

To Learn Something
Fourth Sunday in Easter
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The Rev. Katherine Bush

“All the widows stood beside Peter, weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that Dorcas (aka Tabitha) had made while she was with them.” Every now and then stories from the Bible seem so completely relatable to me. I know that all of Scripture is full of humans doing their fumbly-human best to stay in relationship with God, but sometimes the stories seem quite distant. I don't know much about animal husbandry, and my visions aren't of angels and thrones, and I've never walked in the portico of Solomon.

I have been sad, however, and I have said, “look at what she made.” Here are the smock dresses my grandmother made for us. Here is the book my professor read and underlined. Here are the letters my friend wrote to me that I keep in a box. Here are the pictures of them on their wedding day. Look, look at this evidence that they were here, that they made something, that they gave something to this world. This is what these widows, these friends of Tabitha's are doing. I get this. They are saying to Peter, look at this tunic - the stitching, look at this that she made: clothing that was practical, but also clearly more: lovely, lovingly made. Look, Peter, don't you see that Tabitha's life mattered to us?

But it's actually already been revealed to us, an earlier spoiler in the reading, another small clue about the impact of Tabitha's quiet, little life. Did you catch it? “Now in Joppa, there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha.” A disciple. A disciple whose name was Tabitha. She wasn't one of The Twelve, but she was a disciple. This is the only time a woman is named in Scripture as a disciple, the only feminine use of the word disciple. I don't happen to believe that makes her the only female disciple, just the only one included in the written records. It's so nonchalant the way Luke drops that in. “Now in Joppa, there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha,” just another disciple - this one named Tabitha, or Dorcas in Greek. We know she was a seamstress, generous, a good friend, and a disciple. We know all of this about Tabitha because at the end of her life, her life mattered to her community and to Peter. Look, see the tunics? Look, see what she gave, her charity. Look, see her good works. Look, see how she learned to love the world? Still, there is much more that we don't know about Tabitha, about her quiet, little life, and how she became this person whose life touched so many that Peter is summoned and drawn into this miraculous moment.

For instance, how did she become a sewer of garments? Probably, another woman in her family or neighborhood took her as an apprentice. She learned simple stitches and practiced some hems and basic mending at first, until she could tackle piecing together cloth to make tunics and other garments. And at some point, she became a seamstress in her own right, seemingly of some renown. Look at these tunics, they said, look at how well-made, look at the small flourish she tucked into the otherwise plain clothing; look at how she made these everyday items her own creations, marked as only Tabitha could.

What she learned to do was evident in the tunics and other clothing she made, but she was also a student of more than stitching. To be a disciple is literally to be a learner. Rachel Held Evans describes discovering “with joy” that being a disciple isn't about being an “expert or preacher, lecturer or leader. Instead it derives from the Latin word *discere* - to learn.”

So, how did Tabitha become a disciple, a learner of the ways of Jesus? Perhaps the same way she became a seamstress, at the side of someone else. Joppa isn't that far from the towns and

roads that Jesus traveled, did someone come telling the tales? Or might she have heard him herself in a crowded field one day? Impossible to say. But like learning to sew, it's imaginable that she learned a little bit at first: wrestled with a parable or sat with someone he had healed. Maybe later she heard more of his life and teaching, or of his death and resurrection, and she wove it all into what she experienced of the world. Until at some point in Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha. We know that Tabitha was a learner, one of those who learned the way of Jesus. And this learning showed in her life, in her good works and generosity, in how she learned to love the world.

Rachel Held Evans reminds us that actually, "we are all learners." Like Tabitha, we've all learned so much and so often at the side of someone else. Maybe how to sew, or how to swim, how to drive, how to bake, how to say I'm sorry, how to zoom, how to speak another language, how to start over, how to love. It works best when we have a good teacher. It works best when we approach learning with curiosity and wonder. When we are open, humble, aware of all that we do not know, ready to be taught. We learn a little at a time, small steps, letting the ideas build piece by piece until we can say, look, look at what I made, look at what I can do now, look at how I have changed. We are all disciples, actually, just like Tabitha, because we are all learners.

To be a disciple is to live in the world as a student, to live with humility, knowing how much you and I do not know. To be a disciple is to learn to love the world. To be a disciple is to live with curiosity and a willingness to be changed by what we encounter. To be a disciple is to live open to how God might show up and reveal new things. Not be an expert or a leader, a preacher (I know) or lecturer, but one who listens, who asks questions, aware of all that is beyond us. There is so much I do not understand: geopolitics, bird migration patterns, how vaccines are made, where poems come from. And to learn about the ways of God is to remember with even greater humility, that sewing buttons is one thing, and mending hearts is another. We can, though, learn about all of it if we are willing to make ourselves disciples and to learn anew each day.

And there's one more thing to say about learning. In his book, *The Once and Future King*, T. H. White has the wizard Merlin explain, "the best thing for being sad is to learn something." If this is true, and I think it might be, one of the ways that Jesus calls to us from the grief and brokenness of our lives is with an invitation to learn, to become a disciple, again and again, to learn and to unlearn and to relearn. When we are each feeling lost and ready to surrender, we are encouraged to discover more about the world, more about ourselves, more about the ways of God. The best thing for being sad is to learn something. Despairing about the state of things? Learn something. Learn about Ukraine, its people, its history. Or learn about bird migration patterns. Learn who is doing the work and how you can help. Learn how to mend broken things. Learn about the legislative process. Learn to play the cello. Learn the parables. Learn the psalms.

The invitation to be a learner of the ways of God, to be a disciple, a student of Christ, this is an invitation to learn about the healing and wholeness that is possible, a chance to learn what can be mended or made new. When we are curious and wondering about what the teachings of Jesus might mean, for us and for this world of ours, we open ourselves and learn something that might just help us meet our sadness and the world's sadness with a little more hope and faith. To learn how to love the world all over again.

Now in Joppa, there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha. She learned about Jesus, and she learned what was possible, and she built her quiet, little life around what she learned. It changed her and the world around her. Like Tabitha, we can learn from Jesus, learn something of the ways of God, and maybe not ever fully comprehend those things, and yet still be changed in the learning. Changed in ways that others say look, look at what he made; look, look at how she loved; look, look at what we learned about God from her quiet, little life.