

Rhoda's Big Chance

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

October 26, 2025 – Morning worship

Text: Acts 12:12-17

When I first started thinking about the possibility of offering this particular sermon series, the opportunity to share this story about Rhoda was fun to think about. I have always loved Rhoda even though most people have never heard of her. Hers is one of the few stories in the Bible which functions as a kind of comic relief moment in the midst of a really stressful situation. Peter has just escaped from prison under miraculous circumstances – an angel broke him out – so he is very anxious about being recaptured. In fact, he thought he was just experiencing a very vivid dream in which his chains fell off and the angel guided him out of the jail, right past sleeping guards and through locked doors. Only when he was all the way out and, in the street, did he realize his experience was real. Understandably, his first thought was “now what do I do.” This is the point where our text for today picks up the story line, although it remains confusing since Peter decides to head to Mary’s house – but which Mary? The text says, “The mother of John, whose other name was Mark.” Wait. What? Again with the shifting names!!

Peter, who clearly knew which Mary’s house he was going to, arrives and knocks at the outer gate. The maid (interesting that it is a maid in this house of Jesus followers and not a slave as it is in so many other biblical stories) whose name is Rhoda answers the knock. But she doesn’t open the gate. This gate must have been large and the fence it was part of very solid as well because the text says she recognized Peter’s voice meaning she didn’t see him. She is so excited it’s Peter, whom she knew had been arrested by the authorities, that she doesn’t open the gate. Instead, she rushes

back inside to tell the others Peter is at the gate. They don't believe her and when she kept insisting it was true, they told her it was Peter's guardian angel. Say what now? However, as the knocking at the gate continues, we can imagine it getting louder and louder, so eventually the others do go and open the door and are shocked to see Peter standing there, just as Rhoda had told them. Peter tells them all to be quiet and then tells them to go and tell James and the other believers. Then he takes off for parts unknown.

Yikes! What looks like a simple story on the surface gets complicated fast. And how quickly everyone forgets all about Rhoda! We can sense her confusion when the others don't believe her. Why didn't they believe her when she said Peter was at the gate? Undoubtedly because that seemed like a physical impossibility. They knew the circumstances of his arrest and that the authorities were taking extraordinary measures to guard him since he had managed to escape custody before. So, either Rhoda didn't know these details or she just assumed God could accomplish whatever God wanted, no matter how improbable it seemed. Since the knocking continued we know the others eventually went to the gate themselves and in rushed Peter. We can just imagine her being shoved aside by Peter as he hurries inside once the gate is opened. We can also imagine the shocked looks on all those faces. But then Rhoda just fades out of the story, leaving us to wonder if it would have been any different if she had just opened the gate in the first place. Probably not. So, this in turn leaves us to wonder why this particular story is included in the text to begin with. That's my question!

So why is Rhoda's part of this story even included here? The outcome isn't changed because she didn't open the gate. It's not like the guards came by and re-arrested Peter before he got into

the safety of the house. Nope. He got in. He gave instructions to the others. He left. Rhoda was still there, still the maid, still treated like a prop or piece of furniture as this story of intrigue and suspense runs its course. I have two thoughts on this. First, I think it is entirely likely this little vignette is included as comic relief in the midst of an extremely fraught moment in the life of Peter and all the early Christians. Persecution of them was heating up to the point where they all felt threatened. It was a dangerous time to be identified as a follower of Christ. Dread was a fact of life, as it seemed that arrest of any of them or even all of them was possible at any moment. Then here comes Rhoda, so excited about Peter's escape that she forgets to open the gate. The suspense of the story heightens! She dashes off too excited to function even as Peter keeps knocking louder and louder. This could be the perfect set-up for a slapstick routine where Rhoda trips over every obstacle in her path as she races to find help when all she needed to do was open the gate herself. It's just funny, in a Laurel & Hardy kind of way. Suspense eased. Fears relieved, if only for a few moments.

But, could Rhoda's moment be more than just comic relief? Perhaps it's a testimony to her own faith, to how shocked she was, how shocked we all are, when something we are praying for actually seems to be answered. The text tells us that the church and the people had been praying fervently for Peter since the moment of his arrest. And now, here he was and Rhoda realized she was face to face with answered prayer and her first thought was to witness this to the others. She wasn't worried about Peter since God had already broken him out of jail! She did want to be the first to testify that this miraculous event had happened to her and she wanted them to come experience it for themselves.

I think Rhoda is a woman we can all identify with as we consider this story more deeply. We all have those moments of great significance when we don't react as we would have liked. It's probably easiest to remember this feeling in the context of processing an argument we have with someone else where we did not say what we wish had. "I should have just told so and so that the boss told me to do it that way." Or "I should have just said I'm not gonna let you talk to me like that anymore." Or perhaps we can remember an incident when we could have said something or done something that might have helped someone else out of a difficult situation. "Yes, I did notice so and so walking along the road in the rain, and I could have stopped, but I was late for my appointment." Or "I didn't want to embarrass them by implying they needed help." Or, "they didn't wave me down so I didn't think I needed to stop." Yep. We've all been there at some point, to some extent. We all have those moments that, when we remember them, we're embarrassed by the way we chose to respond. That's life. It happens to all of us.

