

Acts 9: 36-43 “The Proof is in the Pudding” Rev. Janet Chapman 5/10/26

One of the joys of my ministry has been working with children and youth, thus, I cherish stories about kids as they learn about the Christian faith. I came across one about a preschool Sunday School class where the teacher asked the children if they wanted to go to heaven? All the children raised their hands except one, little Marcus. The teacher frowned and asked Marcus why he didn't raise his hand? His response proved why you don't ask a preschooler such a question. With sheer innocence, he answered, "I'm sorry, I can't. My mom told me to come right home after Sunday School." As my mom used to say, "The proof is in the pudding"... one of the many idioms handed down to her that she shared with me. As a child, I used to check my favorite dessert, pudding, for sort of proof hiding there. Having found none, I finally asked my mom what she meant. She realized how it might sound to my young mind and explained it came from an original phrase, "The proof of the pudding is in the eating or tasting." In other words, the real effectiveness of something can only be tested by trying or using it and setting aside both appearances and promises. The best test to determine if it is good pudding is to taste it. Loving pudding as I did, it made sense to me and was one of the great lessons my mom taught me in her lifetime.

This is my first Mother's Day after the death of my mom – one of those milestones like the first birthday, first holiday, etc. that you sort of dread, but know that you have to get through. We all work through those milestones after the death of a loved one with different levels of intensity. Grief can be exhausting on all fronts, with certain memories that come flooding in at the most unexpected moments. Such was this week's memory of being taught early on, "the proof is in the pudding." The phrase is applicable in a variety of circumstances, not the least of which are those mysterious events that are totally outside of our experience, like our biblical story of today. Miracles, by their nature, are hard to prove but are tested within one's own experience. Over the years, I've encountered many who believe they were cured because of the power of prayer and faith in a healing Christ. Likewise, I've heard testimonies of spontaneous cancer remissions among everyday people who simply went on with

their lives, without any sort of prayer intervention from anyone. Whether or not God is formally invoked into the process, the proof, if you will, is revealed in different moments of uncanny deliverance from incurable and chronic illnesses of mind, body, and spirit. The unexplainable is God's specialty and the Bible is filled with such things. As Bruce Epperley notes, "The Bible is a guidebook on miraculous living." In it, we find stories filled with meaning and acts of grace that change the course of our lives. In it, we discover that God finds a way when there was no way. Sometimes miracles occur without any preparation or faith on our part. In other times, within the dynamic call and response of God and the world, our prayers open us up to God's loving energy where we and those we love, are transformed. We become new creations as life triumphs over death.

Today's biblical story is about the wondrous, miraculous, and uncanny that can occur in life as in death. I'm not sure what you thought when you heard it read, but I'm guessing the average 21st century person hears this story about Tabitha as an exaggeration, a mistaken diagnosis, or a result of gullibility on the part of the readers. Today's research tells us so much about near-death experiences that there are all sorts of ways to receive stories like this. Take your choice. Therefore, I would like to introduce the only woman to be called a disciple in the New Testament through the eyes of an imaginary friend, a widow who owed her very life to Tabitha. Tabitha, like Paul, went by both a Jewish name and her Greek name of Dorcas, both meaning "gazelle." Tabitha-also-called-Dorcas's friend we will call Diana. Diana has gone with a couple men to fetch the apostle Peter at a nearby village, who was rumored to offer healing for those who were ill. Diana tugs at Peter's tunic, "How can I make you understand?" She thought to herself, "This was Peter, if he couldn't help them, then no one could." How could she make Peter see he had to do something now. Tabitha could not die! God would not want this to happen, not now, not to Tabitha. As they walked together toward Joppa, a place we know now to be just outside Tel Aviv, she tried to explain. "This year has been like no other. There were times when I knew I couldn't make it, didn't want to make it. My husband, Joel, died last year of the fever.

What remained of my life and my family died with him. I didn't know what would become of me, and I didn't really care." Peter stopped and laid a gentle hand on her shoulder. He knew there were very few places in which a woman by herself had options to survive. With no home, no resources, it was prostitution or starvation. She went on, "Then Tabitha came into my life. She shared from her very self to help all those around her." Diana's demeanor changed as she talked of Tabitha, a seamstress who had committed her life to sewing clothes for the poor and giving widows hope. "Widow" in those days simply meant any woman without a source of security. Diana recalled, "When the disciple of our Lord came to my home, my life began again." Peter was confused. "I'm sorry. I thought you were talking about this Tabitha you wanted me to see. Did she accompany a disciple to your home?" Diana had thought she wouldn't have to explain to Peter, of all people. "Don't you understand? Tabitha is a disciple of our Lord – the disciple who changed my life!" Peter was taken aback by the emphatic response of this sincere convert. She went on, "I'm not being overly dramatic when I say she gave me purpose and hope when I questioned how I could go on. She understood the pain of loss and disappointment. She taught me the skills to make beautiful tunics and cloaks, how to sell what we made and get a fair price. She provided a place to stay and food. There were other women she had brought in as well and she treated us all as close sisters. Before this, we were unfamiliar with the marketplace, but she was a patient and encouraging teacher, like a pseudo-mother to us all. Together we discovered we were able to support ourselves. More importantly, we learned how to reach out in support of others." "So," the apostle concluded, "she was your teacher." "Yes, but so much more. Her home became our place of worship. She taught us about Christ, but also taught us how to be Christ's hands to those in genuine need." As they arrived at Tabitha's home, Peter responded, "Thank you, Diana. I came to teach and heal yet it was I who learned and received healing in my heart. For a long time, I have followed the words of my Lord, but today I have heard his words anew. My vision was narrowed before and I didn't see. Today I learned our Lord's vision is boundless. I'll do what I can, but it is clear the light of God is within her

and her witness is much needed here.” The one who had denied Christ three times, the one who had gone back to fishing when it appeared Jesus was dead, went to pray over a dead saint and then boldly said, “Tabitha, get up.” So Tabitha got up. Then Peter called the people of Joppa and showed her to them alive. We don’t hear any more about her and I think that’s because the most important part of her story was the witness she had on those around her, the way she changed others. Her miracle was as much about raising up the lives of the poor and downtrodden as it was about being raised from death herself.

Trying to prove the mystery of life overcoming death all these years later is futile. People have tried to explain that Tabitha just fainted or was in an altered state of consciousness, but anyone who has faced death personally knows such explanations wouldn’t have produced the kind of faith which has grown over the past 21 centuries. If we are completely honest with ourselves, we can be content to leave all the nitty gritty details behind, if we can simply hear and embrace the hope which arises from stories of credible people, who have known fear and death and have triumphed to live in courage and faith. This is the sort of resurrection experience that is life-changing and enables the Christian faith to spread.

Not long after my mother died, I heard her voice in a dream, the details of which are foggy except that I knew I was scared. In my fear, she came and assured me all would be alright, I would get through this and I wasn’t alone. Her life is still a part of me and through her, through the smell of a rose, the taste of a huckleberry, the cool waters of a clear lake, I am being supported to carry on. I am the beneficiary of her life-long lessons in which, time and again, I find the proof is in the pudding – it can’t be explained but only tasted and experienced as truth. May Tabitha’s well-lived life and transformational death become evidence for you of God’s powerful and miraculous resurrections which still arise today.