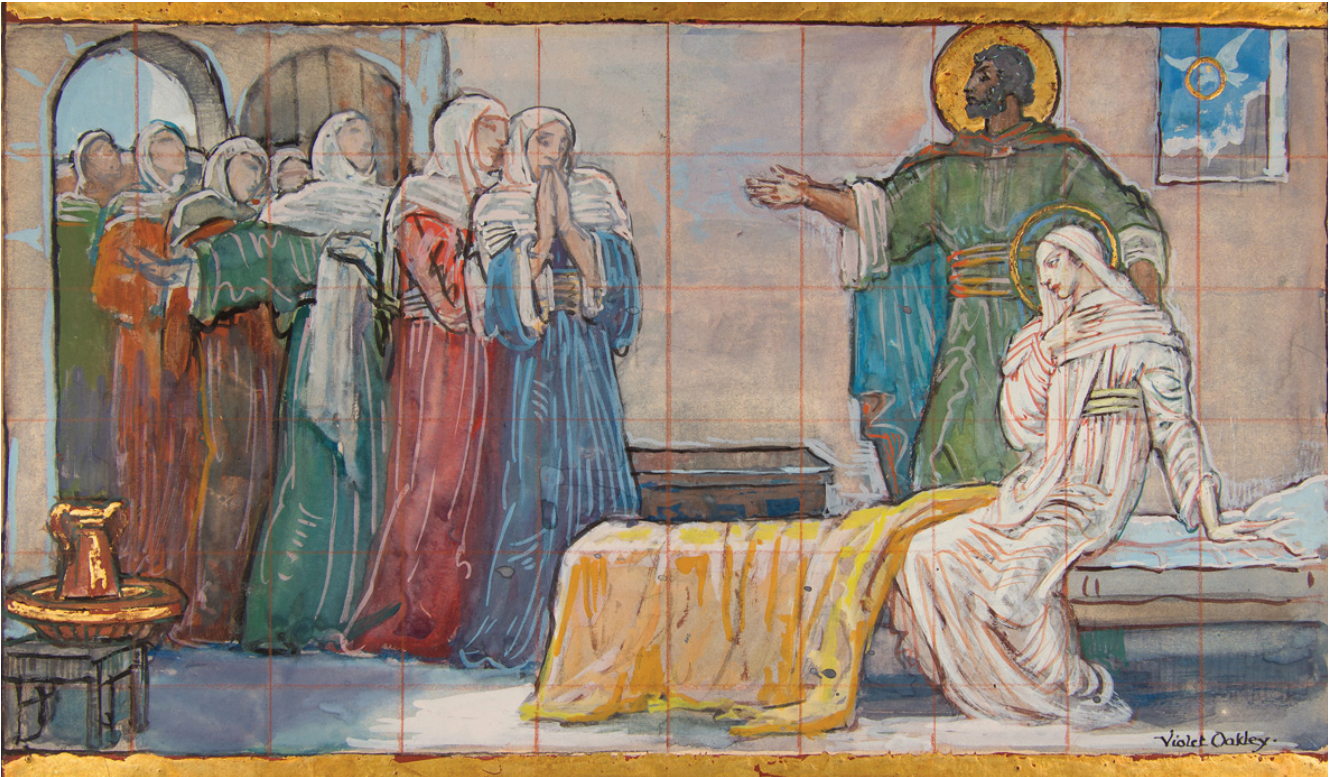


Celebrate the Gifts of Women Sunday  
March 9, 2025



*The Raising of Dorcas by Saint Peter*, final sketch, Violet Oakley. La Salle University Art Museum, Philadelphia, PA

# SAINTS AND WIDOWS

## A Mildly Subversive Reading of Acts 9:36–43

BY REV. DR. LAURIE KRAUS

It's easy to encounter Luke's story of Peter resurrecting Tabitha and think, "Wow, isn't God amazing? Isn't Peter wonderful?" Once merely a scared and impulsive disciple, Peter has become the leader of the church, a man through whom Christ's power—even over death—can be expressed. But the story is also about how in our determination to be an agent of God's love, we sometimes brush past the people who need us or whom we need. Consider Peter, whose mission sometimes got in the way of simply being God's person in the world.

I hope you'll forgive me for drawing attention to it, but the evangelist Luke does have an unfortunate tendency to be a tad dismissive about the women in his church . . . even in this amazing resurrection story about Tabitha. It's odd, since Luke—out of all the gospel writers—is the one who reliably champions the outsiders, the vulnerable or forgotten. But we are human. And sometimes, even when we are passionately committed to the broadest, most expansive vision, we lose sight of the small yet vital truths and practices that inspired us in the first place. We see

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the forest, but not the trees. Maybe that's how in this story about a woman *any* of us would have called a saint, Luke calls the men "saints" and "disciples," but the women, merely "widows."

