact (local, personal, and global) and three corresponding movements: Eulogy, Elegy, and Easter 2.0. And as her testimony unfolds, we will be *blessed* and *challenged*.

First, **eulogy**.

Have you ever had the experience of going to a funeral where you really didn’t know the person all that well, but because of all that was shared at their memorial service you walk away thinking, “*Wow. I feel like I kind of know them now...and their life was inspiring!?*”

Really good eulogizing can do this. Eulogies help us know a person for their best qualities and attributes. The word in the Greek (*eu*: good / *logos* “speech/word”) literally means “a good word or speech.”¹

¹ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/eulogy>

Put simply, eulogies are "words of praise" offered to those dead *or living*! We just automatically associate eulogies with funerals because so often it's not until someone dies that we take the time to take stock of the value of their life and speak words of praise about them.

Tabitha's Testimony begins with a eulogy as Luke shares with us "words of praise" about her impact on her local community. Luke's eulogy includes her spiritual vocation, her geographical location, her professional life, and her philanthropic endeavors.

Luke names Tabitha as a disciple using a specific word—*mathetria*—which means "female disciple." Tabitha is the only person named as such in the entire New Testament. This specific term of discipleship includes both the behavior of "following" and the posture of "learning."² Tabitha followed the example of Jesus, and she was a lifelong student of her faith, forever learning what it means for her to follow Jesus through her specific calling and gifts.

Luke also includes in his eulogy of Tabitha her Greek name, Dorcas. This suggests she was a cultural hybrid, straddling the line between Judaism and the wider Greco-Roman world. As one scholar noted, "she is at home both in the comfortable cultural confines of her faith but also in the different cultures that surround her."³

And this makes sense because of the location of her discipleship—the port city of Joppa. Joppa, you may remember, is where Jonah hopped on a ship to *run away from* his mission to the Gentiles—going in the opposite direction of where God was calling him! In contrast, Tabitha is rooted here in this port city, a place where people are always coming and going, a place where worlds come together and intersect. This has a spiritual meaning in terms of how Tabitha's testimony reached within and beyond her people and it reveals her comfort level with diverse peoples, but also, on a very practical level, I'm sure it was great for business too.

²<https://biblehub.com/greek/3102.htm>

³ Eric Barreto, "Commentary on Acts 9:36-43," *Working Preacher* (21 April 2013), accessed on May 11, 2025 at

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-of-easter-3/commentary-on-acts-936-43>.

This brings us the final part of Luke's eulogy Tabitha "*was devoted to good works and acts of charity,*" (vs 36). Stay with me now as I break down the Greek a bit.

The Greek word translated as "good" is *agathos*, which is a kind of goodness that means distinguished, upright, excellent, honorable, useful.⁴ The Greek word for "works" is *ergon*, which specifically refers to a business, employment, or occupation.⁵ This means that a large part of Tabitha's testimony, and what Luke praises or eulogies, is that Tabitha Dorcas was a distinguished businesswoman with respected, honest business practices. Love that. Love to see a woman in leadership, owning her own business, using her gifts of creativity to provide for herself *and others*.

The "and others" leads us to the next phrase: "acts of charity," which in Greek is *eleēmosynē*. This means alms-giving or beneficence to the poor.⁶ It's very specific. This is Tabitha, as a successful business woman, not just exercising faithful stewardship in the traditional

sense of giving a portion back to her faith community...she probably did that too...but this is a more extravagant generosity—a more integrated way of looking at giving and living. This is Tabitha literally sharing what she had with those who did not have as if it was *all of theirs* to share in together. This is Tabitha using her resources to feed and clothe and support the widows and women in her community, not just one time, but ALL the time.

Yes, Tabitha! We praise you. We join Luke in eulogizing you for caring for the poor and marginalized and for seeing yourself as a steward of your resources to support ALL people, not just yourself. We praise you for using your creative gifts of garment making to lead a successful business. We praise you for being the kind of person who can communicate cross-culturally. We praise you for being a disciple who follows and learns and centers the entirety of your life in the values of your faith: helping the poor, feeding the widows, providing for the community.

⁴ <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g18/kjv/tr/0-1/>

⁵ <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g2041/kjv/tr/0-1/>

⁶ <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g1654/kjv/tr/0-1/>

Eulogizing is inspirational and contagious, isn't it!? And even more so when we do it for *the living*! Friends, the first lesson I want us to take from Tabitha's testimony is that we need to be lavish in our praise when we see people living out their faith in transformational ways that lift up the marginalized, provide for the poor, and center community before self. We need to praise those who we see living out their calling in courageous and effective ways, who are embodying and teaching God's love however God has gifted them to do so.

How lavish can we be with our praise today? Yes, of course today, for our mothers, grandmothers, aunts, and mothering figures who helped raise us and mentor us—*and also* for anyone and everyone in our lives *every* day who we see living out their faith in powerful ways, big and small.

