“God’s Holy People”

Sarah Wolf

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Acts 9:36-43

Revelation 7:9-17

One summer, when I was staying at my grandparents’ house for a week, as I watched tv in the den while my grandparents napped, I dropped the remote control and couldn’t find the batteries. For some reason, I felt that I had committed an enormous sin against my grandparents and that I could not admit to doing this. Clearly I had an early sense of being totally depraved.

When my grandmother asked if I knew what had happened, I lied to her. “I don’t know what happened to the batteries, Grandmommy.” She eventually found the batteries under the couch and put them back in.

Each evening it was our custom for her to come into my room and sit on my bed with me and hear me say my prayers. She never commented on my praying, she just thanked me for letting her listen. That night, she changed the routine a bit. Instead of waiting for me to pray, she said, “Sarah, I don’t know what happened today. But I know this. I love you and God loves you. I want you to know that no matter what you do, there is nothing that will stop me from loving you. And most importantly, there is nothing that will stop *God* from loving you.”

Nellie Gray Stimson was one of God’s Holy People.

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About the time of my senior year of college, I started to feel twinges, little pings, of doubt. I started to feel like I wasn’t sure if I believed it anymore...if any of it mattered. I began to question the existence of God.

As someone who was raised in the church, who attended every single thing the church offered until she went away to college, these feelings of doubt rocked my world.

With these feelings of doubt came intense feelings of shame. I felt certain that my feelings were unique and that no one at my church or in my family had ever had the same experience. I felt certain that I would be judged or ridiculed for my doubts.

Finally, after many months of increasingly doubtful thoughts mixed with intense shame, I met with our youth director, Rebecca. As we sat down for bagels one day, I quickly confessed that I had begun to doubt the existence of God. I blurted it out and then sat back and cringed, waiting for Rebecca’s SHOCKED response.

“Good” she said.

“I’m sorry...what?”

“Good,” she said again. “I’m glad that you’re experiencing a time of doubt. It’s about time that you did. I’d be worried if you didn’t.”

She then went on to explain that times of doubt can help us to solidify what we believe. They can help us to take an objective step back and re-assess. Rebecca gave me permission to sit in my time of doubt, to feel what Frederick Buechner referred to as the “ants in the pants of faith.” And because of Rebecca’s support, my faith journey continued on.

Rebecca is one of God’s Holy People.

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Yesterday, I attended the memorial service of Joan Sayers’s mother, Sue. Sue was the wife of a Presbyterian minister, and in the sermon we heard all about how Sue practiced Christian hospitality. If someone entered Sue’s home, Sue felt she was called by God to extend the same hospitality that Christ extends to us to every person she encountered. Her life was the embodiment of many of our Scripture passages emphasizing the importance of hospitality to strangers and kin alike.

Sue was one of God’s Holy People.

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Bestselling author and public theologian, Rachel Held Evans, died unexpectedly last Saturday at the age of 37 due to complications related to the flu, leaving behind a husband and two young children. Growing up in Alabama and Dayton, Tennessee (home of the Scopes Monkey Trial), Rachel was raised in an evangelical, fundamentalist church which did not allow women to be in leadership. She later began attending a mainline protestant church as her views of God and God’s love for all of God’s people changed.

Our Wired Word article for today says that “she clung to the belief that Jesus "embodied a radically inclusive love" in his life and teachings. Many remarked how she sought to welcome everyone to the table of Christ, and to amplify the voices of those whom she felt were often unheard in the American church, including women, lesbian-gay-bisexual-transexual-questioning (LGBTQ) persons, and people of color.”

While I was a campus minister in Memphis, I recommended her books to my many students who were away from home for the first time and away from their home churches. They were wrestling with how to reconcile the faith with which they were raised and the new ideas and people they encountered in class and on campus. Rachel’s voice echoed a lot of what was going on in my student’s heads, and she gave them permission to fall in love with the Church all over again.

