



making God's love visible in downtown Memphis

Dorcas and Doreen
The Fourth Sunday of Easter
Sunday, May 12, 2019
The Rev. Paul McLain

'All the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made.' In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

On Thursday, I went to the Benjamin Hooks Library, hoping to find a book to inspire me for today's sermon. In the parking lot, I saw a woman walking away from the library. She appeared to be of African descent and she had two small girls with her, the older one walking beside her, grasping her right hand, while she used her left hand and arm to hold the little one, who was coughing deeply. The woman was sobbing uncontrollably. I called over to her and asked, "What's wrong?" She said, "I'm going to miss the ceremony." She seemed to be waving me off as she walked toward her vehicle.

When I got inside the library, I discovered that the ceremony taking place there was for naturalization of new United States citizens. I went back out to her car and she was in the back seat, wiping the face of her little girl who had been coughing. She rolled down the window and let me know that her youngest daughter had become sick, both with a coughing fit and nausea. In essence, the mom was doing what mothers do every day – the messy art of triage. Yes, she needed to be in the ceremony. But, her daughter became sick and tending to her was the greater priority.

I offered to sit with her children while she went back, but she was understandably protective and wary of leaving her daughters in the hands of a stranger. We agreed that I would keep the girls, but would always be in her line of sight. We went back in and explained the situation to the immigration authorities. It seemed they may be able to swear the mom in as a citizen in a small private ceremony after the big ceremony. The woman's oldest daughter led us toward the children's area of the library, and we sat down and finally had a chance to visit more.

The mom told me she is from Uganda, but has been living in Batesville, Arkansas, where she works as a rural health care resident. She and her husband had been working through the process to become U. S. citizens for twelve years. Her husband was in the big ceremony.

She had planned for this day to go so differently. She had dressed up her little girls in their Sunday best for what would be one of the biggest days in the life of their family. But, as you moms here know all too well, often the best-laid plans are soon thrown out the window. When they arrived at the library, her youngest girl was coughing and spitting up all over her beautiful little dress.

The mom told me her name – Doreen. I had gone to the library hoping to find a book to help me understand the story of Dorcas, the woman raised from the dead in our passage from Acts. Instead, I encountered a real flesh-and-blood woman named Doreen.

The two have a lot more in common than similar names. Both are women who dedicate their lives to serving their communities. Both are women who face hardships. In the case of Dorcas, she spent a lifetime doing the hard work of weaving clothes, especially clothes for the long neglected widows in her community. She was one of the first recorded female disciples of Jesus. And, most recently, she had suffered from illness and died.

The followers of Jesus in her community learn that Peter is nearby and they plead with him to come. When he arrives, the widows are gathered around Dorcas. They are holding up and showing Peter the beautiful clothes that Dorcas hand-crafted for them. Peter has them leave the room. He then kneels beside her lifeless body and offers a prayer. He uses her Aramaic name and says, “Tabitha, get up.” Dorcas opens her eyes, sees Peter, and sits up. He gives her his hand and they walk back to rejoin the saints and the widows.

We’re left with the question of why is Dorcas given the gift of being raised from the dead. One of our parishioners, Martin Jellinek, wrote a paper about this scripture passage. Martin writes: “What is significant here is that Peter has brought back Dorcas so that she could continue to minister to and provide for the widows. The very important shift here is that Peter performed a miracle in order to provide for the outcast and despised. As long as we exclude the marginalized by considering them Other, our own faith is limited. It is only through engaging and embracing those who are different that we can come to see the fullness of God’s grace and love and grow in our Christian ministry.”

In the case of Doreen, the mom I encountered, she felt marginalized as a woman of color, as an immigrant, as an outsider. She had pleaded with the authorities earlier that day about her need to tend to her sick child to no avail. Doreen told me that having me as a white male presence with a collar was helpful in getting their attention in her second attempt to resolve her situation. When she learned that I am an Episcopal priest, Doreen shared that she is a member of the Anglican church in Uganda.

We talked about this approaching Mother’s Day and shared thoughts about our own mothers. Doreen told me that her mother in Uganda is her role model who gives her inspiration. Doreen’s mom has long been involved in serving in rural health care in the remote villages of Uganda. While it has been Doreen’s fondest dream to become a United States citizen for all that will mean to her and her family, she said that her long-range goal may be someday to return to Uganda to carry out the work that her mother has started there.

While we are talking, Emma, her youngest daughter, begins to feel slightly better. She plays with her older sister Alicia and another child joins them. Then Doreen’s husband arrives. The big ceremony is over. He will now stay with the kids while Doreen and I go over in hopes of having a private ceremony for her. The authorities show us kindness and she is brought to the front of the room for a private swearing-in as our newest citizen. I take a photo of her being sworn in. Then she asks one of the immigration authorities to take a photo of the two of us as she proudly holds up her certificate. That’s a photo I will always treasure.

Doreen texted me later that day to let me know they had made it back to Batesville. Her little Emma was getting the health care attention she needed. And we both gave thanks for our unexpected encounter.

What I learned this week from my study of Dorcas and my encounter with Doreen is that resurrection is not a solo event. Instead, it is a shared, communal experience. It is often messy, much like childbirth. It is also mystical, when expectations of what is supposed to happen give way to a chance encounter and then something unexpected and truly transcendent happens.

Today, be thankful for Dorcas, Doreen, and all women and mothers who deal the best you can with the challenges and opportunities of moment-by-moment triage in hopes of giving your children and everyone you encounter the brilliant radiance and limitless possibilities of new life. Happy Mother's Day! *Amen.*

