

Today we begin the first of THREE, four-week sermon series this summer here at Triune Mercy Center. The first series is on Bold and Untold Stories-really Characters- in the Bible. By a quick show of hands- no shame. How many of you have ever heard of Rhoda? Yes, Rhoda. Well, today we're going to remedy that or help you to become reacquainted, as Rhoda is the first Bold and Untold Story in our first four-week summer sermon series. Pastors Trevor and Elaine and I cannot wait to explore the other three or four characters with you throughout the month of June. But back to Rhoda. We meet her in Book of Acts, chapter 12, where she makes her one appearance in all of Scripture. The chapter opens very violently by letting us know that King Herod Agrippa, like his grandfather Herod the Great with baby Jesus, is out for blood with some leaders in the early church movement. He starts by killing James of Zebedee, the brother of John and one of the original twelve disciples. Then when he sees how pleased a few of the Jewish leaders are with him, Herod moves on to Peter. However, ironically, it is Passover, the Festival of Unleavened Bread, the great and festive day deliverance of the Israelites from Egyptian slavery. However, this day finds Peter in bondage, not celebrating liberation. Because it was Passover, Herod throws Peter into a maximum security prison with lots of guards until the festival ends and he can bring Peter before the people and kill him. Meanwhile, the early church was obviously on high alert. Luke tells us in the Book of Acts that "while Peter was kept in prison, the church prayed fervently to God for him" (v. 5). Fortunately for Peter, God intended a new exodus for him. On the night before his impending death, an angel tapped Peter on his side, waking him up,

released his chains, and led him right out of there. Peter, obviously, wasn't sure if what he was experiencing was real or just a vision. After passing two guards, the angel and Peter arrived at the iron gate leading to the entrance to the city. Without touching it, the iron gate opened, and they went down one street and then the angel disappeared. By this time Peter was awake and alert enough to realize what had happened and that it was real. He then headed on to John Mark's mama's house- Ms. Mary's- and this is where we pick up in today's story. But before we turn to God's word for us this day, let us first pray. **PRAY. READ.**

My preaching professor, Rev. Dr. Anna Carter Florence, has written several books and in her most recent one, *A is for Alabaster: 52 Reflections on the Stories of Scripture*, she offers an eye-opening reflection on Rhoda. Anna's teaching, faithfulness, and engagement with scripture has impacted me and the way I preach greatly for many years. One day a year and a half or so ago, my mom called me out of the blue and told me she had been reading Anna's book with her church Sunday School class. Anna's husband, David, serves there as the Associate Pastor so he asked Anna to come and teach a few of their lessons. The very first thing she asked me was, "Jennifer, do you know who Rhoda is?" She stumped me at first; however, I eventually got there. It doesn't help that this story is not in the three year Revised Common Lectionary. It's sad, actually, because I think this story, particularly Rhoda, has a lot to say to the church today.

Peter knocks, probably frantically, on Mary's outer gate, and Rhoda, a "maid," came to answer. I imagine that she did what many of us do before answering the door and asked, "Who is it?" I would especially hope that Rhoda did some kind of security check, as the fear was likely palpable there among the house guests. Imagine her surprise when she heard Peter on the other side of the gate. Notice she heard him, not saw him. That clues us in, perhaps, that Rhoda was familiar with Peter's voice, indicating that he had likely been to Mary's house a time or two. However, in Rhoda's excitement upon recognizing Peter's voice, she ran back into the house to announce the answered prayer standing at the outside gate. And that's just where she left Peter. Outside. On the street in the middle of the night. A wanted fugitive- well, he would be soon, just standing there exposed. How many of us have done something similar? We're so excited that our brains don't properly function on the task at hand, and we walk away distracted and forget all about what we originally set out to do. I know I am guilty. Some find this part of the story humorous, but I have to wonder if that humor doesn't cover up some deep discomfort and/or shame. For just as Rhoda delivers this good news to the believers, those who had fervently prayed for Peter's release, they did not believe that it could actually happen. Or they couldn't believe it coming from her. "If the latter is the case (and it probably is), the story plummets into a sinkhole of unanswered, lingering questions" (Florence). They found it easier to believe Peter was dead than to believe the joyful testimony of Rhoda. They told Rhoda she was out of her mind- muy loca- very crazy. "Rhoda declared their prayers had been answered, and they called her delusional. If this story

