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

My sermon this morning is about that good woman Tabitha. Let us begin with the first verse from our reading from Acts 9. As I read the verse, please note the name of the town where this marvelous event took place. The town is called Joppa. The verse goes this way:

36Now 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)

Long before today’s story about Tabitha, that rebellious preacher Jonah had fled from the Lord and landed at this seaport town of Joppa. Joppa is on the Mediterranean Sea along the western coast of Israel. Jonah set sail from Joppa for Tarshish, which seems to have been in Spain. So Jonah was heading in the opposite direction from Nineveh, where the Lord had told him to go and preach. This all means that the town of Joppa was once visited by a man who lived in the belly of a great fish for three days before he was raised up to life again. Now, in this morning’s First Lesson, the town of Joppa witnesses an even greater miracle. Jonah had been trapped in a great fish. That is awful but at least he was alive. Tabitha, on the other hand, was trapped in death. She was held there in death, like some poor captive, until that good day when St. Peter came along, prayed over her, gently said to her, “Tabitha, rise,” took her by the hand and restored her to the many people who loved her.

The combination of this Sunday’s First Lesson from Acts 9 and our Gospel Lesson from John 10 is a magnificent Easter grouping. It is a glorious and hopeful combination because it means that our resurrected Jesus Christ is not going to leave a good person like Tabitha dead as a doornail. Death, like the powerful paw of some mighty grizzly bear, had dared to snatch Tabitha away. But Jesus knows Tabitha and, as he promises in our Gospel Lesson, he shall give eternal life to Tabitha, and she shall never perish, and no one shall snatch her out of his hand. We have known good people like Tabitha, haven’t we? On Mother’s Day, some of will be thinking of our mothers when we think of good people who have died and moved into the nearer presence of the Lord. It is good to think that Jesus can restore them to life. It is good to think that Jesus will restore you and me to life someday. Let us take a look at this warmhearted disciple Tabitha.
Many of us have special affection for people who make things with their hands, including things for the poor. At the Wartburg in Mount Vernon, for example, where my wife, Carol, is Director of Pastoral Care, there was a longtime quilting group called the “Cut-Ups.” They made over 150 quilts for Lutheran World Relief over the course of a few years.

Tabitha was such a one. She made things with her hands and gave them to the poor. In fact, to this very day, there are church groups called “Dorcas Circles.” Dorcas is the Greek form of the Hebrew name of our hero, Tabitha. Dorcas Circles make things and give them to the poor, following in the spirit of Tabitha of old.

For the early Christians of Joppa, their town was a much lonelier place without Tabitha. They seem reluctant to bury her. Instead they lay her out on a bed in an upper room and they lament her, not with flowery speeches, but by holding up the tunics and other garments that Tabitha had made for the poor widows of Joppa. These poor widows were not ashamed to admit that the very clothes on their back had been given to them, woven for them, by Tabitha. They grieved that such a good person should have died.

A hope remained to them—an extraordinary hope. They heard that St. Peter was preaching in a nearby town. So they send two men to that town to fetch the apostle. “Please come to us without delay,” they entreat him. The two men do not specify what they seek from Peter, but Peter is patient and goes with them to Joppa. The Bible is silent about what the poor widows actually ask of St. Peter. Perhaps they can hardly bring themselves to speak what is really on their hearts. They want Tabitha back with them. They want her to be alive again. But they do not say this so much as they simply weep and show Peter the tunics and garments that Tabitha had made for them. Peter understands. He sends everyone from the room, perhaps so that he can be alone for his prayers. He prays to our heavenly Father, in the name of Jesus surely. He prays concerning Tabitha. Then he turns to her body and summons her up to life. It sounds like mother or father awakening a child from sleep. “Tabitha, rise.” And she does so. St. Peter has restored this good woman to life.

The Bible says that our good deeds carry onwards, even into heaven. St. John puts the matter this way:

And I heard a voice from heaven saying, “Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord henceforth.” “Blessed indeed,” says the Spirit, “that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them!” (Revelation 14:13, RSV)

We might think that there is not much we can do in this world that will be of lasting significance. Many of us get up in the morning, have breakfast, and head out into our work day. We peddle onwards, and perhaps at the end of
the day we can sigh and say, “Well, it is probably better that I worked today than that I did not work,” and yet it does not feel to us that we have accomplished much of lasting significance. But let us not forget the good Lord. If we have labored faithfully or if we have done some charitable deeds as Tabitha did, well, our deeds follow us. One day we will rest from our labors, but what we have done in this world will not have passed away. Our deeds shall follow us. Any good we do in our earthly life shall not have been done in vain. Eternity reckons our good deeds. Eternity reckons the good deeds of Tabitha, and St. Peter’s restoring her to life is a foretaste of Tabitha’s resurrection into eternal life. It is a foretaste of our resurrection into eternal life too.

Today’s Psalm — the 23rd Psalm — says that the LORD makes the sheep to lie down in green pastures. When you think of the LORD, think of Jesus, our Good Shepherd. Sheep face dangers in this world... lions and bears and wolves. Sheep seem unable to sense water, and so they need the shepherd to lead them beside the still waters. Sheep can trip, like any other of us. Their foot can fall into a crevice in the rocks and they can break their leg, which is a terrible thing for any of God’s creatures. Sheep can be attacked, they can break a leg, they can get lost, they can get sick, and they can die. Same with us. It was the same with Tabitha. We do not know why she died, but she did, and she was mourned. Likewise with us. If we have lived long enough, we have probably lost some good people in life. They have died, and we miss them. Probably always will.

But this story of Peter raising up Tabitha shines a whole new light on things. On Easter Sunday morning, we celebrated the resurrection of Jesus. We celebrated his great victory over death. Now, on this Fourth Sunday of Easter, we celebrate another victory over death. This time, we move on from the resurrection of Jesus to the raising up of Tabitha. The resurrection of Jesus means that there is afoot in our world Someone who can set people free from death’s cruel grip. Easter means that we have not seen the last of Tabitha. Indeed, you and I shall meet that good woman one day. Easter means that we have not seen the last of many good people in our lives, for Jesus has power to raise them up to life again. Indeed, Easter means that this world has not seen the last of us either! Of you and me. Some of us are getting older, all of us are vulnerable to sickness and injury, but come what may, Easter means that this world shall not be done with us. And our good deeds, alms, and charity shall not be passing songs in the nighttime, but adornments we shall wear even into eternity.

Jesus Christ, our Good Shepherd, shall see to these things. And to him be the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.