

“Out of Your Mind”

Acts 12:1-17

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Do you ever get the feeling there are some things about the disciples that maybe we *don't* want to know?—such as: what is this connection with Peter and servant girls? Why, at the tensest moments, is it always the maid who identifies him?

I can think of at least three of these women. There's the servant girl of the high priest, on the night Jesus was arrested: she can identify Peter. She stares at him warming himself by the fire, in the high priest's courtyard, and finally says, “I know you. You were with that Galilean”—which Peter famously denies. There's a second servant girl, according to Matthew, who sees Peter on the porch the same night; she remembers him, too. She tells the people around her, “This man was with Jesus of Nazareth”—which Peter denies again, without bothering to disguise his Nazareth accent. And then a year or so later there's Rhoda, or “Rosie,” if you want a loose translation of the Greek: Rosie the maid, from Acts 12.¹ She doesn't even need to *see* Peter in order to recognize him; she knows what he *sounds* like. So when she hears his voice at the door on a night that just happens to be Passover, just like the night when Jesus was arrested, she is so happy she doesn't even stop to open it and rushes to announce to everybody that Peter is at the gate!—which *Peter* doesn't deny, this time, but everyone else does. (*Flip goes the story...*) Three servant girls, three denials, three positive ID's.

Now, I realize three instances do not necessarily constitute a trend, and I don't want to make too much of this. There could be a lot of reasons why Peter made such a lasting impression on female domestic staff. Maybe he was exceptionally kind to them. Maybe his sermons promised them a freedom they didn't know in this world. Maybe Peter just stood out from the other disciples because he was the cute one, or the clumsy one, or the one with fisherman's biceps or a Sean Connery Galilean accent; who knows? There could be any number of reasons why these women could identify Peter in the dark, most of which are far too boring to make it into a supermarket tabloid.

For a while I read this story thinking that if those servant women remembered Peter, it must be something about *him*. I suppose I wanted Peter to be the hero; I wanted him to be an unforgettable role model, a caring pastor, a great preacher, a man of the people, a champion of justice, honest and wise and brave and true. It's a *preaching conference*, okay?² I wanted to find us a good role model. And Peter's a good one, in this story. Imagine, if *you* got to be Peter, when you returned home. Imagine preaching the kind of sermon that people actually notice, because it's not only exegetically sound and contextually sensitive, it's *true*, and even *dangerous*; and I don't mean because Mr. and Mrs. So-and-so will be so mad about what you said that they'll withdraw their money; I mean the kind of dangerous that goes beyond local church politics, so that there are FBI agents sitting in the back pews taking notes, and your sermons are quoted in the *Washington Post*, launching movements, inspiring activists, horrifying the Pentagon, until finally the president himself has no choice but to order your arrest, because your preaching is toppling governments. Can you even

picture that?! And imagine, the night before your trial, locked in your cell, guards on either side, alarm systems at every door, and suddenly, an angel appears, breaks your chains, takes your hand, leads you out, and you find yourself free, free to preach another day!

I love reading the story that way. Imagine: the preacher who tells the truth, makes a difference, goes to jail, and then, is rescued by angels! Wow. The sermons I would preach, if I thought it would go like that. The things I'd say, on behalf of justice, if all I had to worry about was the Pentagon. No more pressure to keep Mr. and Mrs. So-and-so happy. No more budgets. Just truth...and angels. Preacher heaven.

So it's a preaching conference, and I admit I got a little carried away thinking about Peter and his angel. I got a little stuck in that reading of the text. I started to believe it was all about *him*: that if Rosie the maid and the other servant girls insisted that they remembered Peter, it must be something about *him*—clearly, his unforgettable preaching. Because that would make a good, inspiring story for us, right? *Be like Peter. Truth...and angels. Go in peace.*

But I forgot. Peter isn't the real preacher in this story. Oh, he's a preacher all right, but he isn't doing it right now; he isn't preaching *here*, in this text. The one who *is* preaching, is Rhoda; Rosie the maid. *She's* the preacher. Which might lead us to wonder if our next homiletical hero, our next role model, is Rosie the maid.

The thing about Luke is, he's too careful a writer to leave anything to chance. Every word choice is deliberate and loaded. And when he repeats a particular verb or image, you have to assume that it isn't just by accident; he's trying to make a point. Those word repetitions are like little neon signs in the middle of the text: ****Pay attention. Pay attention. Pay attention.**** That's how I discovered that Rhoda wasn't the only servant girl around: I hauled out my concordance, and there they were, the maid by the fire and the maid at the door, blinking *** at me. But it was the *verbs* that turned this text around for me, all these obscure lexicon parallels between Luke and Acts that only a preacher could love—like did you know, for example, that the word Luke uses for “recognizing” (as in, Rosie the maid *recognizing* Peter), is the same word he uses in the Road to Emmaus story, when Jesus took the bread, and broke it, and their eyes were opened and they *recognized* him?! It's a rare verb for Luke; he doesn't use it much. Or how about this one: the word for what Rhoda does when she recognizes Peter, the word *apagello*, that gets translated here as “announced” (as in, “she ran in and *announced* that Peter was standing at the gate”)—well, *that* happens to be the same verb John uses in the resurrection story, when Mary Magdalene *announces* on Easter morning, “I have seen the Lord!” Rhoda is the first woman to claim *that* verb since Mary. Is that awesome, or what?!

