

Listen to Rhoda
Acts 12:1-17
Peter Hiett
9-07-08

Song: *People Are Strange.*

People are strange when you're a stranger
Faces look ugly when you're alone
Women seem wicked when you're unwanted
Streets are uneven when you're down

When you're strange
Faces come out of the rain
When you're strange
No one remembers your name
When you're strange
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Listen, I want you to take just a minute and think about the strangest person you know? Maybe they are insane, maybe they just don't fit in. Who are they and why are they strange?

Now turn, find three or four other people, introduce yourself and then tell them about this person and why they are so strange.

[Knock on the door. 4-5 minutes go by.]

I'm sorry I didn't mean to give you that much time. But talk about strange. I just heard pounding on the door and when I went to the door there was this guy standing there. His eyes were like wild—crazy—and his hair was all disheveled like he'd been sleeping under a bridge or on the side of the road or something. And he said, "come with me!"

And I said, "I can't do that I'm a pastor and I'm just about to preach a sermon on the idea that we should do everything in moderation, better to be safe than sorry, and a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush."

He said, "Peter, come with me."

I said, "How do you know my name and where are you going?"

He said, "I'm going to a field it has buried treasure."

I said, "No way!"

Then he said, "I'm buying a pearl more valuable than any in the world."

I look at this homeless guy who obviously has no place to lay his head. And I said, "Impossible!"

Then he said, "Where I am going beggars in the house is eat dinner at the king's table any throw wild parties for juvenile delinquents—prodigals."

I said, "no way there's no such place ... you're crazy... no way!"

He looked me square in the eye and said, "Yah Way."

Strangest thing.

[FRANCES] So who was it?

[PETER] I don't know?

[FRANCES] Was he alone?

[PETER] Well no. He did have these 12 guys with him.

Let's pray:

Father, this world really is strange. There are crazy people everywhere and we wonder where you are. So would you help us to see? In Jesus name we pray this. Amen.

Tonight, I'd like to take a look at one of my favorite stories in all of Scripture. It's Acts chapter 12, and it's the story of Rhoda.

Acts 12:1-15 "About that time Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belong to the church. He killed James the brother of John with the sword, and when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. This was during the days of unleavened bread. [Easter time]

And when he had seized him, he put him in prison, delivering him over to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending after the Passover to bring them out to the people. So Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church.

Now when Herod was about to bring him out, on that very night, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries before the door were guarding the prison. And behold, an angel of the Lord stood next to him, and a light shone in the cell. He struck here on this side and woke him saying, "Get up quickly." And the chains fell off his hands. And the angel said to him, "dress yourself and put on your sandals." And he did so. And he said to him, "wrap your cloak around you and follow me." And he went out and followed him. He did not know what was being done by the angel was real, thought he was seeing a vision.

[Peter doesn't know if this is real or not; he thinks he may be crazy]

When they had passed the first and the second guard, they came to the Iron Gate leading into the city. It opened for them of its own accord, and they went out and went along one street, and immediately the angel left him.

When Peter came to himself, he said, "Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting."

[In other words, "I'm not crazy."]

When he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many were gathered together and were

praying. And when he knocked at the door of the gateway, a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer. Recognizing Peter's voice, and her joy she did not open the gate but ran in and reported that Peter was standing at the gate. They said to her, "you are out of your mind."

The King James reads, "Thou art mad." "Maine" is the word. They say, "Rhoda, you're strange, nuts, certifiable, abnormal, you're crazy-insane!"

How do you know if someone is crazy?

Before I was ordained in the Presbyterian Church USA, they made me take a psychological test (Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory) to see if I was crazy. It was about 1985. I was going to seminary full-time, working at Bellaire Presbyterian Church full-time actually about full-time in youth ministry, and this young site grad student gave me the MMPI to take home and fill out.

I took it in a foul mood, late at night, right after for finals and before we left in the morning to come back to Colorado on Christmas break. I remember there were questions like, "Do you hear voices?" I checked, "No."

And then there were questions like, "Do you like fire?" And I'm like, "yeah!" I mean where would we be without fire?

