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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
4/17/2016, The Fourth Sunday of Easter  
Acts 9:36-43, John 10:22-30  
The Disciple Dorcas

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

<sup>36</sup>Now there was at Joppa a disciple named Tabitha, which means Dorcas. She was full of good works and acts of charity. (Acts 9:36, RSV)

Joppa was blessed to have Dorcas. Any town would be. This Fourth Sunday of Easter is a cheerful Sunday because it speaks of good people like Dorcas. It extends the resurrection of Jesus to include the raising up again of a kind-hearted and charitable disciple – the sort of person any town needs, any church needs.

St. Paul says that Jesus is the “first fruits” of the resurrection:

But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept. (1 Corinthians 15:20, KJV)

This is our Easter joy: the resurrection of the dead has begun — it has begun with Jesus. But also there shall be a great resurrection harvest to come. Those who have lived for Christ shall live again with him in eternity – wave upon wave of saints rising up again. The story of Dorcas is a thrilling Easter story because it gives us a beginning picture of that vast harvest of resurrections to come — a harvest that I want to include you and me too.

In this morning’s Gospel Lesson, Jesus defies death in the strongest language:

<sup>28</sup>...I give [my sheep] eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand. (John 10:28, RSV)

Well, death had tried to snatch Dorcas from the hand of the Good Shepherd, Jesus. But Jesus is not having it. Through his disciple Peter, Jesus restores Dorcas to life and to her good manner of life. It is a foretaste of the raising up again of a lot of good disciples in this world, including the raising up of people who are dear to us, but now rest on that far shore. They did good in their day. Easter means that they shall do good again, throughout eternity.

Joppa, where this morning’s story takes place, was a seaport town along the Mediterranean Sea, about thirty-five miles from Jerusalem. In ancient days, cedar logs were floated down the sea from Lebanon to Joppa and then carried overland to Jerusalem to build the temple (2 Chronicles 2:16). Joppa is part of the story of that rebellious prophet Jonah. When the LORD commanded Jonah to “Arise, go to

Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it,” (Jonah 1:2), you might recall that Jonah headed in the opposite direction. Instead of marching off toward Nineveh, Jonah dashed off to Joppa, and there found himself a ship sailing the other direction. Joppa probably had many interesting people throughout its long history – some good people, some bad people. Dorcas was one of the good ones.

To this very day, tribute is paid to the story of Dorcas through the existence of what are called “Dorcas Societies” or “Dorcas Circles.” There are Dorcas Societies around the world. Their mission is to provide clothing to the poor. The memory is preserved of that great scene where Saint Peter is taken to the upper room, to the body of Dorcas who has died. There, women were grieving and holding up clothing that Dorcas had made:

All the widows stood beside him weeping, and showing tunics and other garments which Dorcas made while she was with them. (Acts 9:39, RSV)

They say that in tidying up your home and simplifying your apartment, it helps to take each item of clothing in your closet or bureau, hold that piece of clothing in your hand, and ask yourself, “Does this pop for me? Does this delight me?” If it does, then keep it. If it does not, then give it away. Ruthlessly, give it away! Well, I bet that for these widows in this morning’s Bible story, when they held up a tunic or some other garment that Dorcas had made, that piece of clothing popped for them. It was dear to them, not just because of what it was, but even more because of the hands from whom it had come. It’s not every day that you meet someone like Dorcas – someone who is so kind-hearted and so hardworking on behalf of others.

And yet, while we might not meet people like Dorcas *every* day, still our world is graced with many such good people. And I am glad to say that churches often have such good people in them. Of course, other societies have good people too. Still, the church tends to have its right fair share of Dorcases, and that is as it should be.

At my wife, Carol’s, church – United Lutheran Church, Mount Vernon – there is a WELCA group that does good deeds like those of Dorcas. “WELCA” stands for “Women of the ELCA.” The NALC – the North American Lutheran Church - has a similar organization; it is called “WNALC” – Women of the NALC. Carol’s group, for example, recently collected socks, wash clothes, and soap for the New York City Rescue Mission for homeless people (<http://nycrescue.org/>). Other groups at the Wartburg make quilts for Lutheran World Relief, support a missionary, and support Our Sisters’ Place, which is a shelter for abused women. This evening, as Carol and I watch Inspector Morse on Netflix, her hands will probably be busy finishing a “seafarer’s scarf” she is knitting for the Seamen’s Church Institute. While she was traveling recently, she knit a cap for the head of cancer victims. Right now, over at United Lutheran Church in Mount Vernon, the elderly folks there are enjoying Coffee Hour with some blueberry muffins Carol

made for them last night. Our world is filled with kind-hearted people who work on behalf of others. Here at Immanuel, our Meals on Heels program is a benevolent program very much in the spirit of Dorcas. This world needs Dorcas.

So, Peter kneels down beside the dead body of Dorcas, prays, and then says to her “Tabitha, rise” (Acts 9:40). That is Dorcas’s other name, Tabitha. So Peter awakens her, as if awakening a child from sleep, “Tabitha, rise.” And the dear lady opens her eyes and sits up. She who was dead, is now alive. Then Peter takes her by the hand and lifts her up. She who was helpless, now has strength to stand up. Peter presents her to the saints and widows in that town, and they are happy again. This good person, Dorcas, has been restored to them. I bet Dorcas, then, continued as before, doing good for others even to old age. One of the joys of heaven will to be meet Dorcas.

In your life, you might know a Dorcas. If so, you are blessed. Not only do they do good in this world, but they give us an uplifting example. They are Christ-like, and make us want to be better people. The world might not give them a lot of credit. In fact, Dorcas might be generally overlooked because she is often quietly quilting and doing her good deeds. But the angels notice Dorcas, and in that good kingdom where the mighty are put down from their thrones and those of low degree are exalted (Luke 1:52), we might be very proud to say, “I know Dorcas.” Give her what help and encouragement you can even now.

Psalm 41 gives a benediction to those who remember the poor:

- <sup>1</sup>Happy are those who consider the poor;  
the LORD delivers them in the day of trouble.
- <sup>2</sup>The LORD protects them and keeps them alive.
- <sup>3</sup>The LORD sustains them on their sickbed;

Dorcas was such a one.

If you have known a Dorcas in your life who now rests in Christ, think of today’s Gospel story and of Christ’s determination that they shall live:

I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand. (John 10:28, RSV)

Picture Peter taking Dorcas by the hand and lifting her up to life again. Even better, picture Jesus taking our loved ones – and we ourselves one day – taking us by the hand and lifting us up to everlasting life. Not a scrap of goodness in our life shall go to waste, thanks to the goodness and merits of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.