

Rise Up!

Acts 9:36-43

Farmville Baptist Church

May 8, 2022

As many of you know, I was out of town last weekend. I did manage to slip into the back of the sanctuary to participate in the worship service, and heard a wonderful sermon in the process, but it was a nice weekend to get away and do something I had wanted to do for a LONG time. A reenacting friend of mine, who lives near Raleigh, had theater tickets in Charlotte, and he invited me to use his second ticket to see the hit musical *Hamilton*.

And, I've got to tell you, it was incredible!

I had heard the soundtrack countless times and saw the Broadway cast recording on Disney. I had seen the behind-the-scenes videos and read up on the show's creator, Lin-

Manuel Miranda. I knew that *Hamilton* was a cultural phenomenon, and that the songs and characterizations were well-executed and engaging. But nothing, absolutely nothing, could have prepared me to see the musical in person. It was amazing, outstanding, inspiring even, and I'd go see it again next week if I could.

The musical, of course, tells a version of the story of Alexander Hamilton, one of the nation's more colorful founding fathers. A genius who left his fingerprints on the US Constitution and our financial system, Hamilton also lived a flawed life that ended in a famous duel with then-Vice President Aaron Burr in 1803. Along the way, he was a hero of the American Revolution and a close advisor to President Washington, rising from, as the song says, "poverty and squalor" on a Caribbean island to being one of the most powerful and influential people in the young United States.

Indeed, this theme of “rising up” – both in terms of the revolution against Britain and Hamilton’s own ascent from humble beginnings – is a steady drumbeat throughout the play, especially in some of the most powerful and poignant moments.

Perhaps the theme of rising up strikes such a chord with audiences at *Hamilton* performances because we have a narrative in our culture that rewards the story of rising up. We love the tale of someone who lifts themselves up by their bootstraps; we have a fantasy that America is somehow the place where anyone can make it if they simply try hard enough, work hard enough. Our heroes are self-made men and women, folks who have almost willed themselves to success. The idea of an orphaned immigrant from the Caribbean finding a pathway to power and fame through military service, determination, and moxie – well, that’s an

irresistible combination. It's no wonder American audiences have eaten it up!

I think 1st century audiences would have, as well. You see, we aren't all that different in many respects from the people we read about in ancient literature and writings, including the people of Scripture. Folks in those days still worried about their children and families, how to put enough food on the table, and where to place their trust for the future. There were folks then looking to get ahead, to grab a seat at the table of power and hang on to it tightly. Even Jesus' own disciples fell into this category at times; James and John asked Jesus to ensure their ascendancy¹, the disciples got into an argument at Jesus' last meal with them over who was the greatest², and even after his resurrection, the disciples asked Jesus, "Lord, at this time, are you going

¹ Mk. 10:35-40

² Luke 22:24-30

to restore the kingdom to Israel?”³ Jesus’ closest followers, at least part of the time, thought he was their ticket to a better life than hauling in nets of fish and collecting taxes from their fellow Jews. They threw in their lot with him, thinking it would help them rise up and get them in the room where it happened as advisors and ministers of a new, rebel kingdom. They thought Jesus was heading up a nationalist movement that would restore the nostalgic days of old – while, incidentally, empowering and enriching Jesus’ followers in the process.

They, of course, got it all wrong. Jesus had been telling them for years that he wasn’t about the power and might to force others to his way of thinking, or ~~of~~ the path of “success” in the world’s terms, with bigger and bigger barns to store all his wealth. Instead, he was teaching a humbler path, and

³ Acts 1:6

modelling for them a different way of leading and being in the world. After the Spirit's arrival at Pentecost, it seems his closest friends finally "got" it. They went forth on a path of bold preaching and miracle-working, but a path that didn't bring them riches or political influence – remember Peter and John telling the lame man, "We don't have silver and gold," and then almost immediately appearing before the Jewish ruling council and rejecting the path to relevance and influence that they suggested. The early church took Jesus' servanthood and humility to heart, putting the work of the kingdom first and eschewing the trappings of power and success.

The spiritual descendants of those early Christians have not, on balance, done a very good job following in their footsteps.

