This week we continue our series of sermons on “The Church of the Risen Savior.” This series follows the continuing work of Jesus in the book of Acts as he creates the Church of the Risen Savior – a spiritual community that continues to manifest his ongoing presence and loving activity in the world to this very day.

This Sunday we’re looking at Acts 9:36-43 where we see Jesus creating a serving church devoted to works of mercy and acts of charity that bring blessing to the world. The central character in this passage is Tabitha, a woman who made garments for poor widows in the port city of Joppa. She died and the disciples sent messengers to fetch the apostle Peter from a nearby town where God had used him to perform a miracle, restoring health to a bedridden man. Now in the story of Tabitha, we see ordinary people doing ordinary things that produce extraordinary results!

Notice first, the ordinary people in the church at Joppa. As I said, Tabitha is the central character in the story. Her Aramaic name “Tabitha” is equivalent to the Greek name “Dorcas,” both of which mean “Gazelle.” It was a common name given to women in that day. There was nothing unusual about it. And hers was a common occupation, too. She was a seamstress, one of the commonest of occupations in her day.

Now my wife has been making dresses for our granddaughters to wear at my upcoming retirement ceremony and she has posted pictures of them on Facebook where she has received a great deal of well earned praise. They are beautiful and deserving of praise, but some of the praise originates in the fact that sewing is an increasingly uncommon art form in today’s modern world. Fewer and fewer people practice it. Not so in ancient times. God sewed garments for Adam and Eve at the dawn of time and throughout history, people, principally women, had to sew in order to provide clothing for their families. It was a common occupation.

So there was nothing uncommon about Tabitha. She was an ordinary woman in an ordinary village practicing an ordinary occupation. She was so ordinary that’s she’s only mentioned once in all the Bible and then disappears forever. But she’s not the only actor in this story. Peter is also mentioned.

What do we know about Peter? Well the name “Peter” is really a nickname given to him by Jesus Christ. It means “Rock” or “Stone.” His real name was “Simon” or “Simeon” – a very common name – so common in fact that another character in this short story bears the very same name. Not only was his name common, but his occupation was common as well. You see, Peter was an ordinary fisherman on the Sea of Galilee. And fishing was a very common occupation around that tiny inland Sea.

So Peter’s name was common. His occupation was common. And his demeanor was common, too. How do we know? Because when he spoke once in the presence of the Jewish Council, the councilmembers were amazed by what he said, principally because
they knew he was an uneducated and an ordinary man. (Acts 4:13) So Peter is just another ordinary character in this little story. But there are others.

For example, there’s Simon the tanner who appears at the end of the story. Like the others, he had a common name. And like the others, he had a common occupation. As a tanner, he treated animal skins and prepared them for use in making a variety of articles to include clothing, sandals, girdles, bottles, helmets, quivers, slings, shields, chairs, and household furniture. It was the commonest of occupations and very much needed in that day. And like Tabitha, Simon the tanner appears in this story, and the one that immediately follows, and then disappears forever from our history. He was just an ordinary man with an ordinary occupation but at least he had a name.

There are several characters in this story who were so ordinary that their names didn’t even merit mention, like the women who washed Tabitha’s body when she died and the men who fetched Peter from a nearby town.

Now why do I make so much out of the ordinariness of the people in this story? Because we sometimes forget that the church is primarily composed of ordinary people and that God normally works in the world through ordinary people like you and me. Paul put it this way in 1 Corinthians 1:26-29, 31: “Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God…as it is written, ‘Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.’” (NRSV)

“Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.” Midshipmen, you may actually be among the best and the brightest our country has to offer. Senior enlisted, officers, and admirals, you’ve demonstrated sustained superior performance throughout your careers and have accomplished much along the way. And many others of you have also excelled in life and labor. But compared to the saints and sages throughout the ages, and especially compared to the Lord himself, we are all pretty ordinary after all. But that’s ok because the church is primarily composed of ordinary people; and God normally works in the world through ordinary people like you and me.

And what kind of work does God normally do through ordinary people like you and me? He does ordinary work – the kind of work that almost anyone can do. Look at Tabitha. What did she do? She sewed clothes and gave those clothes to poor widows in need. Now that’s something almost anyone could have done but only Tabitha got it done. She offered a common skill to God and God used it to bless the world. It’s the kind of thing that almost anyone can do today. Do you have a common talent you can use to help the poor or needy?

This week I met Todd Engelsen. Todd’s a friend of Chaplain Johnson’s. Todd is an actuary by profession and worked more than 20 years for John Hancock Financial Services in Boston, Massachusetts. In the late 80’s he began to volunteer for an organization that’s now called PEER Servants. PEER is an acronym that stands for
Partnering for Economic Empowerment and Renewal. Today, Todd directs the ministry of PEER Servants. What do they do? PEER Servants helps indigenous Christian microfinance organizations provide microloans to the poorest of the poor so they can establish small businesses and become economically self-sufficient.

For example, they gave a $100 loan to a teenage mother in the Philippines so she could buy a sewing machine in order to begin a business of her own. When she repaid that loan she qualified for a larger loan and ultimately purchased 18 sewing machines and a small van. Today, she has 24 employees and distributes her products through 20 wholesalers. How’d she get there? She got there in part because God worked through Todd’s talent as an actuary to make it happen. He looks a lot like Tabitha, don’t you think?

Now look what happened when Tabitha died. Some unnamed women washed her body, prepared it for burial, and placed it for viewing in an upper room. I suspect they also cared for her before she died. Unless she died suddenly, I suspect they were there, swabbing her brow, giving her water, trying to make her as comfortable as possible in the hours leading up to her death.