Let's be honest. Most of what we read and hear and consume these days is negative. And we complain about that, which just puts more negativity into the air. And yes, there is a lot of Bad News happening in real time. But guess what. There is Good News happening in real time too, and if we fail to speak of

the praiseworthy things we see happening in the world in the name of the biblical Jesus we see in the gospels who lived among and loved and served the poor, the children, the widows (and not in the name of the Christian Nationalist Jesus who is not recognizable in the pages of scripture), then we are failing to live out a key part of our Testimony and the Testimony of all those people working behind the scenes and out front for the sake of the gospel.

How many people can you eulogize this week? In conversation, through handwritten notes, in a text or phone call, on social media, in public settings?

And, most importantly...if someone praises *you* for something you are doing that they feel is making a difference in the world—serving others, teaching others, helping others, sharing with others, uplifting others—*let them* praise you! Did you hear me? Let them eulogize you for all your goodness. Do not say “*oh, it's not that big of a deal,*” “*or it wasn't just me it was all these other people too.*” No, no. It IS a big deal. And it was you, even if was a bunch of other people too.

I know this is hard because it's hard for me too; it makes us uncomfortable. But not much about the gospel is comfortable after all. Please, *Let people praise you for your faithful, Christlike works*. Let people call out your praiseworthy deeds. Because if we don't, we are are shutting down the gospel. Have you ever thought about that?

Despite the humble intentions of not wanting to receive public praise, the impact is devastating. Our personal insecurities about not wanting to be in the spotlight is detrimental to our collective spirituality and moral ethic. Because in the vacuum of our praise, other voices will speak instead, and loudly. What happens instead is that people doing things that do NOT reflect the love and light of Christ get all of the air time...their words are the ones that reverberate through the headlines...their actions end up being the ones that define Christianity.

So when you see someone helping the poor, sheltering an immigrant, or speaking up for rights, when you see someone teaching children or caring for one who is suffering—eulogize that like crazy! And, let people eulogize you.

We bless our world when we eulogize the living, when we call out the praiseworthy acts of God's love happening in the world through ordinary lives.

Now, get ready for a little whiplash. Because we're going from praise to lament. From **eulogy to elegy. And this is the second part of Tabitha's testimony.** If the eulogy spoke to her local impact, the elegy speaks to her personal impact on the ones that knew her best.

I know exactly what you are thinking right now, or what you're googling. *What's the difference between eulogy and elegy?* No worries, I've got you.

By definition, an elegy is a poem of lament or a song of mourning for the dead. While eulogies are not exclusively for the dead, elegies are. I found this explanation about their difference helpful: "*While both eulogies and elegies are traditionally written to honor someone who has died, the difference lies primarily in tone and perspective. Eulogies [when given for the dead] look back to the past, celebrating the subject's deeds and life, while elegies look forward, mourning the present and future without the subject in it. Eulogies and*

elegies can both take many literary forms, but eulogies are most often written in prose and elegies are most often poems, [musical compositions, or anything that expresses emotion on a deeper level about the loss we are feeling in our present and future].”⁷

For example, a eulogy might include words of praise saying, “Mrs. Smith was an English teacher at Colorado Middle School for ten years, impacting hundreds of students.” An elegy is a handful of Mrs. Smith’s seventh grade students standing up and emoting and sharing how their lives were changed by this teacher and how their world will forever be different now that she is not teaching and not doing the specific things she does that impact them—like bringing in guest speakers to make the books they’re reading come alive, or taking them to plays on the weekends, or listening to them talk through their middle school drama.

There is a specificity to elegies that is borne out of deep relationship. It’s not the stuff printed on CVs or resumes. It’s the stuff that causes the tears that fall down your face, the

ache that you feel forming in your heart.

Of course, I’m using the term metaphorically today, because we do not read a specific poem or musical composition in the text about Tabitha. But the grief of her absence is palpable in terms of how it affects those who loved her the most. There are two key moments that are elegy moments. They reveal the personal impact and relationship Tabitha had on her community.

First is the tender tending to of Tabitha’s body—which would have only been done by women close to her, just as we know women close to Jesus went to his tomb to anoint his body with spices. This is an intimate act done by the grieving, done by those in community with the person—and always, in that day, done by women. These women who washed Tabitha’s body after she died from her illness and placed her in an upper room (a room upstairs). I think Luke shares that specific detail with us to draw our minds toward Jesus, priming us for Easter 2.0, but these details of washing a dead body and laying her in a special room set apart are so important. I can’t think of a

⁷ <https://study.com/academy/lesson/elegy-poems-definition-examples.html>

more tender, sacred act than this. It is a duty full of devotion, and I have to imagine they might have hummed or sang as they washed her body. Elegy.

