

Finding Edna

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
May 11, 2025 – A Sermon for Sunday Morning Worship on Mother's Day
The 4th Sunday of Eastertide
Text: Acts 9:36-42

Good morning and welcome once again to the Mother's Day celebration of this church. As it does every year, Mother's Day reminds me of where I part ways with some of our more recent denominational traditions which, at least at times, does not enthusiastically support the observance of Mother's Day in the church. There are several explanations offered as to why some in the UCC feel this way but most often this lack of attention to such a lovely sentiment is seen as a way of recognizing that not all women have children and that motherhood is not the primary purpose of women. If you know me at all, you know that I wholeheartedly endorse both of these positions. However, I am not prepared to use either of these as a reason not to celebrate all women in general and mothers, and those women who are like mothers to us. I have always thought of Mother's Day this way – as a time to honor all women for their incalculable gifts to those who know and love them.

Some of these women we honor this day are mothers. Some are not. To me, it never really mattered when it came to Mother's Day. As you might have picked up on if you read my article in *The Beacon* this month, I was blessed to grow up in a church with many women who were like mothers to me. Each of them provided a role model for me in different ways. Miss Gilson, my piano teacher, was one of them, a quintessential spinster lady complete with the Gibson- Girl hairdo and the cameo pins on her high-necked dresses. Mrs. Thornton was the Sunday School Superintendent and became Elder in the church, an event I wrote

about in my *Beacon* article. Mrs. Braymer, Mrs. Martin, Mrs. Rizzo – all housewives to outward appearances but really the backbone of the family business each of their husbands operated. On Mother's Day they would all come to church sporting the corsages bought for them by their families. Orchids, roses, daisies, violets – beautiful flowers of every kind would perch brightly on the shoulders of these ladies whose smiles populated my Sundays back then. Only now do I have an appreciation for who they were in their own right, and how they all were a foundational part of my journey to becoming who I am today. So, as I think about Mother's Day, these are the women I am thinking about and happily remembering. I am sure you all have women in your life whom you recall fondly on a day such as this. What are their names? Say them now so we can all celebrate these women and the memories of them we treasure! (*Pause*)

Today's Scripture text is about a woman who was, I suspect, very much like all the women from our lives we have just been talking about. This is a short story about one of the Apostle Peter's first healings as he emerged as the leader of the disciples, now apostles, in the absence of Jesus. This is another one of those biblical stories which seems simple on the surface and yet it offers so many tantalizing clues about life in these early church groups. The first thing that jumps out is that this story is about one woman, but she is referred to with two different names. But even before we learn she has two names, we learn something even more remarkable – she was considered a disciple! A woman! This meant she was regarded as someone who had received and acted upon the instructions she received as a follower of Jesus.¹ In other words, she was understood to be a leader, someone to be

¹ *The Westminster Dictionary of the Bible*, Davis & Gehman, Eds., ©1944, The Westminster Press, p. 140.

looked up to and followed as an example. This is more than a little remarkable in the patriarchal society in which she lived. And, as noted earlier, she is introduced to us by two different names. In Hebrew (and the Aramaic which the apostles spoke) she was known as Tabitha. But in Greek, she was known as Dorcas. Looking at the two names, it is difficult to see the connection between them, at least linguistically. The fact that she is so intentionally referred to by these two different names reflecting two different cultures is quite remarkable, so we have to ask ourselves why it is that she is treated in this way. Is it because she was seemingly risen from the dead by Peter? Or is it because she was such an extraordinary woman in her own right? Or could it be both?