This week has been filled with remembrances of Rachel Held Evans as the religious world reacted to her shocking death. Many of them by women who had been feeling a call to ordained ministry for years, but who didn’t believe that they could serve in that capacity. As the remembrances grew in number, the hashtag “#becauseofRHE” became a space on social media where people could share their stories of how her writing had affected them.

One such response is this:

“BecauseOfRHE I outlived my will to give up on life. I came out as gay and braved a world of rejection inside the faith tradition I had always known to be my home, I found God beyond church pews and in the faces of the most vulnerable, I started to really love people (& myself)”[[1]](#footnote-2)

Rachel Held Evans was one of God’s Holy People.

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God’s Holy People have been around for millennia and are still among us today.

Today’s text from Acts highlights one of God’s Holy People, one who may not be so well known to us.

Tabitha’s resurrection is a story that is powerful, and yet for some reason seems to be a little forget-able.

When we studied this text on Monday in our Bible study, the women around the table each exclaimed that they had either never heard this story before *or* they’ve never heard it preached on before. I admitted that I hadn’t heard preached before either.

John Peterson popped into his office later on Monday (because he can’t seem to stay away…) and I shared with him the reactions of the Bible study. I told him that I was excited to preach on this text from Acts because none of them had ever heard a sermon on it before. John, ever the organized person that he is, turned to his computer and did a quick search. He’s preached on this text at least 3 times.

I have to admit, it makes me a little sad to know that I’m 34 and I don’t remember (to the best of my memory!) a sermon preached on Tabitha. Because, this is a remarkable text in many ways.

Probably the most obvious part of this text that stands out is the resurrection of Tabitha. She became ill and died and then Peter is sent for, he prays to God, and he raises her from the dead. A remarkable thing indeed, when we think about the state of the church at this point — Jesus has been raised, he has ascended to heaven, and the apostles are busy roaming the land, helping out these new communities of faith. Tabitha’s resurrection will surely add credence to the wondrous love of God in Christ that the apostles are sharing with the people.

The resurrection is definitely remarkable.

But what’s most remarkable to me in this text happens at the very beginning, in the very first verse.

“In Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha.”

It’s that one word, right in the middle of the sentence, that is remarkable.

Disciple.

This is the only time in the entire New Testament that it is used in the feminine form. We miss this because English doesn’t have gendered nouns, but Greek does. Tabitha wasn’t just an early church go-er. She was a *disciple*. Rachel Held Evans, wrote on Tabitha once and pointed out that the, “word [disciple] literally means “pupil,” or “apprentice,” which may suggest that at some point, Tabitha studied directly under Jesus, like Mary of Bethany.”[[2]](#footnote-3)

Whether or not Tabitha studied directly under Jesus, she was definitely a follower of Christ.

And how did she follow Christ? Through service.

I chose to read from the Common English Bible because I love the language used in describing Tabitha’s life. It says that Tabitha’s life, “overflowed with good works and compassionate acts on behalf of those in need.”

As one of Christ’s disciples, Tabitha chose to live her life in service to others. She began to look out for the widows in Joppa. Biblical scholar Elizabeth Schuessler Fiorenza tells us that for widows “in the first century — as today — the majority of the poor and starving were women, especially those women who had no male agencies that might have enabled them to share in the wealth of the patriarchal system.”[[3]](#footnote-4)

In caring for the widows of Joppa, Tabitha takes on Christ’s command to care for the “least of these.” The widows were on the very bottom rung of the societal ladder, forced to rely on the kindness of strangers, who weren’t always inclined to be kind.

Tabitha’s life wasn’t just one of a do-gooder. As the CEB version tells us, it overflows. Her good acts and care toward the widows spread and rippled beyond Joppa even.

At the beginning of the text, we are given two names for Tabitha. We are given her Aramaic name — Tabitha, and her Greek name, Dorcas.

