

**WESTMINSTER**  
PRESBYTERIAN  
**CHURCH**



SERMON

May 11, 2025

# **(Extra)ordinary Life**

Laura Bentley



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Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: May 11, 2025

## Introduction

This week, we continue reading in Acts of the Apostles. Jo spoke last week about this book—that it is a companion text, a part 2, to the Gospel of Luke and written by the same author. It chronicles stories of the early church, as the ordinary, men and women, who followed Jesus are now empowered by the Holy Spirit to spread the Gospel to the ends of the earth, forming communities of faith along the way. It also shares the stories of some surprising new disciples and apostles who encounter the living God in extraordinary ways.

On this Mother's Day, or mothering Sunday, as some churches have begun to recognize it, I want to highlight the work and the value of women in the church from the very beginning. I'm grateful this week that the lectionary has given us a story centered on the life of a woman in the early church.

Though we have strayed many times in human history in our view and treatment of women, there has never been question of women's worth to God—women are image bearers of the Divine. God created in God's image male and female, and like day and night, the sunrise and sunset, our genders, the particularities of how we express masculinity and femininity, point to a God who is big enough, strong and compassionate enough, to create all that is.

God created, loves, and honors women. Today is an invitation to honor those who have mothered us—whether by birth, adoption, spiritually, or practically—those who have shown up in our lives with care, wisdom, and persistence. It is a day to

honor the image of God reflected in the lives and acts of women.

Tabitha is one of those women. And in her story, I hope you hear echoes of women who have shown you God's love and life. And that you will hear a call to be a person, no matter your gender, who loves like a mother.

Before we turn our attention to Scripture, please join me in prayer.

### **Prayer for Illumination**

God of life,

We thank you for the gift of this day, for the gift of our lives,  
for those who have poured their lives into us  
that we might be where we are today.

Open our hearts to hear your Word to us,  
that we might offer our lives in service of others  
and to the glory of your Kingdom.

In the name of our risen Lord, Jesus the Christ we pray. Amen.

### **Scripture: Acts of the Apostles 9:36-43**

<sup>36</sup> Now in Joppa there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas. She was devoted to good works and acts of charity. <sup>37</sup> At that time she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs. <sup>38</sup> Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, who heard that Peter was there, sent two men to him with the request, "Please come to us without delay." <sup>39</sup> So Peter got up and went with them, and when he arrived, they took him to the room upstairs. All the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing tunics and

other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them. <sup>40</sup> Peter put all of them outside, and then he knelt down and prayed. He turned to the body and said, “Tabitha, get up.” Then she opened her eyes, and seeing Peter, she sat up. <sup>41</sup> He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive. <sup>42</sup> This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. <sup>43</sup> Meanwhile, he stayed in Joppa for some time with a certain Simon, a tanner.

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

### **Relentless Expansion**

We catch the apostle Peter along a journey of spiritual discovery. Peter followed Jesus with abandon as a disciple. He threw down his net and walked closely behind Jesus—every teaching, every healing, every confrontation with authorities, every miraculous break with the laws of nature...Peter was a witness and always the first to become a participant.

Yet, we know the stories of Peter. He walked on water, then sank. He proclaimed Christ as Messiah, then tried to get in the way of his calling. He promised to die for Christ if it came to that, then denied him three times after his arrest.

But Jesus called, restored, and sent Peter. Not begrudgingly, but with the proclamation that upon this Rock—this apostle’s witness and action—Christ would build his church.

We join Peter at this point in his journey in Acts of the Apostles, as he is a well-known messenger of Christ. A leader

in Jerusalem, the birthplace of this new Jesus movement. Communities gathering in homes and at the Temple, empowered by the Holy Spirit to follow the way of Christ and to worship him as their Lord and Savior, one with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Peter is a Jewish apostle sharing the Gospel with Jewish people.

But, as one commentator puts it, Acts of the Apostles is about the relentless expansion of the Gospel.

Peter is learning to not only walks with Jesus but to walk like Jesus—healing in Lydda and now, in Joppa, raising this woman from the dead. And that’s not the culmination. Peter’s journey will continue as he stays with a tanner named, Simon. A man whose profession makes him unclean. The surprising work of the Spirit in Peter’s ministry is not just what Peter can do through Christ, but who God calls Peter to heal, to serve, and to send.

It would not have been a shock for early Christians, nor for Peter, to hear that in Joppa there was a woman who was also a disciple. A woman who was so valued by her community that that two men were sent to Peter to urge him to go to her aid. Women played a central role in both the Christian community’s mission (think of the centrality of caring for widows) and the community’s ministry and leadership (think of women who funded Jesus and the disciples, those who opened their homes to daily gatherings, those who served the poor, who shared the stories of Jesus with their neighbors). Our daughter is named for one them, Junia, who exceled among the Apostles. (Romans 16)



And yet, Peter is the same man who heard women proclaim the resurrection of Christ and thought it an ideal tale. He lived in a world that deemed women to be second class citizens, at best. The relentless expansion of the Gospel pushed against the norms of Rome and some first century rabbinical teachings, and created space for women to lead, to serve, and to be valued alongside their brothers in the faith.

Peter ran up the stairs into such a space.

There he listened. He paid attention to the women, many of whom were widows. He took their stories and their requests seriously. And through him, God brought extraordinary life.

### **Tabitha's Ordinary Life**

Remarkably, Luke—the writer of this book—spends as time on the woman lying in bed, as on the great apostle.

