

Who Do We Believe?

Acts 12:1-17

June 21, 2020

First Presbyterian, Luling

I realize right away that the English teachers among you are cringing at the sermon title. I put a grammatical error in the bulletin, and Etta faithfully reproduced it. "Who Do We Believe?" I wrote, and I know better. I know it should be "Whom Do We Believe?" In any case, the answer to the question is the same, and this story from Acts tells us that the answer is: we don't always believe the people who are telling the truth. We don't always believe the people who are telling us something that sounds unbelievable, even though it's true. We tend not to believe people who don't look like us, who don't speak like us, who don't worship or pray the same way we do. The first step to believing what people are saying is listening to them, and that part is missing both in this story from Acts, and missing from our lives, often, too.

This isn't the lectionary passage today. It's a story that we studied in the Bible Study that we wrapped up a couple weeks ago, and it's another one from Acts that I was not very familiar with, and it's one that stuck with me, as one I wanted to think about some more. So, lucky you, you get to think about it with me.

It's superficially a story, one of many, about Peter. He is in prison, which happens to the main characters more than once in Acts. Herod, the same Herod involved in Jesus's arrest, has put him in prison, kind of just for kicks, during Passover. Herod intends to release Peter, but it doesn't seem like the gathering of Christians in Jerusalem knows this, because they are praying fervently for him to be released from prison.

The Christians are gathered together in a house, the house of Mary, who is the mother of John Mark, who is a minor character in Acts. I can't begin to keep all the Marys straight, and here's another one. But they are gathered together, on purpose, actively praying for Peter's release.

Meanwhile, the very night before Herod has planned to release Peter from prison, an angel breaks Peter out of prison, which makes it sound violent, but it is very quiet and miraculous. They just walk out of prison and into the city gates without being challenged in any way. Once he's within the city, the angel leaves Peter as suddenly as he appeared, and Peter finally realizes that there has been a miracle and that he really is free from prison.

And where does he decide to go, at once? To Mary's house, where he knows the Jesus-followers will be gathered, praying for his relief. He knocks on the outer gate. We can tell from these descriptions that their houses were not exactly like where most of us live. But there is some kind of gate, before one entered the property, and then another door before one entered the house proper. So all his friends are inside praying fervently for his release. Peter is outside, knocking at the gate.

At this point, a new character enters the story. Rhoda is described as a maid, but that word means slave, and she hears Peter's knock. She hears him outside the gate, recognizes his voice, but gets so excited that their prayers have been answered and he is out of prison that she leaves him outside the gate and runs to go tell the others. I mean, we've all had our goof ups like this, where we get so excited we don't know what to do first and can't do two things at once, so we end up leaving someone standing awkwardly when we should have tended to them first. I hope I'm not the only person that has ever happened to, anyway.

Rhoda the slave, runs to tell the others that their prayers have been answered and Peter has been released from prison. So you can imagine their reaction. They jump up and run to the gate to see him with their own eyes and let him in and give him a big hug. No. That is not what they do. Not at all. They've heard this miraculous news from Rhoda the slave, and they don't believe her. They tell her she doesn't know what she heard, she doesn't know what she saw, it certainly couldn't have been Peter.

They don't believe her. Why? Acts doesn't say, but I have my suspicions. If you'll remember, the disciples didn't believe the women who saw the empty tomb and ran back to tell them that Jesus had been raised from the dead. So I'm suspicious that they don't believe Rhoda at least in part because she is a woman. And in part because she's "just" a slave. Though she clearly believes more in the power of their prayer than they do, she clearly believes that their prayer has been answered when they don't believe that, she has not been included in their prayer meeting or circle of believers. She's "just" a slave, not worthy to be believed, especially when she's saying something that they think is unbelievable, even though it's exactly what they've been asking God to do.

So there's poor Peter, stuck outside the gate, continuing to knock. It finally registers with the rest of the gathered Christians that someone is still out there knocking, so they go to investigate. They realize immediately that Rhoda had been right, and it really is Peter, free from jail. He tells them how it all came to happen

and tells them to share it with some other believers. And then he moves on, and that's the last we hear of Rhoda the slave.

She had more faith in the effectiveness of their prayers than they did. She did not budge on what she was telling them, even though they didn't believe her. She stuck to what she was saying. Rhoda was a faithful witness, and now we barely remember her story.

This story troubles me. Who do we believe? Who do we believe? And on what subjects? I imagine they would have believed Rhoda if she'd stayed in her role and told them supper was ready, but when she speaks on something else, she's dismissed and discounted.

Who have we dismissed and discounted? Who have not listened to or believed because of the place we've assigned to them? Who have we not believed not because of what they said but because of who they were? Because we considered them less-than in some way, less smart, less status, less important, less inside our group, less educated, less worthy of speaking?

And what miraculous good news have we missed out on because we haven't believed those who brought it? What insights are we missing? What information do we not even know we need?

Whom do we believe? We'd better believe Rhoda and those who walk in her faithful path. Let's keep an eye and an ear and a heart out, open to what our Rhodas have to tell us.