We all have saints in our lives; and we also have widows. We have people we see, and people we don't. Strangely, sometimes, even when we think we *are* "seeing" them, we really aren't. They are objects of our charity, an obligation we need to support. Or they're supporting characters, a set of "extras" filling backstage, atmospheric background to enhance the primary narrative, which is the hero's journey. With so much need and hurt in the world, it's understandable that sometimes we miss seeing the whole picture. Yet, as I read this story I wonder: what does it take for us to move beyond our preconceptions and ordering of reality to see that "widows" are also disciples and saints? And that quiet work in communities that is invisible to us can help us refocus our understanding of how God's love is at work in the world?

Peter experiences this shift when he takes time in his busy schedule to make a pastoral call. As he arrives at the house where Tabitha has died, he encounters a community, described as grieving widows, who are eager to show him who their friend Dorcas/Tabitha really was. They want to share her amazing legacy of generosity and to welcome the apostle to their proud and strong community, formed out of giving and deep solidarity. "All the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them" (Acts 9:39b).

This is an extraordinary little sentence, put in as an aside when Luke really just wants us to rush up the stairs, on our way to the juicy core of the story Luke

thought he was telling—the resurrection of Tabitha. Peter was sure he knew what he was there to do; and with little thought and less care he ushers the women out of the room so he can pray. What happened then, when he finally stilled his heart and began to listen?

As Peter prayed by Tabitha's deathbed, perhaps he heard the voices of Tabitha's friends, as they figured out who needed clothes, and which families, food. Who was lonely, and which one had something to celebrate. Maybe he walked through the doorway into thanks, and was grateful simply to be. To see. To listen. To set his agenda aside, and let others take him where God needed him to go. Is *that* the moment, do you suppose, when Peter changed, and the whole church turned itself around with him? When he stopped seeing those women as "widows" and began to see them as "disciples" like himself?

When Tabitha rises up, so does Peter. Together they go back to the saints and widows—who now, Peter sees, had actually been disciples and saints all along. Of course, the story doesn't tell us what went on in the heart of Peter as he prayed by the bedside of Tabitha, but it does tell us, almost in an aside, that directly after he leaves her house, he stays with Simon, a tanner. The observant Jew Peter was *before* would never have become ritually impure by staying with a tanner . . . but now, he does, because once God starts to open us up, there's no going back. And not too long after that, Peter has a dream, a Roman soldier arrives, and the next thing you know, water and the Spirit are splashing everywhere. They are all baptized, and a room that had been crowded with widows and "others" suddenly became a communion of saints (10:34–48).

## A Service for the Worship of God

### Call to Worship

*(If desired, fill the font or play the sound of splashing water as the Call to Worship is spoken.)*

In the morning of creation, when chaos reigned and the earth was formless and void, the Spirit of God moved over the face of the waters and whispered, “Come, you are welcome in this place.”

In the dry and desperate desert where the people fled, seeking freedom, the daughters of Miriam danced, water burst forth out of the rock of Horeb and Holy Wisdom beckoned: “Come, you are welcome in this place.”

By the waters of Babylon, where exiles wept bitter tears and could not find their voices, the Spirit of justice spoke: “Come, you who long for home, you are welcome in this place.”

Out of the River Jordan, where the prophet called, brother Jesus arose, dripping, from the waters of baptism, calling: “Come and follow me—you are welcome in this place.”

Near the crystal river that flows through the new Jerusalem, by the tree of life, whose leaves are for the healing of the nations, the Spirit and the bride say, “Come, all you who are thirsty, drink from the springs of the water of life and know you are welcome in this place.”

Let us worship God!

### Hymn

“Here in This Place” (GTG<sup>1</sup> 401)

### Prayer of Confession

All: Weaver God, we come to you, or—more the truth—you find us, disconnected and out of sorts. We are disheartened by our failures, discouraged by our weakness, and little that we do seems worthy of your grace. Restore our fortunes. Restore our future. Weave for us the tapestry on which our lives are stretched. Give us patience with the endless back and forth of shuttle, hand and effort. We look too closely, seeing only strands and knots and snarled threads of too-much-trying or none-at-all. Grant us eyes to see the whole of which we are a part. In the end, we ask for gentleness with ourselves, acceptance of our less than perfect ways. We pray that what we do and what you weave form patterns clear to all, of mercy in the warp of it and love throughout. Amen.<sup>2</sup>

### Assurance of God’s Love

One: Good people, most royal  
greening verdancy,

Rooted in the sun you shine with radiant light.

