

Once Upon a Time, There was a Disciple
A Sermon
by Shelly Davis

Text: Acts 9:36-43

Finally, a story in the Bible
about a woman whose name we know!

Did you know:

- There are more than 600 unnamed women in the Bible? (this calculation includes the Apocrypha—a set of books recognized by Roman Catholic and Orthodox canons but not most Protestant or Jewish ones)
- Many women in the Bible are identified or designated only in relation to men (wife of, daughter of, mother of, sister of, etc.).
- When a woman does have a name, she often shares it with another biblical woman.
 - This is true on 27 occasions.
 - Ever think about how many different “Marys” we find in Jesus’ story alone?
- Add to that the recognition that women of importance in our biblical stories are mostly sex workers, royalty, or barren women in need of children.
- And, if this isn’t shocking enough, it is also true that named *or* unnamed, many, many of these women are also depicted as conniving and deceitful in their stories,

- including heroes or villains like:
 - Tamar, Judith, Jezebel, Rahab, and Salome, just to name a few.
- With a mere 188 to 205 of the women in the Bible having been given names (depending on what Bible you're reading) we have alongside them in our very same Bible, 1,181 named men.
- Thus, a very conservative estimate is that named women are less than 15% of the named characters in our entire Bible.

[Women by the Numbers, June 2104, Erin Kane, GCSRW, Director of Research and Monitoring]

So, thanks be to God, that *today*,
we hear a story in the Bible about a woman
—a disciple, no less—whose name was Tabitha,
which in Greek is Dorcas.

And this woman, called a *disciple* of Jesus—the only time in the New Testament that the feminine form of the word “disciple” (*mathetria*) is used in relation to a specific woman—she is named not once, but *twice*:

- *Tabitha* in the Aramaic or vernacular language of Jesus and his first disciples, and
- *Dorcas* in the Greek—
- brilliantly, **both** names mean “gazelle” in their respective languages

This woman disciple of Jesus was known among her community for her devotion to good works and acts of charity, especially the tunics and other clothing that she made for widows.

This Dorcas of Luke's story in the Acts of the Apostles sounds to me like one of the countless women who have been part of countless groups of women up to good deeds throughout the church's history that have so often carried the name, "Dorcas Circles."

From our churches' former Women's Societies,

- to our present collection of extraordinary women actively serving United Congregational Church on our deacons, church council, many Boards, and faith formation efforts—
- and in every conceivable capacity we may ask or need them to serve—
- we have greatly benefitted, and continue to benefit from, the blessings of the multitude of "gazelles" who have "devoted themselves to good works and acts of charity" in our midst.

Thanks be to God—for every one of you!

However, even as our story from the book of Acts today lifts up the discipleship of Tabitha and so many women—named and unnamed, like her—we find that the community of widows gathered around Tabitha in this passage are in *mourning*, for she had become ill and died.

And because we cannot read or hear this scripture—or any of our scriptures—in isolation or without the context of our present lives—for we believe this is a *LIVING* testament—Hebrew, Old, Christian, New—

that calls us into conversation with the characters and stories that point us to God and one another, while helping us weave an ever-new fabric and garment of faith for our day and time—I find myself encountering

- in this story of a devoted, beloved, gifted, female disciple of Jesus who has fallen ill and died,
- echoes of two particularly heartbreaking deaths of extraordinary women who devoted their talents and lives as contemporary disciples on the way of Jesus

One of these female disciples was the theologian, poet UCC pastor, and hymnist, Ruth Duck who passed from this life into the next in late December 2024, just after turning 77. Among her many academic degrees, Ruth was awarded a Doctor of Theology from Boston University School of Theology in 1989, where her work focused on liturgy, worship, and the Trinitarian baptismal formula.

1989 also happens to be the year I was awarded my Master of Divinity from Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary in Evanston, Illinois—where Ruth Duck soon joined the faculty as a liturgical theologian and professor of worship, teaching there for 27 years.