There was a question, "Do you think there are people out to get you?" And I checked, "Yeah." I mean I could name them. They were in the Junior High department and they wanted me fired.

There was a question, "Do you believe there is a devil who hates your soul?" I checked, "Yeah."

I remember finishing the test in thinking, "Dang, if anyone took these tests seriously, they'd think I was crazy." I mailed it in and went on vacation.

Upon return I had to check in with this grad student in the Psychology department because the results went to the Presbytery who were ordaining me. I remember I was in a great mood. I just worked out, I was relaxed, rested, and trusting. She starting she started asking me all sorts of questions and I thought, "Wow! It is so cool to have someone caring for me."

And then she said, "Peter, do you do drugs?" I said, "No."

She said, "Are you addicted to alcohol?" And I said, "Well, I like beer, and maybe sometimes I've had too much, but no."

Then she said, "Do you beat your wife?" I said, "No I don't beat my wife!"

Then she said, "Well you must have some way of expressing your anger. Do you like violent sports?"

I thought of backpacking in football with friends and this is exactly what I said. I said, "Yeah. In fact the more cuts and bruises I get, the better I feel."

And at that she stopped, leaned forward and said, "Peter this'll be hard for you to believe because you presently do not have any 'presenting issues,' but you must believe me, you have this serious psychological problems. Some sort of personality disorder, paranoid or passive aggressive, I'm not sure, but unless you submit to extensive psycho-therapy your ministry will be a disaster in your marriage will end within a year."

I said, "Oh my gosh this is serious."

She said, "See, you're being paranoid."

So I tried to relax a minute, and I got a little agitated and said, "But this is going to the Presbytery."

And she said, "See, you're being passive aggressive."

I was trapped. Trapped by the powers that be. Crazy.

Now I want to say that psych tests can be really helpful and others have been really helpful to me. But after reading the answers to a multiple choice test, talking to me half an hour, discounting the opinions of all my relationships, this young psychologist in a position of power had concluded that I was out of my mind. Crazy.

But how do we know who's crazy and who's not crazy? Maybe she was crazy. How do we know who's sane and who's insane? I looked up the word *sane* in the dictionary and it said, "sensible or rational." So I looked up *rational* at it said, "sensible." I looked up *sensible* and it said, "rational."

See, nobody really knows. So Pilate looked at Jesus and said, "What is truth?" Being Governor, that weighed on him because he was in charge of judging sanity.

Honestly I think sanity is usually effectively defined as "the psychological state of those in power." So the king is rarely insane (until another king replaces him). So Festus accused the apostle Paul of being insane (like Rhoda, and same word). King Herod thinks Peter, James, and the early church is insane. The Jewish leaders accuse Jesus of being insane (same word as used for Rhoda).

Nowadays, we live in a democracy where we vote for King. The King is the person who gets the votes of the most people and so sanity is defined as the mental state of the most people, the way most people answer the question on a test. That is, sanity is defined as “normal”. Everyone wants to be “normal” and to be abnormal is insane.

In our society, sanity is faith in the crowd, and the people who the crowd idolizes. That is, sanity is faith in the “principalities and powers of this present age,” or as the Bible calls them “the principalities and powers of this present darkness.” The sane are the normal, the ruling caste, and the insane are the abnormal, the outcast.

Growing up, I had a cousin who people thought was a bit insane. He wasn’t like the rest of the family. I’ll call him Gary. He had these wild eyes. He heard voices and wandered the streets of Denver when not at Fort Logan Mental Health Center. So when he spoke people often didn’t listen.

I have a friend I’ll call Karen. She came to me years ago with the craziest stories and while I would be talking to her, her personality would split. And I’d just start talking to a different person. Long ago, some of them were demons too. That made it really hard for her to function in this world. And because of that people thought she was crazy and didn’t want to listen.

Years ago I had a woman come and meet with me that told stories of these horrifying spirits that would attack her in the night. If she’d taken the MMPI, I think she might have tested a bit crazy. If she was honest, that is, because she had worked really hard at acting normal. So actually, she would have aced the test. But it would probably have been a lie. But in our world a lie is normal, in which case, the truth is insane. The truth is an outcast—cast out.

