

Acts part 3: Rhoda's story, women in new roles

Silvia Purdie, Cashmere Presbyterian Church, Sunday 13 May 2018, Mother's Day

Readings: Acts 12: 1-18

John 17: 6-11

We pray: Holy Spirit inspire our words and the meditations of our hearts that your truth may come alive in us. Amen.

One of the principles of eye witness testimony is that a story is often preserved with the name of the person who told the story. As we read the New Testament, where a name appears, there is a good chance that it is that named person who told the story to the author. In the case of the book of Acts, the author was Luke, the young man, probably trained as a doctor, who traveled with Paul. Luke was not an Israeli, his home was further north, but he travelled to Jerusalem a couple of times with Paul, and my belief is that on his travels he recorded the stories told to him along the way, about Jesus, first and foremost, but also about key events in the life of the early church.

One of these key events was the miraculous escape of Peter on the night before he was to be executed. This story includes the name of a serving girl, who plays a key role in the story, so we can assume that she is the teller of the story. This, then, is Rhoda's story.

And what an awesome story it is, full of mystery, suspense, threat and humour. If Luke wrote it down when he came to Jerusalem in 48, it probably happened about 6 years earlier. Peter is in prison, sentenced to be executed at dawn. The church are praying, an all-night prayer vigil in Rhoda's house. Their last-ditch desperate prayers were answered in the most astonishing way. For Peter got slapped awake as he lay on the cold stone floor of a prison cell. Surrounded by a strange glow Peter fumbled for his shoes, stumbled semi-conscious, somehow slipping out of chains and through locked doors, past armed guards, and out into the night air. Peter was quite sure he was dreaming or hallucinating, but standing on the street he suddenly realised that he had been rescued from certain death, by an angel, no less!

I expect that panic quickly took over, and Peter ran, fully expecting the might of the Roman army to be thudding through the streets after him. He ran, not to the main church house, James' house, not to Peter's own house – they would have been too obvious a target for a Roman search, but to Mary's house. He knocks on the gate – not too loud, it was the middle of the night, and he didn't want to wake the neighbours. Rhoda hears the knock, 'who is it?' she asks nervously. 'It's Peter' he replied, and she recognised his voice, and promptly freaked out, rushed back inside leaving poor Peter standing on the street terrified for his life. Inside they are all praying for Peter, but can't for a minute believe that he might be standing at the door – 'you're crazy' they say, then in their fear leaping to the conclusion that he has been killed already and his ghost has come to say goodbye. But sure enough, someone is knocking at the door so they all go, open it, and there, sure enough, is Peter. He stays just long enough to tell them what has happened, grab a few hugs

and a loaf of bread, tells them to tell the others, and then he disappears off to find somewhere to lay low for a while.

It's brilliant, and told with a real story tellers act.

So what do we learn about the early church from this dramatic narrative?

First and foremost, the story is about the power of prayer. And this is a theme which is utterly central to the book of Acts. Nothing happens that has not been prayed into. Every decision is accompanied by prayer. Every journey is embarked upon in prayer. Every person is sent out with prayer and received back with prayer. Peter's miraculous jail-break is one of the most dramatic answers to prayer recorded in the Bible. If there is one thing that we can learn from reading Acts it is to pray more. Pray when we are alone. Pray when we are together. Pray our gratitude and celebrations. Pray our despair and our fears. Every aspect of our lives, individually and corporately, is to be immersed with prayer, for God is active in everything and in everyone, and prayer releases the power of God. Prayer makes room for God to act. Prayer prepares us for what God is doing, and helps us align our choices with that.

Second, Acts tells of real people. It is not air-brushed. The people in Acts have personalities, and conflicts and emotions. This story is deliberately unflattering: Rhoda does a stupid thing in forgetting to open the gate in her excitement. The church do not believe her. Isn't that just like the church to pray for something but fail to recognise when the very thing that they are praying for actually happens?? Like, we want God to answer our prayers, but so often when God does answer our prayer we miss it, or we minimise it, or it doesn't work out how we expect so we don't quite believe it.

Thirdly, we can see a little of the cost of being a follower of Jesus in those times. Peter knew that if he had stayed in Mary's house and been found there by the soldiers, everyone else in the house would have been punished, arrested, possibly killed. It was serious. The apostle James, one of the sons of Zebedee, had recently been killed. The persecution of the church was beginning. Successive Roman governors and emperors tried their darndest to get rid of the fellowship of Jesus Christ. But despite living at times in fear for their lives, the early church continued to thrive and grow.

And, fourthly, this glimpse into church life highlights the key role of women in the early church. The church met in Mary's house. We are told that Mary was the mother of John Mark. This is the same Mark who, I believe, wrote the Gospel of Mark, the very first of the gospels to be written, and who travelled with Paul, Barnabas, ending up going all the way to Rome with Peter. There were various Mary's in the early church. This Mary must have been wealthy, to have owned a large home in Jerusalem. Widowed, presumably she ran the family business. She may have been one of the women who had supported Jesus financially. Certainly in the decade after Jesus's death and resurrection, this Mary became one of the leaders in the early church. She hosted a home church. As host she would have

presided over the common meals, including the breaking of the bread and the prayers.

Next Sunday we celebrate Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit as a life-changing experience. One of the most important features of the Spirit as they experienced it was that women and men received the Spirit equally. This was unheard of and utterly unexpected. This changed everything. This created a whole new way of being family, new models of leadership.

The old sign of full membership in God's people was circumcision, male circumcision. The new signs of full belonging were baptism with water and with fire. The same for men and for women. The book of Acts makes it clear that Gentile women as well as men accepted faith in Jesus, and shared in leadership in local communities. Luke makes a point of mentioning women. We hear about Lydia, the purple cloth merchant. We hear about the 4 daughters of Philip who were prophets.

Women experienced in the early church a radically different foundation for their identity. This is expressed so beautifully in John's gospel, chapter 17, in the form of Jesus' high-priestly prayer.

John 17 verse 6 Jesus says:

I have made you known to those you gave me out of the world. They belonged to you, and you gave them to me.

Paul in his teaching describes believers as being "in Christ". It's the same idea as John 17 verse 6. We who accept Jesus Christ as Lord belong to him. We are alive in him. We have been given to him. We stand in Christ.

As a woman this is who I am. Yes I am a wife and a mother, but I am not just a wife and a mother. I am loved of God. I have received the word and the spirit of God – not because I am ordained but because I am a follower of Jesus. The word and the spirit is available to all because Jesus has given them to us.

Women were valued in the early church, and are valued in our church today, not because of what we can do, even if some of us do make darned good cookies, not for our public roles, whether we are married or not or mothers or not or employed or not or ordained or not. Women are precious to God not because of our faces or our bodies or our clothes or our bank accounts. So many women, young and old, feel themselves to be not good enough, too much or not enough, never quite measuring up. Women are valued in Christ simply because Jesus Christ chose us. It matters to me that I stand in a line of faithful women, going right back 2000 years, including Mary the mother of John Mark, and Rhoda the serving girl, who knew themselves as loved, who took their place in their community, who found their voice even if sometimes they got called crazy.