As I checked in some of my commentaries about this story, I quickly realized something. In the standard commentaries, like the one in my *New Oxford Annotated NRSV Bible*, Tabitha/Dorcas is not even referenced in the sparse notes on this particular story. The whole focus is on the importance of this being one of Peter's early healing stories. In other words, her value to the story was only as the recipient of this healing from Peter. So, I checked one of my feminist biblical commentaries, *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Commentary*, and again, somewhat surprisingly I admit, she is considered again due to the pairing with Peter which is itself indicative of a pattern of how women are treated in Acts – always linked with a male.² Hmmm... I think an important point is being missed here. To me, Dorcas/Tabitha was an extraordinary woman in her own right. She was known and deeply respected for her “good works and acts of charity.” She was also, apparently, an excellent seamstress, a

² *Searching the Scriptures*, Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, Ed., ©1994 Crossroads Publishing, p. 782.

talent we can assume she used frequently to accomplish her “good works and acts of charity.” She was such a valued member of this little community of faith that when she became ill and seemed to have died, they quickly sent for Peter whom they had heard was nearby. She was seen as too valuable to lose, even to death. As we heard in the text, Peter did respond to the request and came to pray over her, and she awakened. He helped her up and took her back to her friends and the story ends there.

What I would like us to reflect on here for a moment is that Dorcas (Tabitha if you prefer), a clearly remarkably talented and much loved and valued member of her community, fades into the background as Peter’s prowess as an apostle now imbued with the ability to heal and even raise the dead takes center stage. Dorcas literally disappears into the shadows as the emphasis shifts to Peter and what he does in the story. Dear ones, I find this to be infuriating. It’s as though Dorcas was only put on this earth – and in this story – to provide a reason for Peter to do something miraculous. Her humanity is lost to the need to celebrate Peter’s newfound abilities. I understand the need for this from a theological standpoint – Peter’s reputation as the emerging leader of the Jesus Movement needed to be grounded in remarkable acts of healing if he was to be accepted in this new role. But still, what about Dorcas? What about all the women in those early communities? What about all the women who have been part of our lives whose invaluable contributions to us and many more besides are at risk of disappearing?

Well, dear ones, that is just unacceptable to me. I confess this is a new found passion for me – this looking for ordinary women at risk of being lost to history – and it comes from a very recent and very personal experience I have had in my quest to find Edna. Who is Edna, you might ask? Allow me to tell you about

her! Edna Lydia Reed Hainsworth was born in Stafford Springs, CT in 1888. She was the daughter of Joel Henry Reed, a prominent Superior Court Judge, and Lydia E. Reed. She had two siblings, Alice Mabel Walker and Willis H. Reed, and was married to Alonzo A. Hainsworth sometime before 1908 when she gave birth to her first son, Waldo Reed Hainsworth. Her second son was Winston Clarkson Hainsworth, born in 1913. This son grew up to be Dr. Winston C. Hainsworth, a much decorated war hero in the Pacific Theater of WWII. He was also the father of Peter Hainsworth, my husband. Thus, Edna was my grandmother-in-law, and a very special someone indeed.

Peter's Dad told wonderful stories about his mom, how hard working she was, how she would do anything for her children. Her husband, Alonzo, was part of the YMCA movement in its early days. Thus, he was never in a position to earn the kind of money Edna would have been accustomed to as a judge's daughter. She accepted this as her lot and set out to do whatever she needed to do to make ends meet. Peter's dad loved to tell stories of her getting up every day before dawn to make donuts to sell to the workers on their way to the docks at Norfolk's port. She continued her donut making for years, increasing her efforts to make sure her sons made it through college. We think she also did work as a freelance seamstress. Her husband was always giving away money to folks he felt had more need than his own family and it's not hard to imagine strangers at the family dinner table were no rare occurrence. So, like Dorcas, she was a woman of good works and acts of charity – because life asked it of her. In short, she was a remarkable woman whom the rest of the world considered totally unremarkable. Thus it is no real surprise that eventually she became lost to time.