Well that’s the way it is in our world, and sadly, that’s the way it often is in the church. Did you notice that the king (King Herod) thought the gospel was strange and so judged the preacher of the gospel insane? And then rulers of this house church think the good news (Gospel) is strange and so judge the preacher of this good news insane, and that’s especially easy because it’s Rhoda. And Rhoda is definitely not a part of the ruling caste. She’s a maid and perhaps even a slave. An outclass, and outcast.

Acts 12:12-15 “He [Peter] went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying.

[Remember they’re praying earnestly for Peter to be released.]

And when he knocked at the door of the gateway, a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer. Recognizing Peter’s voice, in her joy she did not open the gate but ran in and reported that Peter was standing at the gate. They said to her, “you are out of your mind.”

They said, “Rhoda, you’re hearing voices! Rhoda, you’re nuts, you’re insane. I mean after all, what does Rhoda know? She’s a servant girl. She has no training, no education, no diploma.” They’re thinking, “Surely God would not hide this from the wise and reveal it to babes, like the Rhoda. She probably can’t even read. And on top of everything else, she’s a woman—a girl. And we all know what they’re like!”

They say, “Rhoda, dear, sweetheart, this is an idle tale.”

Does this sound familiar?

In Luke’s first volume he records that it was some women who first went to the tomb on Easter morning and reported that Jesus was no longer dead, no longer imprisoned in the tomb.

Luke 24:10 “Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles, but these words seemed to them an idle tale and they did not believe them.”

An idle tale. Foolish! An idle tale...

...until Jesus shows up and basically says, “guys the strange women were right. Now go into all the world and proclaim the good news. You know, just the way these foolish women proclaimed it to you.”

To preach the gospel you must be a fool.

They say Rhoda, “you’re out of your mind foolish, nuts.”

Acts 12:15 “but she kept insisting that it was so, and they kept saying, “It is his angel!”

Did you get that? They’re ready to believe it’s Peter’s guardian angel, but not actually Peter having been released by angels, as if that is more believable.

Why? Well because the guys thought of it. They thought up the angel thing, and I suppose they decide what’s normal.

This whole time they’re arguing with Rhoda and Peter keeps knocking. “Behold I stand at the door and knock.” It’s Easter and behold he still stands at the door and knocks.

Acts 12:16 “But Peter continued knocking, and when they opened, they saw him and were amazed. But motioning to them with his hand to be a silent, he described to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he

said, “tell these things to James and to the brothers.” Then he departed and went to another place.

He said, “I’m out of here. Now you guys deliver this message to the others the way Rhoda delivered it to you. So the others can believe, you know, the way you disbelieved Rhoda.”

In other words, if you want to preach the gospel, you’re going to be a fool; you’re going to look insane. Because the Gospel is a joke—the truest joke, a joke upon the principalities and powers and world rulers of this present darkness. “For God has chosen what is foolish in the world to shame the wise and bring to nothing the things that are.”

See this story is a joke, like the Gospel is a joke. Not because it’s untrue but because this whole world is untrue, and principalities and powers—the systems of this world—are untrue. And whenever the church buys into the ways of this world, it becomes untrue.

See this story is a joke, a joke upon the powers of this world.

It’s a joke on Herod, the king.

It’s also a joke on the church, kind of like Easter was a joke on Peter, James, and John.

A joke on all self-righteous, arrogant, pomposity.

And who gets the joke? Who laughs at the joke?

The poor, the weak, the disenfranchised, the powerless, the women—those who don’t put faith in this world because this world hasn’t worked for them; these people get the joke. They know the truth. They inherit the earth.

To get the joke, you can’t take yourself or this world too seriously. But if you are king of the world or king of your world like most of us Americans are, well, that’s hard to do.

Years ago, Susan and I visited Henry VIII Hampton Court Palace in London. One of the guards explained to us that each king had a court jester—the Joker. Now the Joker lived off the scraps in the King’s palace, but the Joker could say anything he liked even to the King and the King couldn’t lift a finger against him.

