



FIRST CONGREGATIONAL
CHURCH UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
Stockbridge, Massachusetts

Stop, Drop, and Roll

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SCRIPTURE: Acts 9:36-43 ³⁶Now in Joppa there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas. She was devoted to good works and acts of charity. ³⁷At that time she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs. ³⁸Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, who heard that Peter was there, sent two men to him with the request, "Please come to us without delay." ³⁹So Peter got up and went with them; and when he arrived, they took him to the room upstairs. All the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them. ⁴⁰Peter put all of them outside, and then he knelt down and prayed. He turned to the body and said, "Tabitha, get up." Then she opened her eyes, and seeing Peter, she sat up. ⁴¹He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive. ⁴²This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. ⁴³Meanwhile he stayed in Joppa for some time with a certain Simon, a tanner.

SERMON: It was a few weeks after Easter. The pastor of the church had hired someone to come in and to preach, because he was exhausted. This was no ordinary church, this was Willow Creek, a huge church in suburban Chicago. And as the pastor sat in a pew pretty much back where Rebecca is, trying to remain inconspicuous in this throng of thousands. He sat there and he started wondering something. At first, his heart, he says, overflowed with joy because he saw the people that were there, he knew about the programs that were flourishing and deepening, he knew the place was alive and on the move and busy. And yet, he sat there wondering from the seat in the pew rather than in the seat up here, whether or not everything that they were doing was making a difference. No, not just out in the world, but in here. He tried to contemplate. Because what we do as a church, does it matter, does it shape us in this Easter time to be followers, to be disciples of Christ? Tabitha, she was a disciple of Christ, the Bible tells us.

And since it was Willow Creek, and since funding was not exactly an obstacle, he went to his church council and asked, I want to try to figure out if what we're doing matters. And so, they thought, who could we work with, and went to Harvard. They hired the best and brightest researchers, and they decided they would study 1,000 churches to try to determine what it was that drove a life of faith from showing up to following. They developed matrices, and they studied, and they spoke with, and they measured. And do you know what they discovered? The single most important thing that you could do to deepen your faith, to deepen your love of God and love of neighbor, whether you were a brand new Christian or one who had been coming to that church for decades, the most important single thing that could move you deeper was Bible study, was looking with a group of people and studying the Bible to find out what messages were in there. And so this morning, in this group, that is what we are going to do. We are going to study the Bible, for this is no ordinary story, this is an Easter story, and if we want to follow Jesus, this gives us a beautiful blueprint for how to become Easter disciples of Christ. So, find the black book that's in your pews. It is the one that has been lovingly worn from all the use, it is the one that should be soft to the touch, and go ahead and open it to page 956.

So let's start with the basics. What book are we in for this reading? Acts. Or sometimes known as The Acts of the Apostles, right? Acts. What kind of a book is it? It's about the acts of the apostles, okay, it's fairly descriptive. It's actually part of a gospel. Acts was never meant to stand on its own. Acts was never meant to be out there saying, hey look at me. Instead, it was written as part of Luke's gospel. And the church fathers – we'll go ahead call them fathers so we can blame them on this Mother's Day – the church fathers decided that John would fit nice and easy between Luke and Acts. And while it makes some sense, it disrupts the entire flow, because you are supposed to read Luke and continue right into Acts, because Luke's perspective is that the work of Jesus continues always and only in the work of – you! Those who follow. Disciples.

So before we talk about Acts, it's probably important to talk a little bit about Luke. Here's some things that you need to know about this gospel before we dive into this story. First of all, it is known by many as the gospel of amazement. Amazement shows up 56 times in Luke's gospel, more than any other and all other books of the Bible combined. Luke is amazed at what happens. Luke comes from the outside of faith, and day by day he is amazed by things that boggle his mind, that defy logic, that open up new ways of living. To read Luke is to give over to the amazement of the story of Jesus. Second, if you read Luke compared to the other synoptic gospels Matthew and Mark, you will notice that of all the gospels, Luke puts the heaviest emphasis on prayer. Prayer matters, amen? And in Luke, prayer matters greatly. It is while Jesus was praying at his baptism that the Spirit descended in bodily form. It was while Jesus was praying on the mountain top that he dazzled white. Jesus prayed before he sent out the disciples. At every pivotal moment and before every critical action, Jesus prays in Luke. And finally, Jesus in Luke's gospel is not just the Savior come to rescue us and drag us along, but rather the one on whose life we are to model our own, the one we are to follow. Timothy Keller, a Presbyterian pastor, says that being a disciple and follower of Jesus Christ means setting a new priority in our lives. It means finding a new identity for who we are, and interestingly enough, he says it means living a new mercy. Isn't that interesting? Living a new mercy. I want you to hold on to that last part, living a new mercy, because that shows up in our reading in a profound way.

