

# Sermon for Sunday, May 12, 2019 - "Not Abandoned"

Fourth Sunday of Easter  
May 12, 2019  
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church  
Decorah, Iowa  
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

[Click here to read scripture passages for the day.](#)

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus, our Good Shepherd.

Tabitha, the disciple we heard about in our first reading, reminds me of a radiant Zimbabwean woman named Paulina. Paulina's life and work help me to picture Tabitha's life among the widows of Joppa.

I met Paulina when I spent a semester in Zimbabwe during seminary. She led a woman's cooperative that I visited. Most of the women in the cooperative had been widowed by AIDS, shunned by society, and left without any protection because of the failings of the legal system.

These rural women had married their husbands in traditional ceremonies in the village - ceremonies that carried no legal status under Zimbabwean law. Their husbands had then followed the common practice of living in the city during the week to make money and returning to their families on the weekend. Often their husbands would marry another woman in the city in formal legal ceremonies that *were* recognized by the government. They'd also usually have a number of other partners in the city and often would contract HIV/AIDS. When they died, all of their assets went to their wives in the city. The only thing passed on to the rural wives was HIV.

Yet the widows in this cooperative had not given up. They'd pooled their meager resources to launch business ventures including garment sales and repair, produce sales, traditional arts and craft production and sales. Over time, they'd been able to build a school room and hire a teacher to educate their children.

A few friends and I got to spend a week living with these women. And I got to know their leader, Paulina. It was striking to me that Paulina was not a widow. She and her school teacher husband had three children and while they were not rich, they had much more money than the widows.

Many women in Paulina's situation had very little contact with widows. They'd maybe employ one to be a domestic worker and give a handout to a few others, but mostly seemed to fear too much contact with them. They wouldn't even look at them directly. Yet Paulina, a strong Christian, could- n't separate herself from the widows. "We're all women, she said, we must stick together". Paulina also saw gifts in the widows that others did not. She realized these women could do so much more together. So, she facilitated a gathering for them and the idea for the cooperative was born. Slowly the women came to believe in themselves and in what they could accomplish. Paulina made her home among them to support and encourage them.

Tabitha, too, lived and worked among the widows of Joppa. We're told she was a disciple like Peter, James and John. As good Jews, all of the disciples cared about widows. Widows in the ancient world faced many of the same challenges as rural Zimbabwean widows, so the Hebrew

scriptures emphasize the care of widows. Jesus' followers took this seriously. The 12 disciples even created the role of deacon in response to a concern that widows weren't getting enough to eat in the daily distribution of food. Seven men were appointed to the role.

But Tabitha did more than just give the widows food, more than care *for* them, she was *with* them. She lived with them. She made clothes with them. She shared life with them. I imagine her being among them as Paullina was among the widows of Zimbabwe - listening, hoping, seeing them with new eyes as beautiful, capable people.

Tabitha's life among the widows gave them great hope. When she died, they felt abandoned and alone. They sent for help. Peter came and prayed and called Tabitha back to life.

God, working through Peter, breathed new life into Tabitha's way of being *with* others. God affirmed her ministry, raising her up to continue it. God also said to the widows, "I see you. I am with you; you are not abandoned."

When we face struggle and loss, it's so easy to feel abandoned and alone. And, this story can sometimes make it even harder because our loved ones aren't raised from the dead the way Tabitha was. Yet, I think the good news of this story is not so much that Tabitha was raised, but that God saw the widows and said, "I will not leave you alone and forsaken. I am with you now in my servant Tabitha, raised from the dead. And, even after she is gone, I am always with you."

Tabitha was raised but she didn't live forever. Her life ended again and she remained dead.

Still after her death, God did not abandon the widows and leave them forsaken. God was with them still through the community of the church. God was with them still through the Holy Spirit that was poured out on the church, the Spirit Jesus promised to send so that the disciples would not be abandoned.

God was with them through the presence of the risen Christ, the Good Shepherd, leading them beside still waters, restoring their souls. Even in the valley of the shadow of death, they were not alone.

Beloved, God is with you in these same ways, as well.

God is present in this community where we can be with each other and for each other like Tabitha and Paulina - where we can share life together. In this community we get to practice seeing each other with the eyes of love and honoring one another as beautiful, capable people. We get to practice listening, encouraging, and hoping. We learn to pay attention to how God is with us through the power of the Spirit and the presence of the risen Christ.

The Spirit poured out on the church is present still with us today, as close to us as our breath. The Spirit is at work to help us use our gifts, to empower us to be with and for other people. The Spirit works in us to lift others up.

God is with us still through the presence of the risen Christ, our Good Shepherd. Our Good Shepherd has led us today to these still waters where we can find rest. He has guided us on the right paths to this place where a table is prepared for us. Even though fear, grief, pain and sorrow stalk, Christ feeds us in the presence of these enemies and pours love overflowing into us.

God is with you.

God is for you.

You can be with and for others by the power of the Spirit.

Let's take a moment for silent prayer. Amen.