

May 8, Easter 4C (Acts 9:36-43; John 10:22-30)

## **Tabitha's community embraces her in her season after loss.**

by [Kiki Barnes](#) in the [April 20, 2022](#) issue

It was a Wednesday night, August 8, 2012. I was on call as a chaplain resident, taking a nap at my parents' home, when my mother's scream jarred me awake. I ran to my parents' bedroom to see my mother holding my father, who had suddenly collapsed. She pleaded for me to call 911. Hours later, I sat in a room with her, my daughter, and an ER physician as he broke the news that my father had died, and life changed forever.

Certainly I have grieved (and continue to grieve), but my worst grief was not for myself but for my mother. Of course my life would change, but not the way hers would. Losing a father is one thing, but losing a husband is on a completely different spectrum. In that instant, I had lost a father; my mother lost a future—at least the one she'd had in mind up until that point. Hopes, dreams, and plans were tied to her spouse. What would the notions of retirement and old age look like now?

I grieved the loss of my mother's sense of stability and purpose in the season to come. In one unforeseen moment, she had become a widow, continually bearing the mark of loss. No longer half of a couple, she had to navigate life in ways she never had before—before she even reached her 60th birthday. Her entire adult life had been tethered by love to another soul who cared for her deeply and lived (with intention) to fulfill her needs daily. He was her biggest cheerleader and most ardent defender.

In the years to follow, I wondered how she would learn to do all the things my father had done, and I lamented that as much as I loved her and made myself available to help, a void existed that no one could fill. I prayed for God to do what my daughter and I could not do for her.

Unlike my mother, widows in the time of Acts 9 had no resources. The Bible speaks of the necessity of caring for the “fatherless and the widows” who need protection (Ps. 68:5), are in a state of distress (James 1:27), and need justice (Deut. 10:18). Scripture suggests the church has an obligation to assist widows, especially those who do not have the support of children or grandchildren. Our Acts text does not mention Tabitha having descendants. Reading through it and living through my mother’s season of widowhood, I learned a few lessons.

God shows up to fill the void. In a time when they had lost a sense of protection and companionship, God placed people and purpose in Tabitha’s life and my mother’s. My mother had taught Bible classes years before my father passed and was able to revisit this love for scripture, this time through a grief group. Acts speaks of Tabitha using her gifts of sewing to create garments. After she dies, a group of women is gathered around her body when Peter arrives, and some commentaries suggest they are adorned with garments she made. Tabitha is a part of a community that embraces her in her season after loss. This sort of embrace continually reminds us that there is life after loss. God reminds us that our lives do not end with our greatest losses. Our identities are not static. Newness of life can happen at any phase. God continually invites us to new relationships, with God and with our world. The story rings true for all of our lives: our gifts make room for ourselves.

Because we have a Good Shepherd, as our Gospel reading in John 10 reminds us, we are not forgotten. God will provide, even during seasons of uncertainty. As sheep, we cannot see the entire landscape, and we cannot easily shift our course during changing conditions. But the shepherd knows the ultimate destination, always keeping in mind where the sheep need to be by the day’s end. The shepherd watches over the flock while leading them through all seasons of life, including seasons of grief. We are continually being shown that we are needed and are a part of something greater than ourselves.

There remained a need for Tabitha and my mother to contribute to a community beyond their personal devotional journey. More people for them to encourage. More people to see them model strength and courage when plans and expectations have been shattered in an instant. More people to see a woman live past an event and lean into all God has for them on the other side of tragedy.

After seven years of being widowed, my mother was serving others by making herself available as a listening ear to those suffering the loss of a spouse. In this work, she encountered a former coworker of my father’s whose wife had recently

died after a prolonged illness. He felt a lack of hope and purpose after having been his wife's primary caregiver in their home for six years. According to the widower, my mother and his pastor helped him realize that his life was not over and hope was available to him. Turns out, this man had read and studied scripture with my father during breaks at work, almost 30 years before. He and my mother married a year later.