The idea was that a Christian king should be able to “take a joke, take a fool.” And if the king couldn’t take a fool, he became a fool. The idea was that a Christian king needed humility. He needed his suppositions questioned in order to grow and learn.

I heard Dan Allendar say that in medieval times they take people they deemed crazy or mad, put them out on a ship and sail the sea. That's the origin of the term "ship of fools." At every port they were welcomed and folks lined up to come aboard for it was believed that the fools had insights into mysteries unknown. They would challenge suppositions and make way for new insights.

Paul wrote: "But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise. God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no flesh might boast in the presence of God."

In other words, the Church of Jesus Christ is His ship of fools visiting the ports of this world. A ship of fools unless she is seduced by the world becoming like the world, a ship of fools trying to be a ship of Kings.

Now we're all tempted to be kings. So it's the grace of God send you a fool—a court jester. We all need one.

So then: who is your fool? Your court jester? Whom God calls to enter your idolatrous throne room and tell jokes at your expense? Who is it that questions your arrogant suppositions? Who's your court jester—who is your Rhoda?

Maybe it's that person you talked about in your small group time? The person you thought was strange, a bit nuts or even last and least.

Now listen: I'm not saying that person is entirely right. In fact, they're probably mostly wrong—mostly dirt—mostly field. I'm just saying that they probably contain some treasure. You know Rhoda wasn't right about everything. I doubt she knew Hebrew or the law. She may have been rather cantankerous and unrefined. Rhoda means *rose* in Greek, so she probably had some nasty thorns. She was probably mostly wrong. But you really ought to listen to Rhoda because she's got the answer to your most earnest prayer, and there is a reason for that.

So my point is listen to Rhoda.

1. It can be humiliating, but it's how we learn, grow, and follow.

If you think you've arrived, know the truth and thus have all the answers, you don't need to grow and nothing is strange. A lot of so-called "Christians" think that's what being a Christian is: it's having arrived. When in reality it's only having begun.

We haven't arrived at truth. Truth has knocked on our door saying, "Follow me." We haven't arrived at truth so much as just started to follow truth. We are disciples, followers, learners. We're going someplace we haven't been before and that always feels strange.

A few years ago in a freshman with physics class at Duke University a young male physics professor showed up in a red dress with matching purse and shoes. He looked like a fool. After lecturing for 40 minutes, one student finally raised his hand and said, "Prof, what's with the dress?"

The professor said, "thank you. At last somebody asked. I'm trying to make a point. You see for the last several decades there haven't been any new discoveries in physics. I think that's because we've been attracting the kind of students that think we have it all figured out, explained, and defined. So nothing is strange and people like that don't make new discoveries. We need people expecting the unexpected."

I think that's true in physics and it's definitely true in theology and religion. We like to think we have all the answers, explanations, and definitions. So we don't expect the unexpected and do our best to ignore the strange. And in that way we build dungeons for our souls and never go anywhere. We refuse to grow; we refuse to follow the truth even when he's knocking at our door. The truth is Jesus.

You see, in our faith, we're not just discovering truths like in physics. We are being discovered by the Truth who is a person. In other words we only discover the truth where he chooses to be discovered. And get this: he chooses to be discovered—that is revealed—and Rhoda.

He chose Rhoda to go to the door. He chose Rhoda not the Emperor, not James, John, or Andrew, not the Seminary President, not CS Lewis...He chose Rhoda.

Years ago I experienced the greatest physical healing of my life. My leg grew out at a prayer meeting. It totally rocked my world. I remember I was so mad at God because the lady who prayed for me was a crackpot in my opinion—terrible theology and a bit nuts. I thought, "God why didn't you choose CS Lewis to pray for me?" And I felt like his answer was, "Will he's not foolish in your world Peter." Ironically CS Lewis was foolish in his world. God does choose what's foolish in the world to shame the wise but not without reason. It's so he can show them something new, show them someone new, show them Himself.