One commentary notes that, “the fact that we are told her Aramaic name (as she was likely known within the faith community) and her Greek name (as she may have been known in the wider community) may suggest that her good works and acts of charity were widely and publicly practiced.”[[4]](#footnote-5)

Her life overflowed with good works.

Perhaps this is why the women act the way they do when she dies. The other disciples in Joppa (*not* the apostles, but other Christ-followers) send for Peter who is in a neighboring town.

When he arrives, the women take him to see Tabitha and they weep and begin showing him the clothes that Tabitha has made them. The verb tense is such that they aren’t just showing him the clothes, they are actually wearing them. Their clothing is a tangible reminder of Tabitha’s compassionate care. This loss of Tabitha will affect them greatly, if no one will step up to fill her place.

The other remarkable thing occurs after Tabitha’s resurrection. The text tells us that after she is raised, Peter gathers, “God’s holy people” to show them what has happened. In case we were wondering who is included in God’s holy people, or, in case we are tempted to speculate who *isn’t* included, Luke adds, “including the widows.” As the text from Revelation tells us, the Kingdom of God includes so many people that no one can count them. The Kingdom of God includes all of God’s Holy People.

Peter’s inclusion of the widows in this holy moment is so important. In the traditional, patriarchal society, it would have been assumed that women would not be invited in to witness such a miracle. But in this new, upside-down world of the Kingdom of God, the lowest of society is invited in to be a witness, to witness a miracle, invited to become a disciple.

“This is what God's kingdom is like:” Rachel Held Evans once wrote, “a bunch of outcasts and oddballs gathered at a table, not because they are rich or worthy or good, but because they are hungry, because they said yes. And there's always room for more.”

I imagine that it is because of the inclusion and subsequent witness of these widows and of Tabitha, that many came to know the love of God in Christ in Joppa and the surrounding areas. Thanks be to God for a text that includes the women!

Every now and then, the lectionary text lines up in such a way that I have to say, “I see you, Holy Spirit. I see you.”

The day after Charlottesville, the lectionary text reflected upon “the dark night of the soul” which felt incredibly apropos. Holy Spirit, I see you.

This week, on Monday, still feeling grief over the death of theologian I greatly admire, thinking about the women who have raised me, both biologically and not, as we approached Mother’s Day today, when I read this text from Acts, I said to the Holy Spirit, “I see you.”

I see the Holy Spirit at work, trying to open our eyes to the ways we have been both raised by Tabithas, and the ways in which we are called to become Tabithas.

Joe Harvard was the minister at First Presbyterian Church in Durham for quite some time. He reflected upon the Tabithas he’s witnessed over his many years of ministry. He writes,

“Have you ever met Tabitha? I have known her in every church I have ever served. She has no wealth or power except her deep and abiding commitment to give expression to God’s compassion for those in need. She is tenacious about practicing her faith by serving others. She prays a simple prayer: “Lord, help us to help those in need, and make us sensitive to what they really need.” Tabitha’s work is too important to die, and I am grateful that the story records God’s agreement as well, by empowering Peter to keep her alive. Tabitha is still alive in almost every church I know.”

While Mother’s Day is not a liturgical holiday, (it is entirely a secular one), today let us think back on the women who were and still are disciples in our lives — the Tabithas, the grandmothers, the youth ministers — like Laura, the mothers, the theologians who have helped raised us in our faith, who have challenged and supported us, and throughout it all, have loved us by sharing the love of God with us.

And may we in turn, take up the mantle of these women of faith, and become disciples of Christ, becoming those people who have shown God’s love to others, especially to those who are ashamed, who are doubting, who are strangers, who feel lost or left behind.

Thanks be to God for all of God’s Holy People.

Amen.

1. Sarah Kessler (@thecoachkessler) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. <https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/mutuality-women-leaders?fbclid=IwAR1YYBjcTTARQ94cWRLUu-DET6G_3kcm4c3-jBwC7n-zrhsaSlpYv6bO8ME> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Elizabeth Fiorenza [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Feasting on the Word - Stephen Jones. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)