sounds familiar, it's because it is" (Anna Carter Florence). Easter morning. When Mary Magdalene and others arrive at Jesus' tomb, and he's not there. Then they're told to go and tell the Good News to the others. When they did, they weren't believed. What they had to say was dismissed as "idle talk." But that's another way of nicing up the phrase they were really told which was that they were full of it. The name calling and disbelief didn't stop the women at the tomb nor did it stop Rhoda. Even though dismissed, they persisted. Rhoda persisted. Even after they told her she was cuckoo for cocoa puffs Rhoda insisted that Peter was at the gate. Then some of them suggested that it was Peter's guardian angel instead. While all that was going on in the house, Peter was still outside knocking- by this time- I'm sure loudly. We don't know if they heard them or if their curiosity got the best of them, but they all went outside to see with their own eyes the real Peter standing there. Imagine their surprise and imagine Rhoda's eye roll (or maybe that's mine). Remember the cartoon Scooby Doo?! In college my eyes began to be open to what I now refer to as the "Velma Syndrome." Velma Dinkley, the brunette in Scooby Doo, was wicked smart and very pragmatic. Make no mistake. She was the brains behind the operation. Most- if not all- of the time she would figure out a clue before anyone else. She would share her discovery and everyone seemed to ignore her. And then a few minutes later her teammate, Fred Jones, the de facto leader of the group, would say the exact same thing that Velma had said earlier, and everyone would listen and agree. Believe me or not- it's infuriating when you're Velma. And don't be fooled that this exact scenario doesn't take place today. Because it does. Just look at the Southern Baptist

Convention- gathering for the 4th year in a row to discuss whether women should have a voice and leadership role in the church or not. And look at what the church has done to Beth Moore and others for standing up! But I digress.

It is disturbing how the NRSV chooses to translate that Rhoda is Mary's "maid." That is not true. Rhoda was a slave of indeterminate age and the "the property of the well-to-do woman in whose house the church is meeting. And while the early church preached a vision of utopian ideals- 'all who believed were together and had all things in common,' it is also entirely true that the vision wasn't lived out in full. Human enslavement was a fact of life in the Roman Empire. Wealthy people, Christians included, owned slaves. And that changes how we hear this story" (Carter Florence). Even though we aren't explicitly told, my professor invites us to wonder that "Rhoda, like so many other enslaved persons of her time, was a follower of Jesus, a fervent believer of the gospel. When Peter knocked on Mary's door and Rhoda, Mary's slave, was sent to answer it- how does it sound to us that she announced Peter's freedom and the answer to their prayers while her own freedom was undeniably denied? How does it sound to us that the church folk gathered in Mary's home told Rhoda she was out of her mind for announcing freedom" (Carter Florence)? This story is another reminder of God's upside-down kingdom, as it goes against everything the world tells us about the position of people. It is most always in the least expected person, the person society says shouldn't be in the know or have any say so or is most ignored, that God acts. The world taught and

still teaches don't believe her. But God said and says differently. While Rhoda may seem a secondary character, in God's story she is not. She nor any other seemingly secondary characters can ever be underestimated. "They possess virtues and strengths that show the weakness of the householder. They work on the edges of the story with dignity and grit. And in the end, their resourcefulness saves the day- and exposes the cracks in the system. Or they may not save the day, if the story allows for more shadow, and they only lift a veil on the tragedies of this world" (Carter Florence).

There's a pattern in scripture for a reason. I would argue that, in addition to ignoring the least of these among us, it is our instinct to dismiss any movement of the Spirit. We just celebrated Pentecost. Remember how some people said, "Wow, they're just drunk- acting that way," and yet their behavior was the Holy Spirit pouring out into them. It's much easier to sit back and sneer or call the oppressed names like *muy loco*- even if you yourself are oppressed- than it is to absorb, to listen to, to observe, to believe this incredible experience of newness and life and answered prayers and God among us, isn't it? Peter's appearance at Mary's gate was an answer to prayer, which is probably why Rhoda is mentioned by name here, as that wasn't the practice to name women in scripture, especially slaves. Rhoda reminds me of another slave girl- an Israelite slave girl in the story of Naaman's healing with the prophet Elisha in 2 Kings 5. I read several Bible studies where the authors try to dismiss this situation because Rhoda participated in this prayer group. But did she? More than likely, she was in the

shadows, because she probably wasn't invited. Therefore, she was likely eavesdropping and observing from a distance- attentive to the needs of those around her. And when Peter knocked, Rhoda answered. Yes, that was more than likely her job to answer the door; however, this was much more than her job- this was her faith- her way of life. Rhoda joyfully announces freedom, the answer to our prayers. Liberation comes in many different forms, among them some which are but others forms of oppression. There is liberation (Herod's branch) and then there is salvation. "As Mary warned in her *Magnificat*, the proud shall be humbled (Luke 1:52-53; 14:11) in this new kingdom which is breaking other kingdoms. God, not kings, will have the last word (Will Willimon, *Acts*). Who in our church or community might we be quickest to dismiss? Or perhaps you feel like a Rhoda? Far too often, we are quick to judge and/or dismiss the joyful good news others share because of who is sharing them or because their words seem too good to be true. Regardless, Rhoda's story invites us "to hold open a door that leads to reflection and reckoning. And behind the door is a freedom the church as a whole body has yet to live into. But Rhoda stands ready. She is poised to speak" (Carter Florence). "She asks hard questions and confronts institutions and systems, and she carries the gospel in her very being and demands that each of us live in faithfulness to it. When you meet her, will you respond with cynicism and shame? Or will you listen and seek out the good news from God that she brings" (Alaina Kleinbeck, faithandleadership.com)? Amen.