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The Scripture

Acts 12:1-17

About that time King Herod laid violent hands upon some who belonged to the church. He had James, the brother of John, killed with the sword. After he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. (This was during the festival of Unleavened Bread.) When he had seized him, he put him in prison and handed him over to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending to bring him out to the people after the Passover.

While Peter was kept in prison, the church prayed fervently to God for him. The very night before Herod was going to bring him out, Peter, bound with two chains, was sleeping between two soldiers, while guards in front of the door were keeping watch over the prison. Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He tapped Peter on the side and woke him, saying, "Get up quickly." And the chains fell off his wrists. The angel said to him, "Fasten your belt and put on your sandals." He did so. Then he said to him, "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me." Peter went out and followed him; he did not realize that what was happening with the angel's help was real; he thought he was seeing a vision. After they had passed the first and the second guard, they came before the iron gate leading into the city. It opened for them of its own accord, and they went outside and walked along a lane, when suddenly the angel left him. Then Peter came to himself and said, "Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hands of Herod and from all that the Jewish

people were expecting.” As soon as he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many had gathered and were praying. When he knocked at the outer gate, a maid named Rhoda came to answer. On recognizing Peter’s voice, she was so overjoyed that, instead of opening the gate, she ran in and announced that Peter was standing at the gate. They said to her, “You are out of your mind!” But she insisted that it was so. They said, “It is his angel.” Meanwhile Peter continued knocking; and when they opened the gate, they saw him and were amazed. He motioned to them with his hand to be silent, and described for them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he added, “Tell this to James and to the believers.” Then he left and went to another place.

The Message

“11 Indispensable Relationships: You Need a Little One”

Mark Briley

“Children are just people in the process of getting older, vulnerable people learning to be human...” Antonia Susan Byatt offered this line about kids, but it struck me as true of all of us. We’re all just people in the process of getting older, vulnerable people learning to be human. And that’s it, right?

Life is just an ongoing unfolding process to which we’ve inserted alarm clocks, business uniforms, fast food, and roundabouts. And yet... even as we climb into the cog of humanity – particularly as Americans – we’re conditioned to go about it all in a particular way. We want to live on purpose, with purpose, and we want to do so now.

So, we jump off the cog for a moment this Sunday morning to see if there is another Way; life beyond the societal treadmill... and there is! Jesus says, *“I’ve got a Way. It’s different from the usual cog you’re turning over and over. And when you exhaust the other way, I know you’ll come looking.”*

And friends? *Here. We. Are.* What are you looking for? Acceptance? Clear cut religion? Maybe a sense of direction or some clarity on a weighty decision you’re discerning? We’re all looking for something... beneath any rugged or polished exterior... we’re just vulnerable people learning to be human.

When Jesus decided to get real as can be... showcasing his ideal model of faith, he didn’t find the popular, Wheaties-boxed, athlete of the day or some Ivy-League scholar who could get big-wordy about the whole thing. He picked a kid... a vulnerable person learning to be human. *“Unless you come into the mix with the wonder of this child,”* he said with a young one in the midst of their gathering, *“you’ll not see the kingdom... you just won’t!”*

“But Paul says,” we protest, “when I became a man, I put away childish things.” It was the Oklahoma State Cowboy Football Coach, Mike Gundy’s tirade at a press conference when he shouts: “I’m a man! I’m 40!!!” It was the sentiment of “Pick on me if you’ve got a problem – I’m no kid.” And there’s always someone who gets upset and uses that pet peeve phrase “I’m a grown ___ man!” which, when shouted, almost always gives off the vibe of the exact opposite.



We get the balance, right? We know there’s a role for maturing in life and in our faith as well. We usually say it with an edge to it: “When are you ever going to grow up?” we say.

My best buddy from high school just had a birthday. I texted him, “Halfway to 84, Brother!” and he responded, “Just 21 for the second time!”

There’s something about the child-like faith that Jesus says is the way forward. We need a child-like *witness* to keep us in that zone of pure heart, pure joy, pure curiosity. Len Sweet names the need as one of our final 11 indispensable relationships we need to help us navigate our life faithfully and intentionally.¹ Who would fit such a bill in Scripture? *Rhoda*. Say, “*Rhoda*,” would you? Who? [“*Rhoda!*”]. I heard you. I’m just thinking like you think when you get that phone call and you’re all, “*Who ‘dis?!’*” Who’s *Rhoda*? Well... she’s the first voice heard from a Christian woman in the church of the book of Acts. And that woman... whose given name was *Rosebud* or *Rose*... is a child. 10, 11, maybe 12 years old. We’re not certain but here she is, named in Scripture for all of eternity, and according to Len Sweet... we need a *Rhoda* in our lives.

