

## Roll Call: Six Women and the Church Alive in the Spirit

Acts 9:36; Acts 12: 12-17; Acts 16:11-15; I Corinthians 1:10-11; Romans 16:1-3

Today we honor the importance of women in the life of our church past and present. Women were important in the life of the 1<sup>st</sup> century church in ways not often acknowledged. A church alive in the Spirit helps the spiritual gifts of all women to flourish, women and men alike.

It all started with Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit fell upon the early followers in a house in Jerusalem, then blew like a mighty wind into the streets. The writer of Acts saw it as a fulfillment of the prophecy of Joel:

In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy.

Sons *and* daughters prophesying, preaching!

This year Mother's Day and Pentecost are one week apart, next Sunday being Pentecost. New Testament professor at Southern Seminary Frank Stagg preached once when Mother's Day and Pentecost fell on the same day. He began with these words: "Women are more than mothers and Pentecost is more than speaking in tongues."

So today I offer glimpses of six women in the early church. It was not just Paul and Silas, Peter, Barnabas and John Mark; there were Tabitha and Rhoda, Lydia, Chloe, Phoebe and Priscilla. Let's see if I can preach this sermon in a non-patronizing way—which is hard for a male-type preacher.

## I

Let's begin with *Tabitha*. Acts 9:36 records:

Now in Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha. She was devoted to good works and acts of charity.

So here is a woman *disciple* and leader in acts of compassion. Who comes to your mind of such women, past and present who have led us in missions and ministries like Fifth Street and Iredell Christian Ministries, whose eyes are always open to people we might help?

## II

Now comes *Rhoda*. She is described as a young woman who served as a maid or servant in Mary's household.

Here's the story. Chapter 12 begins with the ominous words: "Now about that time, King Herod laid violent hands upon some who belonged to the church." He had James the brother of John executed and Peter thrown into a high security prison, triply guarded by soldiers.

During the night something strange happened. Peter was asleep between two soldiers. A light shone in the prison cell, and an angel whispered, “Get dressed and follow me!” Peter rose—it felt like a dream—and followed the angel out of the prison past two squads of soldiers.

When he got out to the streets he realized it wasn’t a dream but real. He headed for Mary’s house, the mother of John Mark. There he’d be safe and in the company of Christian friends.

When he got there he knocked on the door. Rhoda came to the door and hearing Peter’s voice, knew it was Peter! In her excitement she ran to tell the others who were praying, some no doubt for Peter in prison, and left Peter standing outside in the dark.

When she told them that Peter was at the door, they said, “You are out of your mind.” She insisted it was Peter. Then they said, “It’s not Peter, it’s Peter’s angel!” Then they went back to praying: “Lord, please deliver Peter from prison!”

Luke the writer of Luke and the Book of Acts was underlying that they treated Rhoda like the disciples treated the women who came from the empty tomb with the news that Jesus had risen, “They are out of their minds”, they said and thought “their words an idle tale.”

The church alive in the Spirit listens to women, really listens. The miracle of Pentecost was about *hearing* more than speaking, hearing and understanding. And the Spirit helps men listen to the women in their midst.

As they were praying they heard for themselves the knocking at the door. Here was Peter, out in the dark, dawn approaching when he could be re-captured. When they opened the door, they were amazed, flabbergasted to see Peter standing there. They invited him in. He asked them to be quiet. Don't wake the neighborhood! Then he told them what had happened and went on his way.

*Rhoda* the young woman, the maid, easy to ignore, who told the good news of God's deliverance of Peter.

### III

Now *Lydia*; you've heard more about her perhaps. Paul had arrived in Philippi, a Roman colony to begin his preaching mission. Usually he would begin in the local synagogue, but there was no synagogue. The antisemitism in the city was probably one of the reasons. In Jewish tradition, if there were not enough to begin a synagogue, Jews would meet at the nearest body of water to worship.

