



The Church of Rhoda

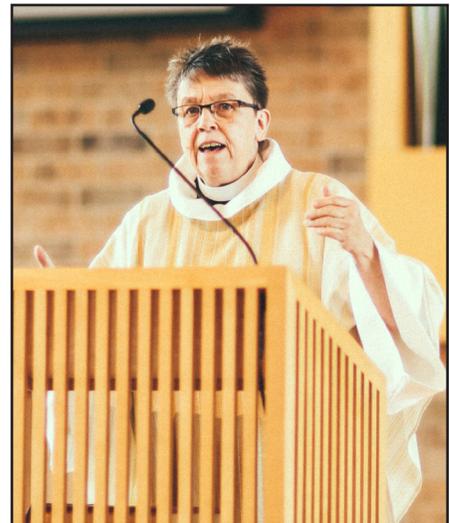
by Bishop Patricia Lull

This sermon was given by Bishop Lull during the 2019 Bishop's Theological Conference at Cragun's Resort on October 14. Based on Acts 12:1-19, the message is dedicated to a "rising generation of Rhodas." It recounts the conference theme of "A Holy Commotion." The conference brought together 80 pastors and deacons from our synod for study led by Dr. Eric Barreto on the book of Acts, connection with peers and relaxation.

Grace and peace to you in the name of the Most High God. Amen.

Do you belong to the church of St. Rhoda? I checked on Google and could find no churches by that name among the Lutherans, the Catholics, the Presbyterians, the Moravians or the Pentecostals. That pretty much means that there are no churches named after this memorable young adult from the Book of Acts.

What would it mean to belong to the church of St. Rhoda? You would have to be able to hear what you cannot yet see, because it is Rhoda who recognizes Peter's voice on the other side of the locked door. You would need to believe what others disparage as impossible, unreasonable, wishful or unbalanced thinking because Rhoda is regarded that night as Mary Magdalene was regarded when she first brought news of the resurrected Christ to the grieving disciples. You would need to be willing to be dismissed because you are too young, too flighty, too exuberant to be taken seriously even among the Christians who know you best because Rhoda was a member of that household of believers. No doubt she had been present when Mary, the mother of John Mark, opened her home to Jesus and his friends. Was it here that the last supper was served? Had Rhoda carried food to the table? Rubbed elbows and made conversation with the likes of Peter and James and John and perhaps our Lord, himself?



To belong to the church of St. Rhoda we would need to hear what cannot yet be seen – the song of the first bird before morning breaks. The first whispers of hope and new beginnings when there is nothing yet to show.

To belong to the fellowship that gathers in the name of St. Rhoda we would need to believe what others disparage as impossible, unreasonable, wishful or unbalanced thinking. And I don't mean the growing numbers of people around us, who can't imagine why anyone would go to church, much less serve as a deacon or a pastor in the church. I mean good, church-going folks, who have settled for the familiarity of belonging to the insider group over an openness to God's transforming future.

To belong to the church of St. Rhoda we would need to be willing to be dismissed because we are too young, too flighty, too exuberant to be taken seriously. I am so grateful that the average age of active, rostered ministers in this synod is going down. Grateful for the millennials and Gen Xer's, who bring fresh ideas to our common work, even if you do press some old-time Boomers like me.

I'm sure it is not lost on us that in this lesson from the Book of Acts, Rhoda is described as a maid. The word might mean that she was a servant-girl, because there were slaves in the households of some of the first believers. Or the word might simply mean that she was a young woman in that household, shouldering the added domestic responsibilities that daughters and nieces daily embrace around the world. In the church of St. Rhoda there is a special place for all who have been told that their race, their ethnic background, their social status makes them not as important as others.

Or, to say that another way, as we lean into the 50th anniversary year for the ordination of Lutheran women, in the church of St. Rhoda we would need to risk being dismissed because we are women; women whose gifts are still under-compensated. Women whose leadership styles still need to be explained. Women exposed to harassment in a way that surprises even the most conscientious brethren among us.

And drawing from other remarkable stories of God's wide welcome in the Book of Acts, to belong to the church of St. Rhoda is to be LGBTQAI+, clinging to the promise that your life belongs to God and your gifts are needed among God's people. Or to be white, or male, or a veteran of many years of service in God's vineyard, wondering if who you are and what you bring to ministry still matters, and yet stepping forth again and again to serve with the gifts God has given and honed in you through the decades.

To belong to the church of St. Rhoda one needs to believe with all one's heart, and mind, and all one has that our God raises the dead to new life. Dead institutions, as well as people, who are as good as dead in their despair and doubt and fear.

Peter was as good as dead, there on death row, waiting for the Passover festival to come to a close when he would be killed by Herod, as James had previously been martyred by the state. We are told that "the church prayed fervently to God for him" (12:5) but we know in our own world how hopeless it can seem to go up against the mighty forces of our day.

Sunday by Sunday, as I worship with you in your congregations, I listen carefully to see if the prayers touch on the deepest places of brokenness and danger in our world. And often they do -- petitions for a young man recently incarcerated, for classmates of a youth who died by suicide, for synagogues and mosques that have been bombed, for migrants with so little hope for an ordinary life, a colleague suddenly and catastrophically ill, for the Kurds, the Anuak, the Iranians and the people of North Korea.

It was well into the night when Peter knocked at the door of the house where the faithful gathered. They were not sleeping, as Peter had been back in the jail, but they were awake and vigilant in their prayers. Not giving up. Not letting God off the hook for the promise, given in Jesus Christ, that goodness is stronger than evil, love is stronger than hate (ELW 721, Bishop Desmond Tutu)

That's the church of St. Rhoda. That's the church to which I want to belong and I'll bet you do, too.

In the Book of Acts we are told that when morning broke, "there was no small commotion among the soldiers over what had become of Peter." (12:18) If you've ever done a victory dance after a terrible wrong has been righted, you know the emotions that accompanied news of that commotion among the small number of Christians in Jerusalem.

I had planned to end our reading of the text of chapter 12 right there. The triumph of prayer, the vindication of Rhoda's testimony, Peter's escape into future leadership in the growing church. A good feel on Monday night at Theological Conference.

But a few days ago, I thought better of that and added in verse 19. "When Herod had searched for (Peter) and could not find him, he examined the guards and ordered them to be put to death." There was so much cruelty in that ancient regime, even as there is such wickedness in our world today. Those guards had played no role in Peter's prison break, which came as the miraculous work of God's hand. And yet they paid with their lives; their families left widowed and orphaned. Simply part of the job description.

I hope that we, who belong to the church of St. Rhoda, never settle for a small commotion when the deepest mercy of God is needed even after justice is won. The early church outlasted the empire because the Christians persistently continued to invite and baptize and to practice radical reconciliation. Who will help heal our nation's bitter divisions if not communities of faith?

So tonight we will dance in worship and celebrate the God of holy chaos and the God, who continues to stir up no small commotion when the dead are raised to life and the undeniable, unstoppable power of the Risen Christ is at work in our world. Thanks be to God. AMEN.