How does she join the narrative? Well... James, John’s brother, James, not Jesus’ brother, James... not a “*Daryl and my other brother, Daryl!*” situation here. John’s brother, James, is killed by King Herod. There were many who were excited about this death. People were getting really irritated with the Christians. They just didn’t understand all the fuss of changing the religion from what it had always been. We understand that, right? Happens all the time today, too – thus the huge gap between people in our time. And when the King is praised for getting rid of James, he thinks, “*Well if they liked that, they’ll love for me to get rid of Peter next.*” So, Pete is booked. Mug shot. Shackles. The whole nine yards. All but the execution which had to wait until the Passover festival had ended. Herod doubled up on the guards. Peter was a high-profile inmate. Instead of the usual single handcuff on Peter with the other side of the

¹ 11: Indispensable relationships you can’t be without. Leonard Sweet. David C. Cook publishing. Colorado Springs. 2008. This series is grounded in and inspired by Sweet’s work in this book. Any quotes or references to Len Sweet are linked to this work.

cuff being on one of the guards' arm – Pete had both arms shackled to separate guards and extra guards on the lookout. But would you believe – there's some Shawshank-like sting operation to break Peter out of jail. And it's done with such stealth, Peter himself hardly knows what's happening. He thinks he's dreaming. Was it an angel? In some shape or form it seems so... if even the angel was named Carl who was part of the Thursday night poker group Pete played with who also happened to be good at picking locks. Angels come in many forms.

Before you know it, Peter is outside the prison gate and free to fly. He comes to, realizing this is real, and he heads straight for Mary's place – John Mark's mom – which was serving as headquarters for the movement. Some think this may have been the place where Jesus held the Last Supper, making it an inspired hub to hold staff meetings to keep things moving. Who knows how much time Peter had before the prison dogs were on his heels? He had the cover of darkness, but it wouldn't be long before the guards knew he was gone, and they'd be after him. It was their own heads after all (*and according to the law*), that were at stake once word was out that he had escaped.

Peter makes it to Mary's and knocks on the door... gently we presume so as not to make a commotion or get the neighbor's dog overly worked up. And here comes Rhoda to answer the door – getting close enough, she hears Peter's voice who is attempting a whisper-shout: "*Hey – it's me, Peter – let me in!*" And instead of opening the door right away, she squeals in excitement and runs back to the group praying. She shouts: "*He's here! Peter's here!*" "*There she goes again,*" they say to each other. "*Yeah, okay, Rosebud, Peter's at the front door right now! Gotcha.*" And they go back to praying. They clearly didn't have the RING doorbell app on their smart phones. They would have seen Pete in motion, standing at the door knocking.

It's lovely technology. We just recently got ours set up, actually. The first time it sent an alert to my phone that there was motion at the door, I was at home, and Carrie and the boys had popped up on the front porch – watering the flowers and playing out front. I saw a feature on my screen that, like an intercom, would let me speak from the doorbell to whomever was at the door. I thought, "*Well, this is awesome.*" So, I mustered up a creepy Clint Eastwood kind of voice and said through the intercom, "*Get off my lawn!*" They stopped in their tracks and started looking around in total confusion. I said it again and about the third time, they followed the voice over to the doorbell. Here's my proof: **[Doorbell pic of fam]**. We've had more fun with this than we should which is probably not the point of the whole thing but...



Mary's house clearly didn't have this technology, so Rhoda is the only source they have: "*Peter's here!*" she yells again. "*Can't you see we're praying for some important stuff here, Rhoda? Pete's in prison after all – you're being disrespectful and we're trying to pray.*" Peter knocked. Rhoda was shocked. The saints mocked.

I wonder how often we don't realize the answer to our prayers is already here... knocking at the door of our lives but we think, "*No way. Can't be. Quit bothering me with all that, I'm praying.*" What are you praying for now? You may be waiting and waiting and waiting while a Rhoda witness in your life is saying, "*Friend – the answer is right in front of you. Trust me.*" And as Scripture so beautifully does, the one who knows the truth is the one least expected based on societal norms.

Did you know there were some rabbis who said it was better to *burn* a Torah than to *give* it to a woman? Can you imagine? And a child has lower status than women and just a hair above the beasts of the field! It's a child that says, "*The good news is at the door.*" Why are we afraid to open that door? Are we afraid of the truth? What it will mean? What it might require? I've been there.

A good buddy and I exchange text messages regularly about a lot of things – some entirely for the fun of finding the best GIF to meet the moment – and some much deeper than that. He was studying Mark 4:40 recently and wrestling with what he called one of the greatest questions Jesus asks of his followers: "*Why are you so afraid?*" "*Why is that?*" he asked. "*If we say Jesus is crushing it. When we say, 'We are more than conquerors,' when we say, 'I can do all things through Christ.'*" And then he offered this string of fears that I have returned to on a number of occasions. He said, "*Why are we afraid to be great? Why are we afraid to take a leap? Why are we afraid to challenge? Why are we afraid to give? Why are we afraid to let go? Why are we afraid to give it up? Why are we afraid of what others may think or say about us? Why are we afraid to sacrifice? Why are we afraid to lose our lives? This world doesn't care a lick about what we profess with our mouths, this world wants to see the evidence of a man that we claim is alive! Why are we still afraid?*"

My friend was preaching... and I was receiving. And my response, maybe your response, maybe our response is so often, "*'Cause I'm still praying about that.*" But then a text, a call, an encounter, a Rhoda clears her throat and says, "*Will you just open the door already?*"

What door do you need to open that you've been avoiding? You hear the knocking. You hear the voice. But you're ignoring it.