But if Rhoda just disappears from this story, does that mean we should just continue to bumble along through life in a hit or miss kind of way? No, I don't think that's what this story is inviting us to do. I think this story is inviting us to be more thoughtful, more in the moment, as we make our way through life these days because if we are paying attention – really paying attention to the people who make up our lives – we won't miss those moments when someone is knocking on the gate and it's our responsibility to answer. And that's the thing. We have to be paying attention to the moments in our lives as they occur instead of just sliding from moment to moment through life. We have to be listening for the questions that too often go unspoken. The person who tells you, "I'm fine" when it's obvious they are not.

The person in front of you at the grocery store counting out pennies to pay for their order and all we'd have to do is to put down a few coins that can make all the difference in that moment. Dear ones, I fear that the longer this shut-down continues, the more of these kinds of moments we will all encounter. This is one of those golden moments when we – when YOU – can make a real and immediate difference in someone's reality. But you have to be paying attention or you will miss it. You have to present enough in the moment to see what's unfolding right in front of you so you even have the opportunity to respond in a helpful, a kind, way. Dear ones, we know all sorts of people in our community will be needing extra help in the days and weeks ahead. We've been talking about it for weeks in connection with food donations. But, dear ones, this being present in the moment involves more than just this. It also means we need to go out of our way to be kind, noticeably and perhaps even aggressively kind.

Now how is a person aggressively kind? Good question. What I mean by this is that you just pay attention to life around you enough to realize – and fully appreciate – that what we are experiencing as a country right now is impacting absolutely everyone. Our situation now is no longer a political issue. It is, and I would argue always has been, a human issue. Real people are being impacted in immediate and tangible ways. With SNAP benefits expiring, real people will be going without the meager financial support they have relied on to feed their families and themselves. Real people in our community will be going hungry. We are expected, called by Jesus to respond. Jesus is very clear on this point in multiple teachings throughout the Gospels. He says quite clearly in Matthew 25 in the Parable of the Sheep and Goats. We are to feed the hungry without worrying about whether or not they “qualify” somehow. Jesus also names this call to help others

in what he called the Great Commandment – that we are to love God with all that we are and all that we have and we are to love the other as much as we love ourselves. Nowhere in this statement does Jesus mention anyone needing to meet certain criterion in order to be loved as God would have us love them. It literally does not matter what you think or suspect about another person that you think is disqualifying for them to be worthy of receiving assistance they need, to be worthy of Jesus' love or ours. Jesus is quite clear that the only one who can do any kind of judging like this is God alone. Certainly not you or me. So, in practical terms, this means that you watch for those opportunities to come your way when you can be of assistance to someone who needs it. And then you respond to meet the need. Period.

What does this look like in a practical sense? The most direct way at the moment is to bring in whatever food you are able to so that our food drive and all the food drives across the country can be successful. It's a tall order to be sure. But there are other ways of responding beyond donating food. One thing to do which can be super impactful is to start tipping in cash in restaurants so the house can't skim off the top from servers' income directly related to their work. When you just add the tip on to the credit card, the house can and usually does keep a percentage for themselves so your \$20 tip can end up being \$15 or less by the time it reaches the server, in the form of a check from which taxes are already deducted. And, when you are buying food for the donation bins, buy the kind of food that you would buy for your own family instead of the cheap stuff from the dollar store. Remembering to donate pet food as well is also a great kindness because some people can't afford to feed their very necessary furry companions. Another response to Jesus' commandment is very simple but no less important. You can just be kind and smile at folks all the

time! Most of us are completely unaware that too often we walk around looking like we just drank a big glass of super sour lemonade. Another easy thing to do is to make the effort to be patient while standing in line at stores, and then not blasting store staff with our impatience when we finally do make it to the cashier. It's not their fault nor is it their responsibility. If you're that upset about the wait, go home and write a letter to the store about the unreasonable wait and mail it. This is practical and may actually help the situation to improve at some point. Blasting the store staff for things beyond their control is just a waste of time and energy that really does make difficult jobs needlessly more difficult. Basically, dear ones, I am telling you that the best way to show you are following Jesus' commands to care for others is to take the time and make the effort to see people as just that – people – instead of something just put in our way to annoy or aggravate us. Everyone has to stop being so angry all the time dear ones and each of us, we can make a difference, by refusing to give in to anger ourselves. Instead put that energy into just bringing as much kindness, hope and light into the world as you possibly can. That's it. That's all. That's everything.

In other words, dear ones, we have to answer the knock when God places someone in our path we'd just as soon ignore. It doesn't cost you anything to smile, to be kind, to set aside your own impatience or irritation in any given moment in order to see – really see – the person beloved of God in front of you. I admit this is sometimes very, very, VERY difficult to do. But the task remains the same. Remember, as my dad used to tell me all the time – if it was easy, anyone could do it. And you're not just anyone. You are you – a beloved, trusted and needed child of God. Amen.