

Life Giving Ministry: Still I Rise

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Acts 9:36-43

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Tabitha opened her eyes, sat up and rose up. She opened her eyes and saw that women, especially widowed women were being exploited in her community. She sat up and paid attention to what was happening at the harbor and in the marketplace. She heard the gossip and the rumors of terrible things and began to see what had been hidden in plain sight, while others were turning a blind eye to it. Women were begging for food with their babies on their hips, hanging around the pier offering favors in exchange for food because they were going hungry. Women were being vilified because they were not married, even if the husband had abandoned them or died, while others refused to take them in. Tabitha sat up and started to talk to the women, hearing their stories and learning what they needed. Before long she was taking collections and seeking help from her fellow disciples to care for the women and their children, so they did not need to beg for food or be exploited by others. She organized free meals and shelter, clothing drives and babysitters. Most of all she offered a caring heart and a listening ear without judgment. She believed them and defended them before others.

Soon, she started to teach the women new skills so they could sell their crafts and garments at market or find work with their new skills to earn a living and provide for their children. Both Jewish and Greek women came

seeking her help, her advice and her encouragement. She was called Tabitha by the Jewish women, but Dorca by the Greek women because it was her nickname – Gazelle. She really was a gazelle, always aware of her surroundings, on alert and ready to jump into action, to alert others of danger and lead them to safety. She saved so many women and children from the harm of those who did not see them as women, worthy of love or respect. She restored their sense of dignity and worth.

Others called her a true disciple of Christ because she was teaching the things she had heard about Jesus, his teachings, and his resurrection to all who would listen. She talked about caring for others, forgiving your enemies, and proclaiming that we should love our neighbor as much as we love ourselves and God.

Suddenly word came that Tabitha was gone. Her life suddenly cut short and the women whom she cared for now rose up to care for her. As they prepared her body for the funeral they talked, as women do. They recalled her many stories about her teacher, her beloved Jesus. They talked of how she was hoping to see Peter the new leader of the Jesus followers because he was in nearby in Lydda. One of the women said, “he must be brought here. Peter must help us to honor Tabitha because of her great faith. It was her faith that saved us from so much.” Another wondered, “maybe it is not too late, maybe she too could be raised from the dead like Jesus was?” So, they sent word by the fastest runner to Lydda “Come quickly do not delay.”

It still took several hours for them to return with Peter. While they waited the women prayed, wept, and prayed over their beloved leader. “Oh, Most

holy God, Tabitha is a life giving force among us. Because of her we too have come to believe in Jesus, the resurrected Messiah. Through her and her faith in you, she gave us new life. Now, oh God give her new life. Do not let death have this victory. Restore her to us. Send your resurrecting power once again and restore your servant so that all may believe in you.”

Peter arrived and we shared with him Tabitha’s story and her ministry among us. We asked him to pray and ask God to raise her up and restore her to us, just as God had done so with Jesus. Peter ordered everyone out of the room. We continued to pray as Peter was alone with Tabitha. Before long we heard through the door Peter say, “Tabitha, rise!” and then some commotion within. We rushed in to find her eyes wide open, alert and standing up, alive once again.

Truly Jesus, the Great Shepherd, had walked with Tabitha through the shadow of death and saw her through back to the living and to us once again. Now we had our shepherdess back to lead us once again. We carried on the work she began, and we offered new life to so many more people, especially the women of Joppa and beyond. We learned from Tabitha’s teachings about Jesus how to open our eyes, to sit up and take notice and how to rise up to deliver others from the power of sin and death.

Tabitha eventually did take her rest in God, but her legacy carries on. She inspires women everywhere how to see the world with the eyes of Jesus, full of love and compassion, not condemnation or judgment. She helps us to sit up and take notice not just about the suffering happening around us, but to also envision through the eyes of faith a new life, a new way of being in the world. A life full of love and compassion for others, giving women and

men everywhere the courage to rise up and live in the way, and the truth and the life – the ways of Jesus.

The power of the resurrection continues still today. Hear these words of testimony to resurrection power in the voice of another women, Maya Angelou from the final stanzas of her poem, Still I Rise:

Out of the huts of history's shame
I rise
Up from a past that's rooted in pain
I rise
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
I rise
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear
I rise
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.
I rise
I rise
I rise.¹

¹Maya Angelou, "Still I Rise" from *And Still I Rise: A Book of Poems*. Copyright © 1978 by Maya Angelou. Used by permission of Random House, an imprint and division of Penguin Random House LLC. All rights reserved. Source: *The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou* (1994)