Tabitha, her Hebrew name, or Dorcas, her Greek name, was a woman of steadfast faith, who cared for her community. That she—like Saul/Paul—went by both a Hebrew and a Greek name, meant that she had a foot in both worlds. She was known beyond only her Jewish community. Perhaps in commerce or in welcoming outsiders into the church or perhaps she was both Jewish and Roman, holding the tension of a both/and identity.

We do know that she was a disciple of Jesus, a woman devoted to good works and to acts of charity.

This probably meant that she was like many of you, who I see in and out of the church all of the time, living your faith in every day life—running meals to people recovering from surgery, jumping in to babysit when school is cancelled, sending cards to those you think need a little pick me up, painting the trim along the walls of this Sanctuary and every office doorway, checking in about people who you haven't seen for awhile just to make sure their OK.

It probably meant she gave generously to the ministry of the church community—helping to fund meals for the community, helping to support those who were called to preach in neighboring towns, helping to pay for housing, food, and other needs of the poorest and most vulnerable in their midst. It definitely meant that she kept the company of widows. Maybe she was a widow herself or single in a society that assumed a woman must be attached to a man for provision and protection. She listened to these women. She advocated for them. She made them clothing. This is what they hold up to Peter, so he can understand who this woman is to them. She covered them—like Christ speaks of God as a mother hen, sheltering God's people. Tabitha literally embraced them with the work of her hands.

### **The Work of Women**

I recently had the amazing opportunity to travel to Scotland for ten days with a group of women—both pastors and laypeople.

(I'm sure I will have time in the future to bore you with all the photos and details, so I'll try to stay on point here.)

We were following the intersection of the lives of Mary Queen of Scots and John Knox. Mary, was the Catholic Queen, who returned to Scotland from France at the age of 19 to rule. She returned to a country in political and religious turmoil, amid the Scottish Reformation, with the power preacher, John Knox, agitating against her authority.

That was the historical backdrop as we walked through room after room that housed artifacts (sometimes recreations) from Queen Mary and John Knox's daily lives. A quill from Knox. A tapestry that hung in Mary's room. A desk. A necklace.

John Knox's writings have been printed and reprinted and now are even available on Kindle. You can easily point to his opinions, ideas, and impact in the world.

But Mary did not leave confessions or treaties or books with titles like, "The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstruous Regiment of Women"—that is a real thing Knox wrote.

Through the centuries what has most conveyed Mary's story by her own hand are her embroideries. Even when under constant surveillance through 19 years of imprisonment, she expressed herself in her needlework. Unlike the letters of her adversary or the relics of her wealth, her embroideries were not valued by collectors for a long time. They were not examined with an eye toward metaphor and cryptic communication. Coded letters sound much cooler...and of more value...than the needlework of a 24-year-old royal.

Embroidery was, while impressive and sought-after, still consider the ordinary work of women. It was a mark of femininity in the 1500's. And could fly under the radar, unnoticed as an expression of the artist, as even the coded communication of a prisoner.

The ordinary work of women has often been overlooked throughout time. Even when the woman was a queen!

But what is remarkable in Acts of the Apostles—what is so like the relentless expansion of the Gospel—is that Tabitha's ordinary work is not overlooked. The tunics she sewed, the clothing she stitched, the stories she told in fabric and dye are lifted up by the women she loved. Peter sees them. Peter sees her. As God always saw and delighted in his creation, Tabitha. Her ordinary life was worth Peter's time, attention, and prayer.

Just as God choose to work once-in-a-lifetime miracles through Peter. God had chosen to work daily miracles through Tabitha.

The Spirit nudged Peter: It was not yet time for her story in this world to end.

### **Your (Extra)ordinary Life**

Peter turned to the body and said, "Tabitha, get up."

Tabitha's life was restored.

And believed in her Christ for the first time.

Peter's words were not just for Tabitha that day. They were God's call to the saints and widows waiting outside, to the new believers, too: Get up! Arise! Live your new Tabitha would live the remainder of her earthly life as a person given new life in Christ. And one day, her life in this world would come to an end, and she would claim the promise of the resurrection to eternal life in Christ.

Friends, we are we not called to the same?

We, too, are called to live our lives on this earth as those who have been given new life in Christ.

The relentless expansion of the Gospel is not just to the ends of the earth—it is to every part of our lives. Our ordinary lives are holy sites where God's grace and life burst into our broken world. Including the hidden labor, historically and for many still today, borne by women.

But God calls us—all God's children, women, men, however our genders are expressed—to glorify our creator with our whole lives. We are all called to serve with compassion and grace.

Every diaper changed, every minute given to nursing a baby, every laundry basket lugged up the stairs...is holy. Every meal cooked, every lunch packed, every dish washed...is holy. Every text sent just to check in, every card sent, every smile shared with a little one...is holy. Every ride given, every time we show up as the village another person needs, every sacrifice made without recognition...is holy.

Each ordinary, quiet, act of nurture, care, compassion, and love you have given is holy.

And it all matters to God.

Whatever your gender. Whatever your gifts. We are all called to faithfulness in the small and mundane, yet miraculous in our lives.

So, wake up! Pay attention to the ordinary tasks of life. Recognize who is doing the behind-the-scenes work of love and care.

And, get up! Join Tabitha, and the many—often but not always women—throughout time that have taken on the hidden labor that clothes, feeds, and sustains us.

Because in Christ, our ordinary lives are made extraordinary.





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