So Paul went down to the river to see if he could find some Jews. There he met a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth and a successful business woman.

She was a believer in God, “spiritual but not religious”, as we might say today. As Paul told her about Jesus, her heart was opened to believe. Paul baptized her and her household. But that’s not all. She offered her home to be the house church for the new believers in Phillippi.

As Grace was being formed over 74 years ago, they met in people’s homes to dream the dream of a new church. We remember those families, and the formative role of women like Lydia in our beginnings.

#### IV

Now let’s turn to the church at Corinth. They had *issues* as all God’s churches have! In the very first verses of I Corinthians Paul expresses his concern about some dissension in the church, and he mentions a woman *Chloe* by name. He writes,

For it has been reported to me by Chloe’s people, that there are quarrels among you. (I Cor. 1:11)

“Chloe and her people.” It’s an interesting description. Sometimes it’s translated “Chloe and her household”, but it was more than that.

Womanist biblical scholar Mitzi Smith has written a recent book on “Chloe and Her People.” Chloe and her people, the author suggests, were freedwomen

and freemen, once slaves. And Apollo too, from Alexandria, a fine biblical scholar and powerful preacher.

The dissension was that some said, “I belong to Paul”, and others “I belong to Apollos”, and others “I belong to Cephas” or Peter. And some, playing trump card, said “Well, I belong to *Christ*.” Factions!

What is most interesting to me about Chloe and her people was that they represent the sizable slave and former slaves population in the church. The church was open to all, including those at the bottom rung of society. A church alive in the Spirit is like that. And Chloe was a leader of that group.

## V

And now we turn to Paul’s letter to the church at Rome. In the very last chapter, chapter 16, Paul makes a roll call of believers. And the one named *first* was “Phoebe the deacon.” Yes, *deacon*. It is often translated “helper”, but the word is *diakonos*, deacon.

Some argue that Phoebe was not an actual deacon, but there it is in the text, and Paul mentions her first. He writes:

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church at Cenchreae, so that you may welcome her in the Lord as is fitting for the saints, and help

her in whatever way she may need, for she had been a benefactor of many, and of myself as well.

In the 1970's a number of Baptist churches began to ordain women as deacons. And our church at its beginnings around that time did as well. And the first women deacons here for a number of years were single women, people like Mary Jean Grose. Some of you remember others fondly, gratefully, and their contributions to your life and the life of the church.

The word "deacon" means literally "to go through the dust", to help serve and minister to others. That's the primary role of our deacons here, released from the church decision-making function as in other Baptist churches. We praise our women and men who have been true deacons among us, ordained or not. On the "Deacon Board" or not.

Finally, Paul calls the name of a woman named *Prisca. Priscilla*. She and her husband are mentioned together, "Prisca and Aquilla." Here is how Paul describes them:

Greet Prisca and Aquila who work with me in Christ, and who risked their necks for my life to whom... I give thanks.

They had set up a house church together. I would like to know the story of how they saved Paul's life, wouldn't you? It reminds us that life as a follower of Jesus

then was not a walk in the park—and that perhaps our following of Jesus today is too easy a walk in the park.

Prisca and Aquila also remind us of the wife and husband teams in our church's beginning who devoted their lives together to the flourishing of the young church.

“Show honor to whom honor is due”, Paul wrote. And we do so today, for those named and not named, for those whose service was notable and for those who served with little notice. We lift them all up to God in thanksgiving today.

There was a movie in the 1980's set in Texas. Near the end there was a scene in a country church at worship. People were scattered in the pews. Then people from the past who had died began to appear and sit with the people they would sit with in church. A husband joined his wife again. The young man who died too soon was there. And the woman who was always there helping, and the alto in the choir.

The communion of saints. What were they singing as they held their hymnbooks?

What a fellowship, what a joy divine  
leaning on the everlasting arms!

Or this,



Blest be the tie that binds  
Our hearts in Christian love;  
The fellowship of kindred minds  
Is like to that above.