One of the first books of worship resources (calls to worship, communion and baptism liturgies, and prayers) that I ever bought (while I was still in college and Ruth Duck was pastor of Bethel-Bethany UCC in

Milwaukee, WI) was edited by Ruth. Some of you may know it, have used it yourself, or have seen it in our church library on our Adams Street Campus. It is entitled, *Bread for the Journey*.

Ruth was best known as the writer of some 200 published hymn texts and psalm paraphrases.

- Her hymns appear in numerous hymnals and supplements and
- she is often among those who have contributed the largest number of hymns in a given hymnal.
- 14 of the hymns in *The New Century Hymnal*—the one in our pew racks—including our closing hymn for today, are gifts Ruth has given to the church.
- All of her hymns
 - are deeply scriptural,
 - incorporate inclusive language that embraces everyone and enlarges our images of God, and
 - sing of justice, equality, and care for God's creation.

Thanks be to God for the life and gift of this contemporary woman disciple of Jesus, Ruth C. Duck.

I am also mindful of another woman disciple on the way of Jesus named Rachel Held Evans who shockingly, fell ill and died in 2019 at age 37. Born and raised into her early teens in Birmingham, Alabama, at the time of her death Rachel and her

husband Dan were parenting two children, a 3-year old boy and a girl about to turn 1. This disciple of Jesus was a best-selling author, speaker, blogger and “joyful troublemaker online,” who challenged the conservative Christianity of her birth and upbringing and gave a progressive, we might even say, “born again” and still Christian, but *very* different, voice to a generation of wandering evangelicals and wandering others wrestling with their faith.

Two of this Rachel’s writing colleagues in truth telling, trouble making and conference planning, Sarah Bessey and Jeff Chu, shared this remembrance of her in *The Washington Post*.

—How Rachel Held Evans really should be remembered
—*The Washington Post*, May 8, 2019 at 6:55 PM

Sarah Bessey and Jeff Chu are authors and, with Rachel Held Evans, co-curators of the Evolving Faith Conference.

Above the desk where she wrote the books, tweets and blogs that reached millions, our friend [Rachel Held Evans](#) had a small sign: “Tell the truth.” Rachel, who died last week at 37 after a [sudden illness](#), would look up at this reminder to re-center herself. She wanted to tell the truth about the world as she saw it. As a [progressive Christian writer](#), that often meant engaging in theological debates and calling out injustice.

But we misunderstand her if we see her primarily as a [renegade](#) and an eager sparring partner.

She never positioned herself simply “against” anything. To tell the truth is to recognize Rachel for who she was — someone who, inspired by Jesus’ love for her, poured out uncommon love and worked relentlessly “for” the good of all people, whether they agreed with her or not.

Rachel was “for” [words](#) — beautiful, thoughtful words. Her writing brimmed with wisdom and wit, authentic storytelling and heart-rending language. And how she loved the [Bible](#). While her relationship with Scripture evolved, her respect for it only deepened, moving her to devote her last book, “[Inspired](#),” to its [stories](#).

Rachel was “for” knowledge. An irrepressible learner, she delighted in theology. She wrestled with sacred texts and peppered scholars with questions, in a way that put seminarians and journalists to shame. Her intellect was remarkable, and her humble discipline and steady (if often incorrect) refusal to believe she was the smartest person in the room made her formidable.

Rachel was “for” Dayton, the small town in East Tennessee where she’d lived since age 14. She loved its green, rolling landscape and especially its people. Outsiders might have asked how a progressive daughter of a conservative town could feel so at home, but to Rachel, the question answered itself: She may have disagreed with them sometimes,

but Dayton's people were her people. She honored them, wanted the best for them, and insistently stayed among them. At the same time, *all* people were [Rachel's people](#).