Who is the disciple that we encounter in this story today? (Congregation: Peter) Well, he's the second one we encounter, the first one we discover is Tabitha; a woman disciple, named clearly and unequivocally. Tabitha, the disciple. And then there is Peter. I love Peter. I do. Maybe it's because the Bible talks the most about him. But I love him, because he's the most real. Peter is the one I yearn to be most like. Well, that is, when he is declaring Jesus to be the Savior. That is, when Peter is the one who – remember when Jesus walks on the water, what does Peter do? He gets out of the boat and he walks to him. I want to be Peter, the one who gets out of the boat and walks on water. Maybe the other reason I resonate so completely with Peter, he is the one I'm most afraid I am like. Like those moments where he in one breath proclaims Jesus as Savior, and in the following breath messes up entirely what that means. Or like that one moment where he follows Jesus who's been arrested because he loves him so much, and wants to make sure he's okay, and then denies that he even knows him. That's why we love Peter, right? Because we are Peter.

So let's look at this story. It doesn't start where Peter is, but it starts with the name of a city – Joppa. Okay, now you're going to get huge brownie points if you know the answer to this question: Have you heard of Joppa? Did anything else happen in Joppa? Okay, cool, something you might not have known. Joppa is the city where Jonah fled from his calling to go to Nineveh. It is Joppa from which Jonah says no way, God, I'm gonna have no part in what you're asking me to do. I'm going that way, getting out of town as fast as I can. Remember that, when we get to the end of today's story. Jonah couldn't wait to leave. Peter, we'll see what he does.

Tabitha, we mentioned she was a disciple, a female disciple. By the way, her name does translate

into the unfortunate name of Dorcas, but do you know what that means? Gazelle! What does “gazelle” strike you as? Graceful, fast, beautiful, right? I have never heard of a gazelle connoted as anything negative. And what does she do, this disciple, this gazelle? (Congregation: “She was devoted to good works.”) Yes, in fact there is another translation that says she “abounds” in good works, abounds in them. And we’re going to find out a bit later what those good works are. Turns out she was living, as Timothy Keller said, into this idea of that new mercy, that she was living with people to whom she was extending mercy day after day, breath after breath. And then unfortunately what do we know about Tabitha? She dies. And those that have been drawn to her, those that she had lived in community with, those upon whom she lavished all those good works, they honored her, they washed her body, they took care of her. She was dead.

So now, let’s go back to Peter. Peter was in the neighboring town. He was not far away. And those disciples came and they showed up, and what did they say to Peter? Make haste. Come quickly. There is no indication in this story that they asked anything of Peter. There is no indication in this story that Peter had any idea of what he was going to do. They simply said come quickly. And I don’t know if it was the panicked look in their eyes, I don’t know if it was the fact that their eyes were red from crying, I don’t know what it was about that request. But what does Peter do? He gets up and he goes. So, the first thing I want you to remember about what it means to be a disciple is first to stop and simply listen. Don’t worry about whether you are up for it or not. Don’t worry about what it is that awaits you. But if you are needed, stop, listen, and go. Step number one.

So where do they take him? To the upper room. Huh, upper room, ring any bells? Maybe just a couple, it should. The upper room is that place where the disciples spent that final night with Jesus around this very table right here. It was in that room where in the face of the greatest powers of earth, Jesus sat and taught them a new way, taught them about breaking their bodies wide open, about pouring their life force out. It was around that table where they prayed and they gathered. I wonder if, as Peter walked up those stairs, if those memories kindled in his heart. I think my knees would have been shaking walking up those stairs.—they put her in that room because it was a quiet room, it was a private room, it was a room where they could honor and remember and hold on to her for as long as they could. They took him to the upper room.

