

What about Dorcas?: Acts 9:36-43

by [Jon Walton](#) in the [April 17, 2007](#) issue

I was looking through a high school yearbook recently, a dangerous thing to do when 40 years have passed. I got lost staring at the silly hairstyles, the photos of teachers who are long since gone, the friend in the senior play whose name is now etched on the Vietnam memorial. It was a time of turmoil and strife in the nation. Racial tensions, assassinations and war were tearing the country apart. But you would never know that from my yearbook's carefree and hopeful class photos.

Someone once said that the only reason anyone would ever look at a yearbook 40 years later would be to remember the good things that happened. Yearbooks do that. They gloss over the poignant and focus on the happy and positive.

The book of Acts is like that too; it's a yearbook of the church. It gives us not the whole story, but the story that the church decided should be remembered about its earliest days so that the later church could look back on its idealism and exuberance and remember teachers long since gone and the Spirit that shaped that earliest community of believers.

Luke lingers over one photo in the book with particular interest. It's a picture of Tabitha, or in Greek, Dorcas, a woman whom Peter raised from the dead. The way Luke remembers it, Peter was told to go to Joppa without delay, but when he arrived at Dorcas's house, she had already died. The wake was under way, and the room where Dorcas had been laid was filled with friends, mostly widows, who stood weeping as they passed around afghans, sweaters and shawls—all crocheted by Dorcas. Everyone there had a story about how her life had touched theirs, some selfless act of devotion that she had performed for them. Dorcas, whose name means *gazelle*, was a tireless disciple whose devotion to others inspired a network of support that undergirded an entire church community. You can almost see her looking after others, taking food, dropping by with flowers or spending an afternoon babysitting.

It was alongside this disciple that Peter knelt and prayed for the power of resurrection life. This was the first time in the postresurrection church that a disciple

had exercised the authority of life over death in this way. But Peter's act made clear the fact that the resurrection of Christ had now been passed on to the apostles, and that the resurrection was now at work in the life of the earliest communities of believers.

But why Dorcas? What is it about her life and death that made her death the occasion for Peter to do what Jesus had done with Jairus's daughter (Mark 5:39)—a miracle that Mark tells us Peter himself witnessed? My hunch is that Peter acted as he did because of who Dorcas was, and also because of who she was *not*.

Dorcas was not a preacher, theologian or eloquent writer. She did not make her mark on the church with brave deeds or major financial gifts. But she did win converts and touch lives, and probably influenced more people than anyone else in Joppa.

She took care of people. She made tunics and knitted afghans, baked cookies, held hands and visited people. She listened to the heartbreaks and joys, toils and triumphs of the people in the church in Joppa.

And what's more, she persuaded her friends to help. She organized her own form of ecclesiastical welfare system and established her version of the Little Sisters of the Poor. She was the Dorothy Day of her time, putting a human face on the compassion of Christ and expressing and embodying that love for those in the village of Joppa.

I'm not suggesting that she was the founder of the Ladies Aid Society or the feminine archetype of Martha Stewart in the ecclesia. She expressed in her life the compassion that *all* Christians, men as well as women, are called to embody in their lives.

Compassion (in Latin, *cum patior*) means to suffer with, to put yourself in the place of another, to enter into their experience. It is the primary characteristic of incarnation. It is what God was doing in Christ when God reconciled the world to God's self (2 Cor. 5:19). It is much more than kindness, far more radical than simply being nice. It is fulfilling the requirements of a godly life as described by Micah: doing justice, loving mercy, walking humbly with God, and doing all in a way that is almost imperceptible except for the compassion of it. It is to take to oneself the sufferings of another so deeply that you empty yourself and take the form of a servant, in the manner of Jesus, who did precisely that, even unto death.

A church without men and women who are willing to follow the example of Dorcas is an impoverished church. The creeds may be perfectly recited, the prayers eloquently prayed week after week, the arias perfectly performed on Easter morning, but these are not enough unless the church also has a few gazelles taking care of others as Dorcas did: driving elderly members to church, sending cards to shut-ins on their birthdays, baking communion bread for Sunday morning and knitting blankets for orphaned infants in Iraq.

Dorcas became a symbol of resurrection life in the Joppa church because her simple acts of compassion and caring expressed, in a visible and tangible way, something of the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Is it any wonder that death could lay no more claim on her than it could on Jesus?