Then, we read that as Peter is called for and arrives, “*all the widows*” stood beside him, “*weeping and showing tunics and other clothing Dorcas (Tabitha) had made while she was with them,*” (v39).

The word “weep” here is *klaiō* which means to bewail, to mourn out loud with wailing.⁸ This was not a silent grief. This was guttural. This is music of the heart, their wailing a song of lamentation. And undergirding their wailing harmonies was a steady, unrelenting beat of clinging. Clinging to the clothing items that Tabitha (Dorcas) had made for them.

Perhaps you know this familiar desire, to pull close to you an item of clothing from a loved one you’ve lost, trying to catch their scent one more time. Perhaps you have displayed homemade quilts or knitted scarfs, or other kinds of artwork or artifacts of a loved one at a memorial service here in our Fellowship Hall—knowing that

some stories can only be told through “showing,” some talent only understood through what it created.

Do you see how these actions—the tender washing of a body, the wailing out loud with grief, the displaying of items lovingly created by the one we’ve lost—are more elegy than eulogy? The tenderness and expression of these women and widows are not evidence of quantifiable achievements of Tabitha; rather they are qualitative experiences of how she touched hearts and changed lives. They are the lasting melody of her life that will echo and reverberate.

Just as eulogies name the things praiseworthy about someone’s life when they were living, elegies grieve what will no longer “be” in the present or future because of what is now gone. There will be no more tunics made by Tabitha, no more clothing items given to these widows. In a sense, the song of lamentation they are singing has a singular lyric: “*Who will care for us now that Tabitha is dead? Who will clothe us? Who will create community with us?*”

⁸<https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g2799/kjv/tr/0-1/>

Community is at the heart of Tabitha's testimony.

You know, Luke does not mention any man connected to Tabitha. So often in scripture women are identified with the men in their life: Miriam the *sister* of Moses, Sarah the *wife* of Abraham, Hagar the *concubine* of Abraham, Leah the *daughter* of Laban, Rebecca the *mother* of Jacob. That's if they are even given a name. But here, in Acts 9, this female disciple—Tabitha to the Jews, Dorcas to the Gentiles—holds her own without mention of a man. In fact, she is given TWO names, not one, both of which speak to *her connections with communities*. Tabitha Dorcas is defined by her discipleship *and* her relationships to the women and widows she served and provided for.

Tabitha was a successful businesswoman. These women were widows. Back then this would have been two different classes of people: one who could provide for herself and ones who depended on the community for provision. Widows were marginalized, and often forgotten. Tabitha did not *have* to be in community with them, she chose to be.

We learn from her testimony, that such communities are not just there for our charity, or sharing of our resources, but are there for us to be in relationship with. It's not about giving them things, it's about receiving from them gifts as well. How are we laughing, loving, learning, living *together*? How are we spending our time, and who are we spending it with?

This is the challenge to us from Tabitha's testimony: If the communities that would show up to mourn us include our family and other people who are generally in the same social class and/or situation as us, it begs the question: **are we living and following Jesus as he invites us to live? Are we connecting with the people in the world who Jesus is inviting us to connect to and commune with?** How can we create authentic and equitable communities of care, where the widows of the world and the Tabithas of the world are mutually dependent on one another?

You see, it's only within the context of who she was in and for her community **that we can truly appreciate the climax of this text, which is Tabitha's rising from death to life.**

Easter 2.0, the third part of her testimony that brings everything full circle, even as it spreads her story on a global scale.

On Easter Sunday we celebrate the Resurrection of Jesus as One who was the Incarnation of God's Love. Jesus' resurrection gives us hope that Death is not the end of the story; that Life prevails. And, Easter reminds us that no one or no power can kill God's love or extinguish Hope.

While Jesus resurrection means something different to us because of *who* Jesus was, he was by no means the only person brought back to life in scripture. Resurrection was not unique to Jesus.

There are three folks who are brought back to life from death by the prophets: Elijah raises the son of the widow of Zarephath (1 King 17:17-24), Elisha raises the son of the Shunammite Woman (2 Kings 4:18-37), and an Israelite man whose body merely touched the bones of Elisha was also raised back to life (2 Kings 13:20-21).

There are three folks that Jesus brought back to life: the son of the widow of Nain (Luke 7:11-17), the daughter of synagogue

leader Jairus (Luke 8:49-56), and his close friend Lazarus (John 11:1-44).

And there are *two* folks that are brought back to life by Jesus' disciples after his death in the book of Acts—Peter raises Tabitha/Dorcas (Acts 9:36-42) from today's story, and Paul raises Eutychus, the guy who fell out a window (Acts 20:7-12).

I love the symbolism of Three raisings by the Prophets, Three raisings by Jesus, and Two raisings by the Disciples because, symbolically, it leaves the door open for us to experience the "third" raising as the disciples in the world today.