Oh, for a while they did; the first few generations of Christians were known for their radical common life of grace and forgiveness, mercy and compassion. The early church was known for choosing to live simply so that what they had could be shared with the poor, for rescuing children left to die by taking them in as their own, for refusing to strike back when outsiders and opponents slandered them and even persecuted them. But over time, as Christianity spread, it also became infected with the perspective of the world. It became a tool of the powerful, not a salvation for the powerless. It became a means to wealth and influence, not a way of life that supported the poor and the rejected. It became a guide for personal philosophy, not a challenge to the temptations of the world that draw us away from the kingdom of God. And so we arrive in our current time, with far too many Christians grabbing for political power and

influence to force their vision of the world on others, often compromising the teachings of Christ along the way, while other Christians adhere to a prosperity gospel that says, "if you make God happy enough, he'll fill your bank account and give you the good life now." Both of those avenues are attempts to rise up ^{in life} – but neither reflects the way of Jesus.

That's why it's good, I think, to revisit the story of Tabitha, because she shows us another way to rise up – in her case, to rise up in the way of Jesus and not in the way of the world. We don't know anything about Tabitha outside of this passage of Scripture, but there's so much here that we can have a pretty good picture of who she was, and why we should pay attention to her story.

The first thing we know about Tabitha was that she lived in Joppa, a seaport town that today is a suburb of Tel Aviv. Ancient even when the Israelites took control of the

Promised Land, Joppa was a site of trade and transit; it was through Joppa that the cedars of Lebanon passed for the construction of the Temple, and it was from Joppa that Jonah booked passage to flee God's call to Nineveh.⁴ As a seaport, Joppa was a melting pot of cultures, with many languages spoken, many religions finding expression, and many paths crossing.

In this bustling seaport was a disciple named Tabitha, also known as Dorcas. This woman with a name meaning 'gazelle' was a couple of things. First, she was a disciple. Indeed, she is the only woman specifically called a disciple in the New Testament (though we know many women were disciples of Jesus and were addressed as such in large groups).⁵ A disciple, or *mathetria*, was a follower of a rabbi, a student of a teacher, who was learning to imitate and

⁴ 2 Chron. 2:16, Ezra 3:7, Jon. 1:3

⁵ LT Johnson, Acts commentary, p. 177

embody what they had seen their master do and live how their master lived. To be a disciple was to strive to be like **one's** master in every possible way, in all of life. That's what Tabitha was doing: striving to be like Jesus in every imaginable way.

As she did this, we note that she has a second name: Dorcas. It's a Greek name, we are told – but it is simply the same word in Greek that 'Tabitha' is in Aramaic. This lets us in on some insider knowledge: Tabitha was connected not just in local Jewish communities, but also in the wider Greek-speaking communities of Joppa. Greek was the *lingua franca* of the day, the language used by merchants and sailors and travelers of all kinds. The people in Joppa who were 'from-heres,' Jews of the area, would have spoken Aramaic, almost certainly the native language of Tabitha. The people in Joppa who were 'come-heres' – folks from

around the Roman Empire, whether Jews or Gentiles – would have spoken Greek. Tabitha is well-known enough in both communities to ^{answer to} ~~be known by~~ both versions of her name. This is a woman deeply connected to the people of Joppa, even across language barriers.

While the text doesn't tell us this explicitly, I think it's pretty safe to say that Tabitha was one of 'those folks' in Joppa: the lady everyone knew, the person you could go to when you were in trouble because she was connected to everyone, the woman who just got things done. We've all known people like this, haven't we – folks who are well-connected, who cross boundaries, who it seems have an 'in' with everyone in town. These are important people, influential people. They could pretty much accomplish whatever they wanted to in their community, because they had spent years forming relationships, bridging gaps

between different groups in the city, and finding common ground. Tabitha, most likely, had quite a bit of influence in the city, quite a large amount of relational capital that she could spend however she wanted.

And what did she use that influence, that power, that relational capital for? Did she use it to increase her own wealth? No. Did she use it to gain greater power and control? No. Instead, Tabitha used what she had  her connections and her resources, to take care of the poor and the needy.

One of those groups of folks needing help that she focused on were the widows of Joppa. Widows – women who had suffered loss in their personal lives, but who also had been cut out of public life and lost their means of financial security, women who had no one to care for them and who could easily be overlooked. These women could all

too easily fade into the background – and Tabitha took care of them. She made them robes and clothes. She literally took care of the most basic needs that they couldn't take care of themselves. And she didn't just do that for them; we're told "she was always doing good and helping the poor."⁶ It was something she did right up until she died.