I met Grandmother Hainsworth once, maybe twice, when Peter and I accompanied Dr. Hainsworth on a visit to see her, I think for her birthday. She still lived in the two family house in Norfolk, VA which her father had bought as a wedding gift for her and her husband when they married. I remember it being tiny. I remember wondering how she had raised her two sons in such a tiny apartment in this two family house. And I remember wishing I had more time to get to know her. Alas, it was a short visit. But we did return with a gift from her – a very large framed piece of her incredible embroidery. This magnificent piece depicted three geese in flight over some sort of coastal waterway. The stitching was impeccable, and I loved it. We hung it at each place we lived following this visit shortly after we were married but, as time passed, it gradually made its way to hanging in the garage in our current home due to the piece's massive size.

This incredible hand-embroidery piece is the reason I ended up on what became my quest to find Edna. As some of you know, Peter and I are currently engaged in some renovations at our home, which involves thinning out a lot of the stuff we have accumulated over the years. Every time I went into the garage, I stared at Grandmother Hainsworth's geese and wondered what in the world we could ever do with them. Then, just a few months ago, I realized that the Seal of the City of East Providence where we live is three geese in flight over a waterway – exactly the scene depicted in Grandmother's piece. So, I suggested Peter call the Mayor's Office to see if they would have any interest in the geese. We sent photographs and they were definitely interested. As we got ready to hand it over to them, they asked for some biographical information on Edna. Thus my quest began and then ended quickly when I couldn't find much, if any information on her via Google. She was, among other things, a published poet so I

thought maybe I could find a poem or two online. No such luck. Then I decided to see if I could find the details on where she was buried because we now wanted to visit her. She died the end of 1978 so we were relying on what little we could remember from that time which was that she was buried in Stafford Springs, CT next to her father. So, I googled. No Edna. I tried Ancestry.com and found a little tiny bit of information but nothing on where she was buried. Zero. Zip. Nada. My stomach flipped over. What if something had happened and she was never buried. What if she had been lost in transit between Norfolk and Stafford Springs and no one had ever realized it! I panicked.

Suffice to say this kicked off quite the search on my part as I was determined to find Edna. We did find her in a few days, and I am happy to report she was right where she was supposed to be – in a grave in the Stafford Springs Cemetery between her husband and her father. But she had no headstone. We think this is because Peter's dad, who was to make the arrangements for her, died unexpectedly just a few months after Edna. The gravestone was never ordered and, when a grave is unmarked as hers was, the person becomes invisible. We were only able to find her because of the efforts of the mostly volunteer staff at this small town cemetery who were willing to comb through 40 year old paper records in the basement of an old chapel to find out if she was indeed there. They found her and therefore, so did we. We went to visit Edna on our anniversary trip to Stafford Springs just a few weeks ago. The photos of her gravesite are here, and we have a headstone on order for her. When it comes in and is installed, we will go back to Stafford Springs, and I will do a committal for her. Family will be invited as will anyone else who might be interested. This is one woman who will not be forgotten because I won't allow that to happen.

Finding Edna became a passion for me as she became a symbol for me of all the women who have been lost to time. Of course, when we are thinking about antiquity, that's not surprising. But Edna was in my living memory. I met her. How could we not know where she was? It was jarring. She reminded me so much of Dorcas, who in the commentaries is noted primarily because of her role as a beneficiary of Peter's healing powers. But what about Dorcas? What about Edna? What about Anna and Dorothy, my own grandmothers? What about your grandmothers and your great-grandmothers? We all have these women in our lives, women without whom we literally would not be here but what do we really know about them? What do their lives have to teach us, here in these fractious times of the 21st century? They lived through and built lives in periods of history every bit as tumultuous as our own. That's why I am so confident their stories have much to teach and inspire us. But first we have to find them. We have to make the effort to recover their stories, recognizing that in doing so, we are shoring up the foundations of our own stories as they unfold every day. Personally, I can't think of a better way to celebrate Mother's Day. Finding Edna has meant more to me than I can really explain. I wish the same to you in your quests to re-discover the forgotten women of your life. They are there, I promise you. All you have to do is find them and get ready to be amazed. Happy Mother's Day. Amen.