Caring for the sick. Caring for the dying. Caring for the dead. It’s the kind of thing anyone can do. This week I visited one of our congregants who is hospitalized in serious condition. When I got there I found two notes left on the night stand. They were from Anne Parker – a member of this congregation. She’d gotten there before me, as she so often does, to care for a sick member of this congregation in his hour of sickness and of need. She’s joined in this kind of ministry by our Lay Eucharistic Ministers who carry the sacrament to our shut-ins after services every Sunday. And all of them look a lot like those unnamed women who cared for Tabitha in her sick and dying days. Caring for the sick, the dying, the dead. It’s an ordinary thing that almost anyone can do.

Now look at the unnamed men who carried an urgent message to Lydda, a town ten miles away, urging Peter to come in the hope he might do something for Tabitha, or at the very least, comfort her grieving friends. What did they do? They carried a message. Anyone can do that! It takes no skill at all. It’s the most ordinary of errands. It just takes a little time. It’s picking up the phone, writing a letter, sending a card, shooting off an e-mail or a text that mobilizes others to do some good for someone in need.

My wife attends a Bible study on the Yard. When the leader’s mother passed away, my wife went online and organized meals for the family. She made the contacts and prepared the schedules so the family members wouldn’t have to worry about preparing meals in the midst of other, more important things. Someone else is organizing meals for another member of our congregation who’ll have surgery next month. It’s a simple thing. Anyone can do that!

Now look at Peter. What did Peter do? “He raised the dead!” you say. No he didn’t. God did that. Then what did Peter do? He prayed! And God answered his prayer and restored Tabitha’s life. Peter prayed. Anyone can do that.
We have a vibrant prayer ministry here at the chapel. There’s a prayer box at the back of the sanctuary where you can deposit your prayer requests. And we have a prayer line you can call. The number is on the bottom of the bulletin’s back page. And Pat Lenham organizes our prayer team passing prayer requests via e-mail to its members. And then there’s Bill Hargrave who loves to pray and often lays his hands on me and prays God’s blessing down. Many of you have benefited from the prayers of these and other people. I know my family is being prayed for now as I prepare to retire from the Navy and transition to parish ministry. Prayer! It’s a simple thing almost anyone can do!

Finally, look at Simon the tanner. What did Simon do? He opened his home to Peter and let Peter stay with him for a while. You see, he exercised the gift of hospitality. Some of us are better at that than others but it’s something all of us can do. Remember what the Bible says: “Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.” (Heb. 13:1-2 NRSV) Angels or apostles like Peter…you never know who it might be.

So you see, ordinary people were doing ordinary things: turning their talents to the service of others; caring for the sick, the dying, the dead; carrying messages and organizing assistances; praying; and opening their hearts and homes to those in need. It was all very ordinary but it produced some extraordinary outcomes.

First and foremost, it produced a miracle! Tabitha was raised from the dead. Peter prayed then turned to the body and said, “Tabitha, get up!” And that’s precisely what she did. She opened her eyes and was suddenly alive!

And miracles still happen in the Church of the Risen Savior! When ordinary disciples do ordinary things in Jesus’ name then extraordinary things occur! As I look out at you, I know there’s at least a miracle or two sitting among you today. Just as Peter called Tabitha by name, I could call you by name as well. You know who you are. The doctors didn’t expect you to be here today. Your prognosis was as grim as could be. But look at you now! You’re alive and you thrive because of Jesus’ healing power and this congregation’s tender care. And I bet if I were to pass the microphone among you, many of you would have a story or two to tell – a miracle story of God’s powerful intervention. I could tell of at least five or six miracles from my own life where ordinary people did ordinary things to bring me into the presence of an extraordinary God and great things happened as a consequence!

But Tabitha’s resurrection was only the first of two miracles that occurred that day. The other was the miracle of faith. Acts 9:42 says many believed in the Lord because of Tabitha’s resurrection. And you see, faith is just as much a miracle as raising the dead! Why? Because faith raises those who are spiritually dead to the realm of spiritual life. In the words of Ephesian chapter 2: “God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved…through faith. (Eph. 2:4-5, 8)

Yes, faith is a miracle because faith raises those who are spiritually dead to the realm of spiritual life. And faith is a miracle also because it is a gift from God. It does not originate
in us. Ephesians 2:8 says, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God…” No, none of us comes to faith on our own. Faith is a gift. We only believe in Jesus if the Father in heaven moves us. So Jesus said, “No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me.” (Jn. 6:44 NRSV) And then Jesus added a promise. He said, “No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day… Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life.” (Jn. 4:44, 47 NRSV)

My friend, Tabitha would go to the grave again but all who believe as she believed will be raised to eternal life which is life with God in the present world and life forever with him in the glorious world to come. Yes, faith is a miracle. Have you experienced it? Do you have it? Here’s praying that you do!

So today, if you feel yourself being moved to faith then don’t fight the Father; rather embrace the Savior and believe! For this Savior is risen from the dead! He’s creating a servant church where ordinary people like you and me do ordinary things that produce extraordinary results. Miracles happen, people believe, and the dead are raised to eternal life! Are you part of the servant church – the Church of the Risen Savior? Are you serving others in Jesus name? Is so then someday you’ll stand with Tabitha, Peter, Simon the tanner, and a host of unnamed servants of God and you’ll hear Jesus say, “Well done good and faithful servant…Enter into the joy of your master.” (Mt. 25:23 ESV) I’m going to hear those words some day. Will you? You think about that. Amen!