A few years ago I went to a family dinner and my crazy cousin Gary was there. In fact that's what he calls himself: my crazy cousin. And you know I'm the sane one; I'm not the crazy cousin because I have a master's degree. Well out of all my cousins, he may be the craziest but he's also the sweetest, at least for the last 10 to 15 years or so since he got some good help.

At dinner while everyone was talking he said, "Hey Pete did I ever tell you what really changed me?"

I said, "No."

He told me how years ago he was standing down Colfax in a fog. He said, "I thought I was going to die. I remember thinking about the survival of the fittest and I thought I'm least fit to survive—last and least. So I just prayed God if you're there I just want to survive."

He said, "Pete I looked up and right in front of me was one of those storefront churches. I stumbled in and this guy there introduced me to Jesus. I met Jesus and he changed me."

And then he got that wild look in his eye. His hair was disheveled like he'd been sleeping under a bridge or on the side of the road. He leaned forward like he wanted me to come with him, like he was telling me about buried treasure in the field. And he whispered so that no one else would hear. He said, "Hey Pete. I still hear voices."

I said, "You do?"

He said, "Yeah. But now there are good. They say stuff like: trust Jesus, love Jesus, follow Jesus."

You see, I think my crazy cousin Gary was let out of prison by the Lord, and led around my angels. Or does that sound like an idle tale?

I told you about my friend Karen (that's not her real name)—Karen who's got all the personalities. Actually there are several little girl parts of her personality from when she was abused. She lives in another state. She has a bunch of health problems: spinal problems, brain tumors. She gets angry really easy and so people don't know what to do with her at times.

One evening about eight months ago when my world was totally falling apart, I was sitting up in my office at Lookout when I got a call. It was my friend Karen. I hadn't talked to her for a long time. She said, "Peter what's been going on? God's been waking me up every night with a picture of you on a cross. What's going on?"

I told her, and then she prayed this prayer, the most cogent, beautiful, deep, and profound prayer that I may have received in all my life. Now my friend is still messed up in many ways like all of us. I don't know how to help her. Sometimes she'll sob that she wants to die. Sometimes split into different personalities—her little girls. Sometimes she'll get really angry and sometimes I don't know what exactly to believe. But I listen because I know Jesus is there. And sometimes she'll say, "can I pray?" And I'm telling you, she starts praying and it's like Jesus is giving me a phone call from California.

And now most of you know Elaine. She's on our board. You heard her testimony. She is my friend who was raised in a coven and has fought an absolutely incredible battle against Satan and his demons by the power of Christ.

For years, Elaine would say to me, "I just want to be normal."

Well Elaine, you're not normal. And the reason you're not normal is that you're so entirely sane. Elaine is in fact one of the most sane if not the most sane person I know if sanity is defined as a tenacious desire to cling to the truth. For you see Jesus is the truth, the reason, the logic. He is the definition of all real sanity and he is not normal. And I'm telling you, I've learned more about Jesus (the truth) from my friend Elaine than I did in four years of seminary. Yet when I first met Elaine, she looked to me an awful lot like Rhoda.

Sure you getting my point? Listen to Rhoda.

If a person confesses, "Jesus is Lord" we know that His Spirit is with that person even if they don't. Jesus can still speak through them.

In 2 Chronicles 36, God speaks prophetically to Josiah King of Judah through Neco the Pharaoh of Egypt.

In Numbers 22 he speaks through Balaam's ass (referring to his donkey.)

In John 11, God prophetically proclaims the Gospel through Caiaphas.

So I'm saying pay attention to Rhoda. Pay attention to that person you think is strange or even a bit insane.

If you're a Baptist, pay attention to Catholics.

If you're a Catholic, pay attention to Baptists.

If you're the prophetic type pay, attention to the Bible scholar.

If you're a Bible scholar, pay attention to that weird prophetic type.

If you're a Republican, listened to a Democrat.

If you're a Democrat, listen to a Republican.

If you're a shrink, listen to a pastor.

If you're a pastor, listen to a shrink.

I can't remember the young lady's name who gave me the MMPI, but it wouldn't surprise me if her name was Rhoda. At the time I thought people like her were nuts. And I think she was mostly nuts, and yet God was still speaking. Friends paid for me to take all the tests over again plus some additional ones. They decided the first one was a misdiagnoses. And yet it was the perfect prescription. I was way too stressed out, and at least a little paranoid and passive aggressive. And Jesus wanted me to trust him and his love for me and not the world's.