In this circle of earthly existence you shine so finely,

It surpasses understanding.

God hugs you. You are encircled by the arms of the mystery of God.<sup>3</sup>

Siblings in Christ, children of creation, believe the good news:

All: In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven!

### Old Testament Reading

Psalms 131

### New Testament Reading

Acts 9:36–45

### Sermon/Meditation

Consider using one of the following poems to highlight how ordinary moments from the lives of contemporary women align with Tabitha’s ministry. These two poems provide a supportive counterpoint to the preaching text from the book of Acts, lifting up moments of transfiguration experienced when we see and receive the gifts of women.

“Ladies Come”<sup>4</sup>

*by James Autry*

Ladies come with sad faces  
and baskets of sweets  
teacakes, pecan pies, puddings,  
memories  
and we choose and they serve  
telling stories and God blessing the children

*I declare that Miss Anne  
was the sweetest Christian person  
in the world*

Saying all the things to be said  
doing all the things to be done  
like orderly spirits  
freshening beds from the grieving night

poking up fires gone cold  
filling the table and sideboard  
then gathering there to urge and  
cajole  
as if the dead rest easier on our full  
stomachs

*Lord how Miss Anne would have loved  
that country ham*

No sadness so great it cannot be fed  
away  
by the insistent spirits

*That banana cake is her very own  
recipe*

*I remember how she loved my  
spoon bread*

*She canned the berries in this cobbler*  
and suddenly we are transformed  
and eat and smile and thank you  
and the ladies nod and know they  
have done well again  
in time of need

And the little girls watch and learn  
and we forget the early spring  
cemetery  
and the church with precious  
memories  
and farther along we do understand it  
the payments and repayments  
of all the ladies that were and are  
and we pray ever will be. Amen.

## OR

“Wise Women Also Came”<sup>5</sup>  
*by Jan Richardson*

Wise women also came  
the fire burned  
in their wombs  
long before they saw  
the flaming star  
in the sky.  
They walked in shadows,  
trusting the path  
would open  
under the light of the moon.

Wise women also came,  
seeking no directions,

no permission  
from any king  
They came  
by their own authority  
their own desire,  
their own longing  
They came in quiet,  
spreading no rumors,  
sparking no fears  
to lead  
to innocents’ slaughter,  
to their sister Rachel’s  
inconsolable lamentations.

Wise women also came,  
and they brought  
useful gifts:  
water for labor’s washing,  
fire for warm illumination,  
a blanket for swaddling.

Wise women also came,  
at least three of them,  
holding Mary in the labor,  
crying out with her  
in the birth pangs,  
breathing ancient blessings  
into her ear.

Wise women also came,  
and they went,  
as wise women always do,  
home a different way.

## Hymn

“Though I May Speak” (GtG 693)  
“Come and Seek the Ways of Wis-  
dom” (GtG 174)

## Prayers of the People

### The Lord’s Prayer

A feminist recasting<sup>6</sup>

Our mother, you are everywhere  
Hallowed be your many names  
Your fullness come  
Your desires be known  
In our lives as they are in your heart  
Give us today our daily bread  
And forgive us when we cause harm

As we forgive those who injure us  
Urge us toward greater wisdom and  
compassion  
And deliver us from false thoughts  
and desires  
For the heart, the whole, and the radi-  
ance of life are yours  
and ours, now and forever. Amen.

## Hymn

“A Prophet-Woman Broke a Jar”  
(GtG 201)

## Blessing and Benediction

Life is a precious thing to me,  
and a little thing . . .  
And the world is a little thing . . . .  
But it is in God’s ever keeping,  
it is in God’s ever loving  
it is in God’s ever making.

How should anything be amiss?  
Yes, all shall be well  
And all will be well.  
And thou shalt see thyself  
that all manner of thing shall be  
well.<sup>7</sup>

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## Notes

1. GtG indicates *Glory to God! The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville, KY: Geneva, 2013).
2. Pat Kozak and Janet Schaffran, *Life Prayers: from around the world*. Edited by Elizabeth Roberts and Elias Amidon (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 1996), 93.
3. Hildegard of Bingen, quoted in *Life Prayers*, p. 14.
4. James Autry, *Nights under a Tin Roof* (Oxford, MS: Yoknapatawpha, 1985), ?.
5. Jan Richardson, *Night Visions*, (Cleveland, OH: United Church, 1998), 94–95.
6. A feminist recasting of the Lord’s Prayer by Martha Weathers.
7. Julian of Norwich, “Revelations of Divine Love,” or “Showings.”