And while they were there, who is there with him? Widows. Turns out the community, the one that Tabitha had been caring for, the one that she had been pouring out these lavish gifts upon, was a community of widows. People who had known what it meant to lose someone already, people who were now at the mercy and the margins of society. People for whom the Bible and the New Testament prays for over and over again to take care of the widows. People in Isaiah, the prophet thundered were being neglected. The community that Tabitha was with was a bunch of widows, and they loved her so. In love they show Peter the things she made. We don’t know whether these garments were sold to benefit this community or whether she lavished on them, showing them how beautiful and worthy and delightful they were. Think about the last time you put on something that you considered to be beautiful. Didn’t it lift your spirits? Tabitha’s gift to them, showing them they mattered, showing that they were people of worth. And then suddenly she was gone.

What does Peter do? He puts them all outside. He says, Leave this room. And before Peter does anything, what does he do? He prays. Would Jesus be so happy that finally the disciples get it, with all that praying he did. Peter prays. And notice in which direction does Peter pray? He turns, and so he is praying away from the body. In the end he turns toward the body, but first he kneels down and he is not looking at the body. And while that might seem cruel or not kind, I look at it differently, that Peter is not allowing himself to become overwhelmed with a problem that’s in front of him. Instead he’s turning to the source that empowers him. He is not letting his own

human frailties and his lack of faith and his lack of belief get in the way. He turns to the source of that belief and letting whatever it is that might be God's power come down and tell him what to do. As a Congregational church, we pray all the time. We vote some of the time. And when we vote, it's supposed to be about how we pray, about how we feel the Spirit moving within us. So Peter does not look at the problem, instead he looks at the source. He turns away from that body and he prays.

The Gospel of John tells an amazing story about the raising of Lazarus. Jesus is walking on the way to see Lazarus. And Lazarus' sister comes out and she throws herself at Jesus' feet and she is inconsolably weeping. And Jesus looks around and he sees all of the faithful Jewish people who had come out of the city and they too are weeping over the loss of Lazarus. Peter has just witnessed this community, the faithful and the widows – there is a distinction to be made – also weeping. So Peter does what Jesus did, allowing that crying to be moved. Amy Levine, a Jewish Biblical scholar, would say we should not confuse this, that he is raising Tabitha for her good works and good deeds. Instead, Peter recognizes how central she was to the life of that community, how without her that community was adrift and likely in peril. So we don't know why, but in the midst of prayer, Peter suddenly turns back to that body and mindful of the community that was there, what does he do?

He tells her to get up. And then he extends a hand to help her do it. And this is the place where it's tempting to Christians in New England to say, Nice story...Checkin' out, Raised her from the dead? Okay... Remember, Luke is the gospel of amazement. Remember how many times in this sanctuary you've become overwhelmed or overcome by something you didn't understand. Remember all the times in life where God has defied your understanding, whether in peace or in comfort or in healing. Peter here gives in to that moment, and he turns and he simply does not think about the physics of it all or the logistics of it all or what it's gonna do, he simply knows what has to be done, and he turns and he says, Tabitha, get up, and reaches out and helps her do so.

Step number two, which I forgot to tell you before: When he was praying, is to remember to make room for God in your hearts, is to drop to your knees and make room for God. And step number three is to allow the miracles to abound, to allow them to flow forth, to allow lives to be changed.

He shows her to the widows and to the faithful. Grammatically, the language separates the two. These widows that Tabitha was working with as a disciple were not necessarily Christian followers at the time. Now also in the grammar, it implies that he shows her to all of the widows in that community and all of the faithful in that town. They all fit in one upper room. Remember, it's not about size. It's about making a difference in your local community where you are. It is not about whether you shape the earthly stage, but whether we shape this one in the mood and motto of Christ. What we do know is that it brought people together. And what does Peter do at the end of this story? He stays. The absolute antithesis of what Jonah did. He comes, he heals, and he stays -- with a tanner. What does he do then? We don't know. But we know this: He stays.

The pastor of Willow Creek sat in the congregation wondering if what we do in this church matters. He wonders if what we talk about and practice in this church shows up in people's lives. I know that it does in ours, because I've talked to you. But I also know that it can be even stronger if we follow the three step process here that is laid out in Acts. Now, it's hard sometimes to remember new things, so when you're on fire, what do you do? Stop, drop and roll. That is what Peter is reminding us to do here. When you hear a call or see a call, Stop and listen to it. When you come face to face with problems you can't possibly understand, Drop to your knees and turn to the source of it all. And then whatever you're told in that prayer, just Roll with it! Because miracles happen, amazement abounds, and it all starts with you doing amazing things in small towns amid small gatherings. Let there be peace on earth, and in Easter, let it begin with me. Amen.

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