Rachel was “for” an all-embracing vision of Christ's church and the relentless inclusion of refugees and those suffering poverty, of LGBTQ people, of women and especially women of color, of the unseen and unheard and swept-aside. She recognized the real geometry of God. She used her writing to build the bridges so many of us needed to get back to God's love, to one another and to the church.

And in a world that covets power, cash and influence, she lavishly gave away all three. She centered on the marginalized, quietly offering expertise, introductions, endorsements, speaking invitations, money and more.

Rachel was “for” Jesus; in many ways, she would have gotten in much less trouble if she hadn't believed so deeply that Jesus meant what He said. She was especially for Jesus' table. At every conference she hosted, Communion was served, and the table was always open. She knew how important its tangible reminders were, especially for those told they had no business imbibing the bread and wine.

Rachel was “for” her husband, Dan Evans; “for” her young son; “for” her daughter, who turns 1 next week. When she stood at Dayton’s outskirts with a sign that read “DAN IS AWESOME,” yes, it was a stunt during her year of literal biblical womanhood ([Proverbs 31:23](#): “Her husband is respected at the city gates”), but it was also simply a declaration of affection for her college sweetheart. And once, when she was caught onstage during a Q&A with a fussy baby in the wings, she didn’t press on; she stopped, went backstage and brought her daughter out to finish the session — one hand around her baby, one around the microphone. She modeled the integration of faith, family and vocation.

Ultimately, Rachel was “for” the abundance of ordinary ways we encounter God. Everything she did pointed to these encounters: feeding people, opening her home, stirring our laughter, attuning our ears to the predawn song of a mockingbird. Since she died, it has often felt as if we are longing for morning — and perhaps there’s a lesson in that, too.

One of Rachel’s favorite books to read to her son was “[The Dark](#),” by Lemony Snicket. It tells of a boy who learns not to be afraid of what he can’t see. “Hi, dark,” he says, with ever greater courage. Rachel walked with us through the dark, urging us never to fear and reminding us that we are loved. She told us there was always room for us and our [messy complexity](#).

And as we struggled with uncertainty all around, she always returned us to her core conviction: We are loved.

We are loved not just by her but also by her all-embracing Jesus, with whom she now rests.

It's the love her whole life was "*for.*"

—How Rachel Held Evans really should be remembered—*The Washington Post*, May 8, 2019

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These two women, one named Ruth and one named Rachel—both amazing disciples of Jesus—have not, *unlike* the women with two names for gazelle, Tabitha and Dorcas—they have *not* had one named Peter or any other disciple of Jesus implore them to “get up” so that their eyes may be opened again, that they may sit up and be helped to their feet.

One of the great mysteries of our faith is what it truly means to be alive and to be alive again in the light and power of the resurrection we proclaim for our risen Lord, and for ourselves, as disciples of Jesus.

I do not know very many things “for sure.”

But I do know that one hymnist, poet and theologian named Ruth lived the abundant life Jesus promises each one of us here and now through her pastoring, teaching, and hymn writing.

AND this theologian and hymnist disciple named Ruth will continue to be “shown to be alive,” and will continue to rise, in all the voices and congregations and compositions and lives that continue to carry her voice and love into this world.

I also know that one writer and speaker named Rachel lived the abundant life Jesus promises each one of us, here and now, through her words, her questions, her many conversions and conversations, her unbridled honesty, her mothering, her convening—in virtual space and in real space—her living life like an open-ended chapter in a book, a holy book, that simply insists we are loved by God.

- All of us.
- Each of us.
- Every single one.
- We are loved by God.

AND this gospel preacher and disciple named Rachel will continue to be “shown to be alive,” and will continue to rise, in all the books and blog posts and tweets and minds and hearts that continue to carry her words and love into this world.

I do know—for sure—that many have, and many more will come to believe in Jesus because of these three women disciples named Tabitha, Ruth and Rachel.

Christ *is* risen. Christ is risen *indeed*.

Hallelujah! Amen.

I invite us now to sing ourselves into prayer together:

Invitation to Prayer – *Alleluia*