

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: March 16, 2014  
Sermon Title: The Ministry of Dogwood: The Lesson of Dorcas  
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe  
Scripture: Acts 9:36-42

## Acts 9:36-42

*Now 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. At that time she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs. Since 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.' So 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. Peter 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. He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive. This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord.*

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In every church, in every volunteer organization, in every town, in every family, there is someone who always makes sure that everything goes right. Usually out of the limelight, not center stage. Just always doing the little things that make everything else seem better, that make everyone feel better.

Our Bible story for today tells us about a woman named Tabitha. Some called her Dorcas. The Bible gives this beautiful description of her. "Dorcas was always doing good and helping the poor." What a wonderful way to be known! *Always doing good and helping the poor.*

I'm trying to I imagine my own tombstone with this engraving: "Here lies David Rowe. He sometimes did good. And occasionally helped the poor." Doesn't have the same ring to it, does it? Sometimes. Occasionally. From

time to time. When the mood strikes. When it's convenient. When I have nothing better to do. None of that measures up to Dorcas, who "was always doing good and helping the poor," which is why when she died, there was such an uproar. People actually sent messages to Peter "to come at once," and when he got to the house, the wailing and mourning and grief were so intense ... Peter raised Dorcas from the dead!

The feeling I get from the story is not just disbelief or grief, but a sense of total loss, of abandonment, a sort of town-wide, communal "We need her, we can't do without her, she is too important, too vital, she's not finished yet." And I think what God did was to say, "O.K., I'll suspend the natural order of things for a bit. We'll bring her back. But listen: nobody lives forever, even good people die, so this time, if you think Dorcas is so special, watch her, learn from her, emulate her, become her." And I'm pretty sure when the Bible says "Dorcas opened her eyes and got up," I'm pretty sure she was quite embarrassed by all the fuss and went straight to the kitchen to make a casserole for the family down the block who just had a baby.

Here's a poem I wrote about Dorcas in my book *Fieldstones of Faith*.

### **Dorcas (Acts 9:36-42)**

*Dorcas or Tabitha  
a funny name  
it means the same.  
a nobody  
a nothing  
on the world's greater stage  
not a leader or earthshaker  
not anyone on the upper echelon  
of anything  
no force outside her front door  
except among the poor  
and that counted for something.  
Yes,  
famous for one thing  
sewing  
and dying  
leaving her neighborhood in mourning  
inconsolable  
her good deeds irreplaceable*

*always doing good  
in the neighborhood  
and now, among the poor  
she is no more.  
We still need her  
they begged Peter  
one more month  
a year perhaps  
until we learn  
to walk in her steps.*

We are far along enough in our worship service for you to have firmly grasped that we are celebrating the MINISTRY of Dogwood. Not just the beauty or the trees. Not the festival itself. This isn't just a big plug for workers or an hour-long advertisement. It's about the *Ministry* of Dogwood. Our Dogwood Festival at its best is a sort of communal Dorcas, a church-wide effort "always doing good and helping the poor."

Oh, sure, it's work and effort and drudgery and debates; we worry about the dogwood blossoms coming too soon or too late or whether it will be too cold or rainy; and one year we had to decide what to do with a large nude painting submitted for the Art Show. I suggested awarding it a strategically placed blue ribbon, but I was outvoted.

Now, 79 years old, our Dogwood Festival continues to "do good and help the poor." It is that simple. Not easy. But simple. I think of Dorcas. There must have been days when it was tough to get out of bed, arthritis killing her, bones and joints creaking and aching, and whatever took her life already weakening her, her kids telling her to slow down, the demands sometimes just too much.

For Pete's sake, when she died, people wouldn't let her rest in peace! The Bible tells us that when Peter arrived, all the widows from the neighborhood were there showing him all the clothes Dorcas had made for them through the years, no doubt telling stories of this kindness and that goodness that Dorcas had done.

No, it wasn't easy. But some people just don't stop. You've heard about our 6<sup>th</sup>-grade girls raising 600,000 pennies for our mission projects with the elderly poor in India. Our very first project was started by a beloved lady, Mary Seethamma when she was old and sick, a diabetic, in a wheelchair. I can still see her overseeing construction, barking out orders to the masons

and embracing the poor. She and Dorcas only knew one speed: "always, always doing good and helping the poor."

That's Dogwood. Dogwood is 79, and it's not done yet. It's not over the hill. It's alive and kicking, just like Dorcas, ready to keep "doing good and helping the poor."

Yesterday, our church hosted another Court of Honor for two Boy Scouts who just earned their Eagle award. They boys had actually moved to Texas, but our Boy Scout troop meant so much to them, they all came up from Texas for the service. When I preached, I told them the story of Samson, a Bible story we just started in our Bible Study Gathering. What's Samson famous for? O.K., Samson and Delilah, forever linked. As Israel was evolving into a nation, it was led first by great men like Moses and Abraham. Later like everybody else, they had kings, David and Solomon. But in between, after great men and before the kings, Israel was led by judges, men and women who were chosen for their wisdom. But frankly, Samson wasted his life, his talent, his leadership. He wasted it in selfishness, pure and simple. He was the Bible's first superhero, sort of an ancient "Incredible Hulk," who tore down buildings, wiped out enemies, and did incredible feats of strength. For his own benefit. For himself. Not for his people. Not for his nation. Not for his God. Samson was narrowly focused on his own pleasure, period. He's the anti-Dorcas, the anti-Dogwood.

We are Dorcas. We are Dogwood. The goal of this church is that every day we get up with the determination to "do good and help the poor." That's why it has been a blessing today to have Pivot House with us. We've been involved with Pivot House for a lot of years. They've sung at Dogwood the last three years, and they epitomize the key word in the Dorcas story: "always." Remember, the Bible says she was "always doing good."

Pivot House is an intensive drug and alcohol rehab ministry. Intensive. Not sporadic. Not hit-or-miss. Not when you feel like it. Intensive. That's another word for "always." *Intensive*. And that's the only way to real success.

We're smart people in this church. Experienced. We know addiction first hand, inside and out, ourselves, our loved ones. We know it. And you won't win against addiction half-heartedly or part time. You win it with intensity; you win it with the spirit of "always." Always working at it, always aware of it, always fighting against it, always committed, always determined, always choosing the good. Always.

That's the Dorcas way. That's the best spirit of Dogwood.

## The Ministry of Dogwood: Responsive Scripture Litany

### Scripture: 'In Celebration of Trees'

- Reader 1: Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food (Genesis 2:9)
- Reader 2: I am like a green olive tree in the house of God.  
I trust in the steadfast love of God forever and ever.  
(Psalm 52)
- Reader 1: Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord. They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. (from Jeremiah 17)
- Reader 2: For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. (Isaiah 55:2)
- Reader 1: On the mountain height of Israel I will plant a sprig in order that it may produce boughs and bear fruit, and become a noble cedar. Under it every kind of bird will live; in the shade of its branches will nest winged creatures of every kind. All the trees of the field shall know that I am the Lord. (Ezekiel 17)
- Reader 2: Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more; but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid. (Micah 3)
- Reader 1: Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life ... and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. (Revelation 22:1-2)

ALL: When they had come near Jerusalem, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, 'Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me.' The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, 'Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!'

(Matthew 21)