It's easy for our modern minds to get caught up in the logistics of resurrection and the science of it all. Is it medically possible for people to die and rise again? Can it be proven that these folks were really dead...maybe they were just "almost dead"...and then came back to life. These questions are fun to bat round if you like that sort of thing. But it's really not the point (of the story, or of our faith).

Things happen every day—medically and otherwise—that we cannot explain. And I know

for a fact that there are those of you in this room today that feel like you have a second lease on life...either because you overcame addiction, or you survived cancer, or you lived through a horrific car accident when you easily could have died. Some of you got out of a relationship that was unhealthy for you or were adopted by someone when your biological parents were not able to care for you.

I see this even in my own story. A tree limb fell on me and broke my C1 vertebrae when I was 19. A lot of people die or are paralyzed when they break their neck. I broke my neck and am neither paralyzed nor dead. Anomaly or Oddity, Lucky or Miraculous, however you describe it—I could have been dead yet I am alive.

But, in truth, couldn't ALL of us say this? Our hearts could have stopped last night in our sleep, but they didn't. We woke up today. They're still beating.

We will never be able to explain the age old question of why some people are “saved” and others “die” or why “bad things” happen to “good people.” The truth is: *life is precious*. And every single

moment on this earth is a gift. None of us are guaranteed any number of days or years of life. Some live one day and some live 100 years. Why? We don't know, but what we do know is that life is precious.

Tabitha's testimony is not powerful and transformative because she is brought back to life. Tabitha's testimony is powerful and transformative because of WHO she was while she was living, what community she was a part of—and how she lived her life caring for the poor and ensuring widows had what they needed. She knew all lives were precious, especially the ones the world dismisses, demeans, or deports.

Think about it: had no one known Tabitha before she died, no one would have noticed when she died, or sent someone frantically to get Peter to try to bring her back to life or help, and certainly her rising would not have been something an entire community would have celebrated if she was not someone who the community wanted to celebrate.

In other words, if Tabitha's life did not impact other people, her rising would not have had the

impact that it did on creating new believers in the Lord.

I'm calling Tabitha's Testimony Easter 2.0 because her life really impacted her community—as evidenced by Eulogy (words of praise about her life) and Elegy (deep, emotive grief at her death)—just as Jesus' life really impacted his community.

I'm also calling it Easter 2.0 because Peter raising Tabitha back to life is the first resurrection after Jesus' own. God is reminding us through this story that our Testimony matters, and that when we live in community with others and when we uplift others with our giving and living, serving those in need—our lives have resounding impact. In so many ways, Tabitha Dorcas helped 'resurrect' life and hope in the lives of all these widows and women. **The real power of 'rising' in this story is ALL the women who Tabitha helped raise up throughout her life.**

Life is not fair in terms of who gets a Tabitha-type miracle and who doesn't. Life just isn't fair. But what I can say is that while each of us has breath in our

lungs, we ALL have the opportunity to be the kind of person like Tabitha who helps RAISE up those around her. She truly is a Mother to the world in this sense.

I have one last Greek word for you today: *Anastethi*, which means "*Arise! Get up! Stand up!*" It's what Peter says to Tabitha. Did you know this verb, in some form, is found over 100 times in the New Testament?⁹ Given that there are only a handful of resurrection stories in scripture, it's used most often in the context of waking people up to the world around them to help them see a new perspective, or live their life in a different way.

Peter's command is something we need to hear ourselves on a daily basis as we become numb to the world around us, or dead to the concerns of those in need around us: *Wake up! Arise! Get up!* Something is happening. Your gifts are needed. See with new eyes. View with new perspective. Stop sleepwalking through life; become awake to the world.

Where in your life do you need to wake up? What do you want

⁹ Kaalund, *ibid.*

to close your eyes to when you know you need to keep them open and alert and awake?

May we all be blessed and challenged by Tabitha's testimony today.

I truly wonder what it must have felt like for her when Peter said "*Tabitha, get up,*" and she fluttered open her eyes? We know she sees Peter, we know she sits up...but then did you catch what Luke says happened next? She did not stand on her own. *Peter gave Tabitha his hand and helped her stand up.* Resurrection is never a solitary event. It always happens in community and for community.

This moment as the moment before the rest of your life begins. Is there anything in the way you have been living that you want to shift or change? Every moment is a new beginning. A moment to die to old ways of being and rise to new ways of being. A second chance at life comes to us with each inhale and exhale.

This is your moment to do something differently today than how you did it yesterday. Your chance to reset from whatever happened this morning, and to live differently this afternoon.

Little resurrections. Little second chances.

hear these words, "***Calvary, Wake up. Get up. Arise!***"

Flutter your eyes open. See the gift of this new day, *this very moment*. And rise up! And on your way up, look around and see if someone else needs a hand. For as we rise together, so do our testimonies. And when our testimonies rise, so does the volume of the Good News in the world.

Amen.