I'm not sure my worshiping community would find this quite as fascinating as I do, but hey—this *is* a preaching conference, and you'll allow me one digression into language technicalities, won't you? Because this is BIG, you all. Luke is telling us, in his very sneaky Lukan way, that Rhoda ran into that room with an *announcement*, a *proclamation*, that *Peter was alive*. He wasn't in jail, the way he was supposed to be; he wasn't dead, the way Herod promised he would be, first thing tomorrow; no, he was alive, and he was standing right outside the gate, because Rhoda heard him knocking, and her ears were opened and she recognized him! (Is this ringing any bells for you, people? I hope so, because Luke is not the least bit subtle about any of this!) *Peter is not dead*, Rhoda announces; *he is alive, and he is here, and I tell you*, she

insists, *I heard him!* And you know what? Every single one of those believers, who had spent hours praying for this very thing to happen, every single one of them looked at Rhoda and said, “You’re out of your mind.” Which isn’t quite as rude as telling her that her story is an idle tale and a lot of hogwash, but close.

She proclaimed something, and they didn’t believe her. She preached good news, and they dismissed her. *Poor Rhoda. She’s out of her mind. She wants Peter back so badly she’s starting to hear things.* She announced that the very thing they had prayed for had come to pass, and they told her she was delusional. Why is that?!

Do you think she just wasn’t convincing enough? Did her announcement lack passion and a depth of personal commitment? Maybe she hadn’t adequately grasped the pastoral context, felt their pain, addressed their needs. Maybe she wasn’t a very good storyteller: her delivery lacked a certain polish, an awareness of the importance of dramatic structure. Maybe she didn’t lean hard enough on the biblical and theological foundations of her message; she should have cited more theologians and scriptural references, argued her case. Maybe she hadn’t spent enough time on her focus and function statements. Or maybe her announcement just wasn’t very interesting, compared to their prayers. But surely, there must have been *something* she could have done to improve her proclamation and make them believe her. Isn’t that what we preachers do, when no one jumps up to believe us? We figure, *Well, it must be me.* Right?

Thank God we have this story. Praise God for Rosie the maid. You know what I hear from her? I hear that a preacher isn’t the one who’s most convincing; a preacher just has to be convinced herself. A preacher is just the one who recognizes the dead man at the door, and announces to everybody that he’s really alive, and asking to come in, so shouldn’t they go open the gate, now? That’s a preacher: a doorman who keeps looking for dead people. A maid named Rosie, who knows Peter’s voice when she hears it.

I haven’t tried this out on my students yet. You can let me know whether it would have sent *you* round the bend, when *you* were in seminary, to hear that a preacher is really a doorman for dead people, or a doorman who keeps looking for people and things we thought were dead. Things that others tell you are utterly impossible, like ending a war. Things other folks have given up on long ago, like a church that welcomes everyone. Things we pray for, but certainly don’t expect to happen, like Peter escaping from Herod. Things no one in this world, no one in their right mind, would dare to hope for.

And that’s really it, isn’t it? To preach, you can’t be in your right mind. You have to be a little out of it, to be perfectly frank. Because there isn’t anything that’s going to dislocate you more than the grace of God. It will pick you up out of your ordered life, where you pray for the power of God to break into our reality, and it’ll do just that: it’ll break into any reality you ever thought you had a handle on, and plunk you down on another planet. It will dislocate you until you’re out of your mind (wherever that was) and instead, wandering around someplace called the realm of God. Totally illogical. And then you get the call to preach, right?—so God says, “Okay, here’s what I want you to do: just wait at the door, and when someone knocks, figure out who it is and then come tell us”—which sounds simple enough until you realize that you’re going to spend the rest of your life recognizing the risen Christ and announcing that there’s a person we all assumed was dead waiting at the door, and guess what?—

they're not dead now.

Luke says the other people in the house were amazed, when they finally came to the door and saw Peter. They were *more* than amazed, actually; they were scared witless, scared out of their minds. They were confused and displaced and beside themselves—take your pick, the word means all those things. It's a word Luke uses a lot, maybe because it's a frightening place, the realm of God. It's a frightening thing to see the power of God moving in our very prayers. Little girls we thought were dead turn out to be only sleeping. Paralytics pick up their beds and walk. Women run back from a graveyard with news about an empty tomb. The good news we hoped for really comes to pass, and it scares us to death. I don't blame Peter's friends for choosing to believe in the realm of Herod, where might makes right and prisoners stay put in their cells. I don't blame Peter's friends for telling Rosie the maid she was out of her mind. They were already moving on with their grief. And then her words yanked them right back to that weird, liminal space where miracles aren't just stories you tell about events that happened to someone else; they happen to *you*. It's pretty darn scary, to have to live like that, as though preachers were really telling the truth about who was knocking at the door.

I should probably come clean and tell you that “Rhoda” also means “clown,” which has all sorts of familiar implications for preachers: “the clown of God,” and so on. But today, I wanted to give you Rosie the maid. I think I prefer her to the clown, actually. I prefer the preacher who's a doorman for dead stuff. It helps me remember that in the end, it's not about me, and my preaching abilities, and never was.

It's about being out of my mind. Isn't that kind of comforting?—to know that we can't preach at all until we're out of our minds. We can't preach at all until we've spent time as a doorman, or as Rosie the maid, waiting at the gate of the realm of God, paying attention to who knocks, and then running to announce what we've seen. And if it takes a really long time for the people to believe us, well, did you notice that Peter just keeps knocking? Where else is he going to go?

Don't worry about the words. It's enough to be overjoyed by what we've seen and heard in this text, and what we believe about it. Just keep watching. Just keep watching.

Notes

1. With thanks to Justo L. González, who, upon hearing that I was working on an Acts 12 sermon about Rhoda, remarked, “Rhoda? Oh—you mean Rosie the maid!”
2. This sermon was preached at the Festival of Homiletics, Washington, D.C., May 19, 2004.