

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: June 12, 2022
Sermon: Thank-You Sunday Sermon for Our Heroes
Scriptures: Acts 9:36-40; Luke 2:41-51;
Isaiah 55:10-12
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe

First Scripture "Healing and Helping" Acts 9:36-40

Acts 9:36-40 - Peter in Lydda and Joppa

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.

We all know famous Bible stories and Bible characters. But when you've been at it a long time, like me, you find some not-so-famous stories and characters. Rizpah, Rhoda, and Vashti are three of my favorite Bible women, for example. Look them up, Google them.

Rizpah, the most courageous mother in the Bible: my father told me, "If you're stuck for a Mother's Day sermon, go to Rizpah." And Rhoda, one of the best stories about prayer in the Bible. And Vashti, perhaps the first great feminist in the Bible, refusing to be demeaned, exploited, and objectified. But I'd never thought of them until I stumbled across them, or someone pointed them out to me.

Well, today, I'm pointing out Dorcas to you, such a great lady that her town wouldn't let her die. Literally. You just heard the story. One day, dear Dorcas died. Funeral preparations were underway. The whole neighborhood was devastated. Somebody got the idea to send for Peter, who was in another town. Why? To do something. What? Who knows?

The woman was dead. Convincingly. Were they hoping for healing? Too late for that. Resurrection? It doesn't say that. But in their heartache and despair, they wanted Peter, someone who had been close to Jesus, who had been close to God, who maybe could say the right thing or do the right thing and have the right results.

When Peter arrived, the house was in an uproar. The dead Dorcas was upstairs, prepared for burial. The villagers pressed on Peter, telling him all that Dorcas had done in her life, all the neighborly things, the kind things, the helpful things: sewing clothing, making casseroles, looking after her elderly neighbors and neighbor kids. She was literally the fabric that wove the town together. So Peter went upstairs, "got down on his knees," the Bible says, "prayed to God," then spoke to her, took her hand, raised her up, and she promptly headed back to her life of good deeds.

I point the story out to you of a not-too-famous Biblical hero because today is "Thank you Sunday." We are honoring three groups of people that are a bit like Dorcas: people who get things done, people that other people can count on, people who never seem to say, "No."

Dorcas was the one you could count on to help care for someone, anyone, no matter what. Just like all our healthcare workers throughout Covid. Covid really did begin like a bad Hollywood movie with a villainous foreign government, mystery disease, public fright, inept officials, competitive theories, and human devastation.

But our front lines never wavered. Doctors, nurses, technicians, the entirety of hospital and medical staff, the whole world of medicine—these people didn't give in to partisanship and politics. No, they just got up each day and went to work.

One million people have died of Covid in America. But our frontline medical workers, they were there day after day, shift after shift, nightmare weeks and months when people were sick, afraid, dying, alone; no visitors allowed, no family allowed, no partners allowed. Our medical workers became not only sterling professionals but also family, pastors, prayer partners . . . even mourners.

And Dorcas was the one you could count on to help teach a child, to raise up a youngster, to be that extra set of eyes in the back of the head. Just like all our teachers and educators in our little Church and across the nation.

There's a popular saying when folks are thrust into unexpected tasks, people will say, "I didn't sign up for this." Probably everyone says that at one time or

another, when parenting or marriage or work or life throws us a curve ball. "I didn't sign up for this."

Covid made that true for lots of us. But especially so for teachers. You sign up to be a teacher because you love kids, you love learning, you love playing and interacting and the closeness of relationships as children grow up. Then suddenly, school is in lockdown; remote, hybrid; classes are on Zoom.

Once schools were open, there were facemasks and face guards and mumbled speech and garbled answers, and you couldn't see smiles or nuance; couldn't hug. As the months wore on, kids became withdrawn, parents got depressed, society got confused. But teachers kept teaching, kept engaged, kept at it. And when North America finally puts Covid in the rearview mirror, it will be teachers and medical workers, our front-liners, who will be our heroes, just like first responders on 9/11.

Through it all, we were like New Englanders midwinter, looking for that first crocus, for signs of spring and renewal. "Normalcy," we all called it. The Dogwood Festival was our sign of renewal. Through two years of shutdown, cancellation, postponement, our group of Dogwood volunteers never wavered, never gave up. Like Dorcas, they were the ever-ready, always enthusiastic volunteers! They believed. They planned and plotted and prepared. They set in motion. And when the time came, no group of people was more ready to deliver a "new normal," a fresh sign of spring, than our Dogwood volunteers.

What a grand thing it was to see the first tentative arrivals. A few shoppers here and there, a vendor's tent going up, a family pushing a stroller, people walking the grounds, all bookended by the spectacular opening night party, and crowds, traffic jams—who could believe it! Traffic jams on Sunday! Dogwoods in bloom. Our Church grounds full of people. The sounds of music everywhere. Smiles everywhere. All because our Dogwood volunteers refused to take "no" for an answer, refused to believe the best was behind us, and chose to believe that God was ready to start a new work.

In the old days, every church had a women's group, and often the women's group was divided up into subgroups, like teams. So if a church had, say, a women's group of 40 women, they might have four sub-groups of 10, each usually with a Bible woman's name. So there would be the Martha Group, the Mary Group, the Ruth Group, and there was always the "Dorcas" Group. And they were always the "doers," the "worker bees," the ones who raised their hands even before you'd finished explaining what you needed. The Dorcas group . . . living up to the name of Dorcas.

Today we thank three groups who would have made Dorcas proud: people who showed up when it was hard to do so, people who kept at it when obstacles were severe, people who believed in tomorrow, even when yesterday it was tough.

Thank you!

Second Scripture

Teaching and Learning

Luke 2:41-51

The Boy Jesus in the Temple

Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. Assuming that he was in the group of travellers, they went a day's journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, 'Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.' He said to them, 'Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?' But they did not understand what he said to them. Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart.

Third Scripture

The Trees of the Field

Isaiah 55:10-12

Isaiah 55:10-12

*For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.*

*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*

Litany of Thanksgiving For All Who Help

Leader: Holy God, thank you for bringing us through most of the Covid crisis, and giving us hope for each new day.

Congregation: Thank you for those who truly went the extra mile during the toughest days, all the medical workers and teachers who persevered.

Leader: God, our scriptures are filled with stories of healers and the healing touch. Thank you for each and every person who served the sick and the dying, with tender grace and hard work: our doctors and nurses, researchers and scientists, medical specialists and hospital staff. Thank you.

Congregation: God, our scriptures are filled with stories of teachers and teaching. Thank you for each and every person who persevered, who gave every student the chance to learn amidst every challenge.

Together: And thank you, Lord, for every sign of renewal and normalcy, every activity and reopening that brought back old memories and made new ones. Today, we also give thanks for each and every Dogwood Festival volunteer who gave fresh life in our 85th year. Thank you for their energy and commitment, their vision and creativity, their faith and joy. Bless, O Lord, all our heroes. Amen.