One of the prayer group members gets up from the “*Free Pete*” prayer circle to make a snack run – who can pray without trail mix and caramel corn, right? And moving toward the snack stash, they hear the knock at the door and discover for themselves, “*Peter is at the door!*” Rhoda was right.

Our kids may be more right about things when it comes to matters of the Spirit than we give them credit for. They can certainly lead us back to a state of wonder... and wonder is holy. And wonder may ask us to fly, and we may be hesitant because the thrill of soaring begins with the fear of falling. Just ask any bird who’s been first nudged out of the nest, or a pole-vaulter who’s stuck that pole in the ground to see if it can fling them over the bar – a barrier their trying to get over.

As we age, we can get better at pretending to be something other than we are – what in the church we may call the stain-glassed masquerade we wear. We’re doing our grown-up life, making grown up decisions and want to be perceived as having it all together – a life worthy of every new Instagram entry. But kids, our Rhoda *witnesses* – can scare the real you out of you. While it can be a little awkward at first, it can also be liberating. It can also bring you fully into the present moment which is so important as we tend to live in the past or live for the future. Kids remind us that now matters.

At our staff meeting this week, part of our team was present in-person and part was Zooming in from their homes. At one point, a child entered the ZOOM screen of one of our teammates. It was little Bella. Her eyes grew and beamed as she saw this room and screen full of people she knew from the church. We all waved and hollered and with big eyes she called out to John who was in the conference room and happens to be father of one of Bella’s classmates! “*Hey!*” she yells. “*I need to tell you something!*” We stopped the meeting, of course, and waited with eager anticipation. “*You’ve got to get over to our house on Saturday – its inflatable pool Saturday*” she announced with ultimate delight. “*You can’t miss it!*” Now John had just shared about a new ministry launching on Saturday morning and another ministry commitment at the church Saturday afternoon – ministry is so often a 24/7 reality. I knew it was full, and I know how such fullness feels. But sometimes – “*It’s inflatable pool Saturday!*” and everything else can wait.

Rhoda’s help us see what’s in front of us... what the soul needs when we’re busy with “*all the things.*” Sometimes we must snap out of our routines and rhythms to wake up to life that is truly life. If spirituality means, “*waking up,*” then your Rhoda is one of your prime spiritual directors. They become our best mentors in exploring the “*nowness*” of the now – which is truly the sacrament of the present moment.

I jumped off the cog for a couple of days this past week for the sake of a child. Two children, actually. One was my own – my baby girl is somehow turning 16 in a few

weeks and has always wanted to visit New York. Carrie and I took Morgan for a couple of days to the big city, and we had an incredible time together. We got to congratulate gymnast and Olympic Gold Medalist, Suni Lee, her dad, and family and soaked in every moment of 'nowness' along the way.



The second child that led us to New York City was one I gladly claim as pure gift in my life.

This is Alistair. He's fresh on this earth – his eyes are working overtime to soak in the world and process one of our first wonderings: “*Where in the world am I?*” “*Why am I here?*” and “*Who are all these people?*” We prayed alongside his parents for his arrival for a long while – much longer than nine months... years of

anticipation and heartbreak were close to us along the way. Our friends, Laurence, and Felicia, as we've shared quite a journey together, invited me to dedicate Alistair while we were in the city. No greater honor. None. And so I held this child – looked into his eyes and he into my mine – looked into his soul and he to mine – and all of us gathered on that rooftop in Harlem, thanked God for this child and



committed ourselves to live in such a way that he would always know God loves him, we love him and we're supporting him as lives into the fullness of life he'll choose to live on purpose, with purpose.

There's not one thing in this world that can get you to stop and wonder, stop, and appreciate the gift of the moment, like the presence of a child. They see the world in a way that Jesus says holds a key to the faith. They point us to the answered prayer that is already



knocking at the front door of our lives. And they give us every good reason to be faithful... for what better reason do we have to press forward with faith, hope, integrity, and love? Rhoda's in our lives give us that added drive to lean forward, look for God's lead, and give our very best all while we're *in the process of getting older, just vulnerable people learning to be human....*”

May it be so. Amen.

Song of Response
“Jesus Loves the Little Children”
“God’s Gift of Children”
Ed Varnum

BY CLARE HERBERT WOOLSTON AND ED VARNUM

Jesus loves the little children,
all the children of the world.
May the children help us see
the precious child in you and me.
Jesus loves the little children of the world.

Thank God for the gift of children
and their wonder at the awesomeness of life.
With their excitement and laughter
or struggle or tears,
we see the world through fresh eyes.
God, from their insight, make us wise.

Jesus loves the little children,
all the children of the world.
May the children help us see
the precious child in you and me.
Jesus loves the little children of the world.

BROAD HEARTS BROAD MINDS BROAD REACH