

# Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

*St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA*

*May 11, 2025*

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## **In the Direction of Tears**

[Readings](#)

[Bulletin](#)

Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ, grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

If you attended our text study last Monday, you might be surprised to hear that I am once again preaching on the Acts text. It might surprise you because I stated rather emphatically that I was struggling with this text from Acts and was likely going to preach on one of the other texts. I wasn't going to preach on Acts because I didn't feel as though I could really dig my teeth into Tabitha or Peter; there may have been something to work with in the person of Simon the Tanner (tanners, since they worked with dead animals, were considered unclean by Jewish law), but even that felt skimpy.

The whole scene is reminiscent of the resurrections Jesus accomplishes in the Gospel of Luke<sup>1</sup> (a reminder, scholars largely agree that Luke and Acts written by the same author). It's all just so...straightforward. Peter echoes Jesus' words and actions in Luke's Gospel, and Tabitha is raised from the dead. And both Jesus' and Peter's resurrections echo those of the prophets of old, like Elijah raising the widow's son.<sup>2</sup>

There are tantalizing details that accompany this scene in Acts. But what can we make of them without reading things into the text? Tabitha was, apparently, a gifted seamstress. She was also generous and clearly supported numerous widows in her community. But where do these details take us? Was she worthier of resurrection than others? Is that why we get these

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<sup>1</sup> c.f. Luke 7:11-17; Luke 8:49-56 (NRSVUE)

<sup>2</sup> 1 Kings 17:17-24 (NRSVUE)

details? It's easy to make that assumption, but it remains that, an assumption. And a dangerous one at that.

So why am I preaching on a text I claimed I couldn't get my teeth into? Well, I noticed the work of another actor in the scene: the Holy Spirit. Remember, this resurrection occurs a while after Jesus' resurrection and ascension. We're seven chapters after the Pentecost event. And how does this miracle come about? "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>3</sup> The faith of disciples, prompted by the Holy Spirit leads to Tabitha's resurrection.

The Holy Spirit's fingerprints are all over this scene. The Spirit moved the community to share their grief with the wider church. The Spirit moved Peter to respond to their tears. The Spirit moved those widows to speak of Tabitha's talent, generosity, and compassion. The Spirit was at work in and through Peter, giving him the words and power to raise her from death. And the Spirit was at work in the revelation of Tabitha's resurrection, an event that brought many to the Way.<sup>4</sup>

There's a strong argument to be made that while Jesus is the main character of the Gospels, it is the Holy Spirit who is the prime mover in the book of Acts. Let me remind you of the lens the author gives us in the words of Jesus early on in this work. "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."<sup>5</sup>

Jesus gives the disciples an incredible mission: spread the good news of salvation and liberation to the ends of the earth. A task that is beyond the means of any one person, or even a dedicated group of people. A task that

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<sup>3</sup> Acts 9:38 (NRSVUE)

<sup>4</sup> Acts 9:42 (NRSVUE)

<sup>5</sup> Acts 1:8 (NRSVUE)

will span centuries and require the work of billions of evangelists and missionaries. And it would be entirely impossible without the Holy Spirit.

Why? The Spirit keeps us on track and moving in the right direction. Which direction might that be? In the direction of tears. In the direction of the world's pain and suffering. That's the direction the Holy Spirit moves us in. Towards people and situations that need healing and wholeness. Towards the places of the world that need good news most!

This movement of the Spirit in the direction of tears should come as no great surprise. It's a movement that has long been illustrated in scripture. Even our Psalm today carries a sense of this movement. Sure, the good shepherd will find green pastures and still waters for us...but the good shepherd also accompanies us through the valley of the shadow of death. God is even with us in the presence of those who wish us harm.

Our good shepherd calls us by name, we know his voice and we can follow it. We know Jesus and where he tended to go...straight towards brokenness and death. Meeting people where they were at, and serving their needs in order to bring them to greater wholeness and righteousness. Turning that brokenness into healing and that death into life...life eternal and life abundant.

It can be difficult at times to know how to respond to the evil in the world. There are people hurting the world over. There are people unjustly imprisoned right here in our country. The racism and bigotry of our country is increasingly blatant. There is oppression and injustice rampant in our society today. What can we do in the face of all of this?

Move in the direction of tears. Go to those who are grieving and weep with them. Visit those who are sick and offer them some comfort. Investigate the needs of your neighbors and serve them. Follow the Way of Christ, the Way of the Cross. Follow it in the direction of tears, in the direction of neighbors.

And when you discover the source of those tears, do something about it.  
Amen.