What would cause Tabitha to do such a thing? What would lead her to spend her days, weeks, years in service to the most forgotten and most powerless people of her day – especially when doing so would only cost her and not benefit her? It goes back to that very first thing we learn about her, even before we learn her name: Tabitha was a *mathēria*, a disciple of Jesus. She had made a choice, some time before, to learn what Jesus taught and how he lived. Then...she lived it, too.

⁶ Acts 9:36b

As she did, choosing the path of service to others, of compassion and generosity, Tabitha discovered something. Just as she was choosing the humble path of Jesus, she found herself rising up. She found herself rising up in the esteem of the widows and poor persons that she served in Joppa, who appreciated her care and love as well as the warm cloaks and robes that she provided them. She found herself rising in the eyes of the leaders of the church in Joppa, who upon finding out she had passed sent two men from Joppa to Lydda to implore Peter to come at once – they didn't know what he could do, but they hoped he could do something, because they needed Tabitha in the Joppa church. And she found herself rising in the judgment of Peter himself, the right-hand man to Jesus who had become the acclaimed leader of the church in the aftermath of Pentecost. Indeed, the kind of disciple Tabitha was, the way

that she lived out what Jesus had taught and lived, was so vital to the work of God in Joppa, so central to what the Spirit of God was accomplishing there, that God empowered Peter to say to her, “Tabitha, get up.” The Greek there, *anastethi*, is the same word Peter and other disciples used to describe what happened on Easter, and the same word Luke used in his Gospel to describe what happened to Jesus: that he had been raised from the dead. And so Peter prays next to the dead body of Tabitha, this devoted disciple of Jesus in Joppa, and then he turns to her and says, “Tabitha, rise up!”

Now, I’ve got to tell you, I’ve preached this passage before, several times. I’ve read this story dozens of times before. I have loved this story for years – and this week, as I prepared for this sermon, it hit me for the first time: Tabitha is the only person explicitly called a disciple of Jesus who was raised from the dead in the Scriptures. Sure, there are

other people who followed Jesus who were resuscitated – Lazarus, his friend, was raised by Christ in John 11, and Paul returned life to Eutychus, a young man who fell asleep during Paul’s sermon and fell out a window. But to actually be named, explicitly, as a disciple? There are many of them in the New Testament – famous ones like Peter and John, little-known ones like Matthias and Cleopas, even one infamous one named Judas Iscariot – but only Tabitha was deemed vital enough to God’s work that she was called back to earthly life.

Tabitha, who didn’t preach to kings or governors.

Tabitha, who didn’t heal the masses.

Tabitha, who didn’t write influential letters to churches across the known world.

Tabitha, who didn’t wield political power or control.

No, it was Tabitha, doer of good deeds, helper of the poor, companion to the widows, who heard the ultimate invitation to “rise up” – rise up and return to the Christlike work she had already been doing out of love for God, imitation of Christ, and care for her neighbor. And as she rose up from her deathbed, restored by the Spirit of God to life and ministry, we are told, “This became known all over Joppa, and many people believed in the Lord.”⁷

I don't know if any of us will ever hear those words, “rise up,” in quite the same way that Tabitha did. Most of the time, we run our race and we hope we've kept the faith before closing our eyes here on earth and opening them to be with our Lord in Paradise. But all of us can be inspired by Tabitha – because all of us can do what she did. We can be serious disciples of Jesus, dedicating ourselves to following

⁷ Acts 9:42

him, growing in our imitation of him, putting him at the center of our lives. We can learn the strange new way of “rising up” that is part and parcel of the kingdom of God. And out of that, we can all open our eyes to see what needs are around us, what people are being neglected or ignored, what group of folks need a bit of extra care, what it means to be a disciple of Jesus, right here and right now.

Today, may we be inspired by the example of one disciple in particular, Tabitha, who gave her life to the imitation of Christ and the service of the poor, the needy, and the neglected. And let us find there a call for each us to rise up, not in revolt or in selfish ambition or in passionless duty as we try to rise to the top, but in humble service and honest love for our Lord through humble service and honest love for those God opens our eyes to who need our help. If we will, we might just recognize that true joy is found, not in

power or prestige, but in service to God's kingdom – and that, in that kingdom, any of us can rise up and make a difference in the lives of others and in the name of our Lord.