So listen to Rhoda because:

1. It's how we learn how we grow how we follow. And...
2. It's a lot more fun.

The kingdom of God is a party, and if you go to a party where everyone is the same, that's actually not a party at all. At a good party everyone is a bit strange. And yet it's like Jim Morrison sang, "People are strange when you're a stranger." Choose not to be a stranger and strangers turn into the funnest friends.

And listen to Rhoda because...

3. Rhoda is worth it.

So even if Rhoda has nothing to say or is thoroughly diluted, listen to Rhoda. Jesus chooses to dwell in crazy Rhoda because He's crazy for Rhoda and he wants you to be crazy for Rhoda, too.

So in the end, what Rhoda says doesn't matter as much is your willingness to listen to Rhoda. For if I have all knowledge (and so don't need to listen to the info that Rhoda has) but I don't have love (don't listen to Rhoda), I'm nothing.

Jesus said, "As you did it unto the least of these, my brethren, you did it to me and as you did it not unto the least of these, you did it not unto me."

He chooses to hide in Rhoda so you'd see Rhoda and so you'd see Him for he is love for Rhoda and you. So see him.

Listen to Rhoda because...

4. Jesus is worth it.

You know when Jesus walked this earth in a physical body, at some point everyone judged him strange and refused to listen. Well, he's still walking the earth in a body—His body, the Church. It's not a real obedient body. There's a lot of dirt to cover the treasure, and sometimes a lot of manger and not much baby. So you sure can't trust everything His disobedient people say, and yet He is there and so you better listen.

So right now look around this room. See anybody kind of strange?

Are any of the people that you mentioned in your small groups in this room? Look around.

This room is full of strange people.

Now watch.

On the night he was betrayed He—being the Word, God’s communication to the world—God’s message to us, He took bread and he broke it saying, “this is my body, given to you. Take and eat, strange people.”

And in the same manner after supper he took the cup, and He said, “This is the cup of the new covenant in my blood, shed for the forgiveness of sins. Drink of it all of you and do it in remembrance of me.”

And so He invites you to this table, but I don’t want you to be too pensive when you come to this table. Sometimes we can get all pensive about this table, which is good, but I don’t want you to just think about yourself. I want you to watch the strange people. And I want you to watch the Word. That means the message from the very throne of God to you. I want you to watch where it goes because you’ll see the treasure bets buried in dirt. So you better pay attention to that dirt. And listen to Rhoda.

Communion

Benediction

Listen to Rhoda. Because Jesus really likes Rhoda, and He’s waiting for you there.

So sit down for a minute, and I’ll give you two very practical application points.

1. You’ll notice that they were meeting in a house church in the story tonight when Rhoda told them the good news. That means, I hope you’ll go to your house church. And when you go to your house church, pay attention to Rhoda—and I really mean that. Pay attention to the people who just show up at the door. I’m constantly blown away by the stories in this room. I can look around this room and see the most incredible stories of Jesus, but their hidden because we don’t pay attention to Rhoda. So go to your house church.
2. Starting next week, we’re going to do extended worship at the end of every service. I’ll have a benediction that is kind of like, “you can go if you want to, or you can stay and continue worshipping.” And there is no pressure. Eating dinner with people is a very Godly thing. So if you want to go out to dinner with folks, just do that. But if you want to stay here, do that.

And as the band is playing, members of our ministry will be here for prayer and ministry. You can pray with the people in the pew next to you. And we can have this room be a place for ministry. But I want you to listen to Rhoda because it can be a weird thing going up to someone you don't know and having them pray for you. But you see, what I was saying tonight is that God speaks through people. And there will often times be a lot of other junk, and you can forget that. But listen for Jesus and give Jesus a chance in Rhoda.

So listen to Rhoda because Jesus loves Rhoda and He talk to you through Rhoda.

And you are Rhoda. And so am I.

God Bless.