

Rosie's Witness

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Scripture: Acts 12

We all know the story. The Christian community is gathered at the house of Mary, the mother of Mark, which seems to have been the central meeting place of the nascent church. They are gathered in prayer while Peter is in prison. Now an angel has freed Peter in such a miraculous way that Peter thinks he has been dreaming. When he finally realizes that this is not the case he goes to the house of Mary, where he knows that the community would probably be gathered.

He knocks at the gate and a maid by the name of Rhoda answers. Full of joy she even forgets to open the gate for Peter, and runs back to the gathered community to tell them that Peter is at the gate. But the community is too busy praying, and too much aware of the power of Herod to listen to their maid.

(By the way, the maid's name, Rhoda, means "Rose." If she were a maid today she would probably be called Rosie. So I have given this brief homily the title of "Rosie's witness.")

Again, the community is too busy to listen to Rosie. They are praying, they are not to be interrupted by someone knocking at the gate.

There is humor in this story. But it is a story that repeats itself. Some time later Saul returns from Damascus telling a surprising story of having met the Lord, and figuratively knocks on the door of the apostles, who would not let him in. It takes Barnabas, in Rosie-like fashion, to open the door to him and his witness. And the story continues. When Francis knocks on the door of Pope Innocent, Innocent tells him that he smells like a pig and he should go wallow with the pigs. When Luther nails his theses, scholars at the ancient University of Paris simply dismiss what an unknown teacher at an upstart university in the hick town of Wittenberg has to say. When Dutch Calvinist, Hadrian Saravia issues a call to world mission, Theodore Beza in Geneva responds that the commandment to go throughout the world preaching the gospel was given only to the apostles.

But, while the church gathered at Mary's house did not believe her, Rosie was right: Peter had been freed from prison. While the apostles were afraid of Saul, Barnabas was right: the Lord

had called Saul. While Innocent thought that Francis smelled like a pig, Francis was right: the gospel must be preached to the poor by the poor. While theologians at the University of Paris reaffirmed the worn-out understanding of the order of salvation, Luther was right: the gospel is a message of grace. While Beza thought that he must support Calvin's view of the mission of the church, Saravia was right: the church is called to preach the gospel throughout the world.

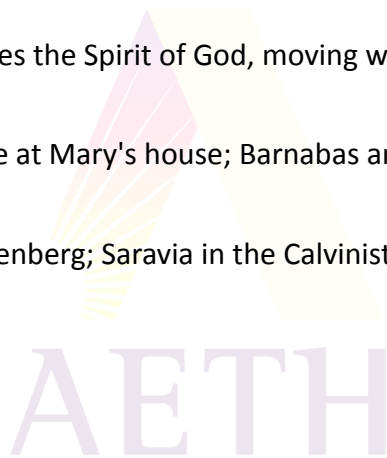
Eventually, the church gathered at the house of Mary was wise enough to listen to Rosie's witness. The apostles gathered in Jerusalem were wise enough to listen to Barnabas. Innocent was wise enough to listen to St. Francis. The church at large was wise enough to listen to Luther. The Calvinist tradition was wise enough to listen to Saravia.

Even today the story continues. Like the church gathered at the house of Mary, much of the church today feels overwhelmed by the power of today's Herods and prays for a liberation which it does not really expect.

Like the apostles gathered in Jerusalem, much of the church in its traditional centers is seeking

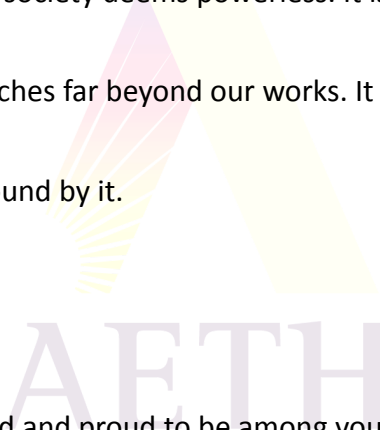
to survive by retreating within its own walls. Like Innocent III, churches that have long existed within the privileges of power find it difficult to listen to Christ speaking the gospel from the margins of society. Like the theologians at the University of Paris, or like Beza in the Academy of Geneva, many of us today — including myself — are tempted to think that God speaks to us only through ancient knowledge and scholarly research.

But in every one of those instances the Spirit of God, moving within the church, has led it to listen to unexpected voices: Rosie at Mary's house; Barnabas among the apostles; Francis at the court of Innocent; Luther at Wittenberg; Saravia in the Calvinist tradition.



And so it is today. I am grateful and honored to be here, at the very beginning of a new academic year in this admirable institution. I admire and respect your long scholarly tradition, your valuable library, your many years of service in providing leadership to the church, your commitment to the gospel. But in the last analysis the reason why I am here and why I am honored to be here is that this is an institution that acknowledges the changes that are taking place in its own environment and sees those changes as a call to mission.

In the mysterious designs of God's providence it has pleased God to provide this institution with the witness of its own Rosie, and her husband Mariano, and an administration, and many others who for several years have been shaping the institution knowing that the Lord who freed Peter from prison is still alive, and that there are many in this very city who like Peter are knocking at the door. It is an institution that, like Barnabas, is willing to bring new and even questionable voices into the conversation. It is an institution that, like Innocent, is willing to see the power of God in those whom society deems powerless. It is an institution that, like Luther, realizes that the grace of God reaches far beyond our works. It is an institution that, like Saravia, will affirm tradition but not be bound by it.



For all these reasons I am honored and proud to be among you, to be part of this work of God. I commend you for it, and I am grateful that the God of Rosie, the God of Barnabas, the God of Francis, the God of Luther, and the God of Saravia is also our God. May we continue to listen as they did. Amen.