Sunday 26 July 2026, Choral Matins
Acts 12.1-17
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There are some really great comedic moments in the New Testament. You may remember my Easter sermon on the resurrection in which I suggested that Mary Magdalene didn't recognise Jesus because he was naked and she was trying not to look at him. And then there's the story of Eutychus who was so bored by one of St Paul's sermons that he went to sleep and fell out of a window. (Spoiler: he was okay in the end). And today, one of my favourites, Rhoda the serving girl. When Peter is miraculously delivered from prison he bangs on the door of where the disciples are staying, asking to be let in. Rhoda recognises his voice and she gets so excited that she leaves him standing outside in the dark in order to go tell the others he's outside. Poor Peter, all alone in the dark, waiting for that silly girl to come back and open the door! Meanwhile the men inside argue about whether she's heard rightly rather than going to check for themselves.

The depth of humanity in the scriptures is part of what makes them so compelling and attractive. Sometimes I think we can overlook that humanity because we often approach the Bible with an attitude of exaggerated reverence. At the eucharist we process the Gospel book and stand between two acolytes with lit candles. On feast days we cense the book, and we kiss is when we've finished reading. There is good reason for this symbolic recognition of the words of Jesus in our midst. At the same time, if we only understand the Bible as a 'holy book', that is as an object to be venerated, we can inadvertently cloud its true humanity and its broad applicability to all aspects of our lives.

If I were to say to you, 'what do you think the Bible is?', I wonder how you'd answer. How likely would you be to say, 'It's a lot of stories about people like me'? How often do you see yourself, or aspects of yourself, in the people written about in the gospels, the book of Acts, and the epistles? I ask this because I think the degree to which we perceive the bible as being 'about us' is somewhat dependent on us seeing ourselves in it already. And we can only do that if we are willing to see it as a living story rather than simply a special book between two hard, formal covers.

Now I've given away a clue to my own way of reading of scripture when I say that we ought to see ourselves in it. Part of the reason I believe the Holy Spirit has preserved the scriptures for us is to highlight their relation to everyday life and the full range of human experience. Each story within the larger narrative of salvation is provided to give us greater opportunity to enter ourselves into the activity of God in the world and among his people.

So, for example, when Mary Magdalene fails to recognise the risen Jesus we may be lead to ask ourselves how often we fail to see Jesus when he's standing right in front of us. Are we looking for something or someone else, rather than for him as he promised to be? When we feel bored during a long sermon, perhaps we should consider not sitting next to an open window. I jest, of course, but who among us hasn't felt the tug of sleep on our eyelids during a church service? We don't really know what St Paul's long sermon was about, but the point of mentioning Eutychus is to allow a bit of real humanity back into the frame. The early Christians were just like us. They tried to understand, sometimes did and sometimes didn't, and were more often than not just muddling through.

Rhoda, bless her heart, in our reading today is so genuine. I can picture her, running to the door because of the persistent knocking, hearing Peter's familiar voice, and being so excited and glad that she runs to get help before thinking to let him in. Perhaps he kept hammering on the door as she ran back up the stairs into the house. That silly, stupid girl!, he must have thought. Doesn't she know it's dark and the soldiers may come after me at any minute?! I wonder if she felt embarrassed when they finally opened the door and let Peter in. Perhaps he had to take her hand in his and reassure her that it was okay, all was well in the end.

You know, thinking about it, there was no reason to record Rhoda's name, not really much reason to record this incident at all. St Luke, as he wrote Acts, could just as well have said, 'And Peter was delivered from the prison to the place where the disciples were. They rejoiced to see him alive.' But he chose to include Rhoda and her mistake, probably in part to reinforce the historicity of his story. Maybe he had a soft spot for Rhoda and thought the humorousness of the event would add something to the narrative. Or maybe it wasn't so much that St Luke thought to include her, but that the Holy Spirit wanted to give some of us silly ones everywhere someone to relate to. On more than one occasion I have been known to be so excited about something that I've forgotten the very important thing I was just doing for someone else. Is this God's way of saying, 'It's okay to embarrass yourself'?

Whatever the reason, or reasons, for Rhoda's remembrance in Acts 12, we can be sure of one thing: she was a completely normal person of no great significance in life, who played a small role in the life of the very early Church, but who is still remembered- by name- to this day. She is remembered by name, remembered by St Luke, remembered by the Holy Spirit, remembered by the whole Church. We, no matter how small or great, play a role in the story of God's saving work in the world. Some of us will be remembered by name in writings, some maybe even by the wider Church. All of us will be remembered by the Holy Spirit, by God himself. We, ordinary people, made special by being chosen by God. You are special because God has chosen you and he knows your name. Amen.