

First Reading: Acts 9:36-43

May 11, 2025

³⁶ Now in Joppa there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas. She was devoted to good works and acts of charity. ³⁷ At that time she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs. ³⁸ Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, who heard that Peter was there, sent two men to him with the request, "Please come to us without delay." ³⁹ So Peter got up and went with them; and when he arrived, they took him to the room upstairs. All the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them. ⁴⁰ Peter put all of them outside, and then he knelt down and prayed. He turned to the body and said, "Tabitha, get up." Then she opened her eyes, and seeing Peter, she sat up. ⁴¹ He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive. ⁴² This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. ⁴³ Meanwhile he stayed in Joppa for some time with a certain Simon, a tanner.

Other reference: Romans 16:1-16

¹ I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church at Cenchreae, ² so that you may welcome her in the Lord as is fitting for the saints, and help her in whatever she may require from you, for she has been a benefactor of many and of myself as well.

³ Greet Prisca and Aquila, who work with me in Christ Jesus, ⁴ and who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles. ⁵ Greet also the church in their house. Greet my beloved Epaenetus, who was the first convert in Asia for Christ. ⁶ Greet Mary, who has worked very hard among you. ⁷ Greet Andronicus and Junia, my relatives who were in prison with me; they are prominent among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was. ⁸ Greet Ampliatus, my beloved in the Lord. ⁹ Greet Urbanus, our co-worker in Christ, and my beloved Stachys. ¹⁰ Greet Apelles, who is approved in Christ. Greet those who belong to the family of Aristobulus. ¹¹ Greet my relative Herodion. Greet those in the Lord who belong to the family of Narcissus. ¹² Greet those workers in the Lord, Tryphaena and Tryphosa. Greet the beloved Persis, who has worked hard in the Lord. ¹³ Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord; and greet his mother — a mother to me also. ¹⁴ Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, and the brothers and sisters who are with them. ¹⁵ Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them. ¹⁶ Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you.

Last week, we learned that Queen Anne Lutheran Church has an interesting story. Each of its pastors carries a secret they pass on exclusively to their successor, namely, where in the church building we hide three items for safekeeping: the Lost Ark of the Covenant, once described as a radio transmitter to God; the Holy Grail, that is, the chalice out of which Jesus and his disciples drank at the Lord's Supper; and a fully functioning time machine, built years ago by one of my predecessors based on plans we obtained by a former

member — a young man named Indiana Jones — who stole them from the Nazis just before WWII.

This week we turn to the time machine, which I recently used to travel back to the first century for the sake of interviewing the Apostle Paul. Why? Because I am the pastor of a congregation full of incredibly able, well- educated, and talented women who are obviously capable of anything men can do. That makes some of these women rightly suspicious of Paul, who allegedly wrote that women should neither teach nor have authority over a man; instead, they “will be saved by childbearing” (1 Tim 1:15). Mother’s Day makes the topic especially relevant.

Here is what I planned to ask Paul based on last week’s reading from the Book of Acts: “You [Paul] experienced a transformation on the road to Damascus that would forever change the way you see the world. How did it change your relationships with other people, including not only your fellow Jews, the people of Israel, but also Greeks and Samaritans as well as foreigners and slaves? How, secondly, did your new outlook affect the way you see women? Were they equal partners with you in your ministry, or did you truly believe that they should be silent and that men should be in charge?

To put it another way: was Paul a misogynist, a man who saw women as inferior to men? Or had he begun something new in his ministry by elevating women to the status of men as essential to his conviction, following what he writes in his Letter to the Galatians, that all are one in the body of Christ — Jew or Greek, male or female, slave or free?

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Now that I had my questions ready, I gathered my things — a tunic, my sandals, a copy of the Greek New Testament which contained Paul’s letters, and my allergy medication. Suddenly it hit me. Wouldn’t it be better to start my journey by interviewing the women whom Paul regarded as “co-workers in Christ” first? That would give them something men of the church in positions of leadership arguably took away after Paul died — a voice. Only then could I interview Paul himself.

And so, I decided to interview three women Paul mentions in Romans, the letter some interpreters regard as his masterpiece: Phoebe (a deacon), Junia (considered to be “great among the apostles”), and Priscilla (a woman who oversaw one of the house churches in Rome). Naturally, I would also like to meet Tabitha, the woman we heard about in our First Reading, Acts 9. Its author explicitly calls her a disciple of Jesus which is the only time in the New Testament a woman receives such a designation.

Unfortunately, we have no evidence she served with Paul.

Alas, I thought to myself, perhaps I could talk with her on another trip.

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Now, you probably wonder where in the church I hide something as large and grotesque as a time machine. All I can tell you is it lies behind a locked door for which there is no key except the one that I have. You probably also wonder what it looks like. Well, to keep the story moving, I would briefly describe it as a complex mechanism with dials, brass rails, a saddle for the pilot, and levers for controls. It’s a piece of machinery, really, one that uses exotic materials like ivory, nickel, and quartz.

You would be amazed at how it works. All an operator must do is sit in the saddle, turn the dials to set the destination, and use the levers to move forward or backward in time. I knew this from the instructions that were included. They made it easy for me to make Cenchreae, a port town in the municipality of Corinth, my first stop. There I hoped to meet Phoebe, the deacon I mentioned before, who was going to carry and deliver Paul's letter to the Christians living in Rome.

Time travel made me sleepy. I flipped the switch, heard a few gears click, and then the room began to spin. When I awoke, I found myself in a desolate place. It was a valley, littered with rocks that baked under the intense heat of the ancient Mediterranean sun. I walked to the top of the first hill I could find, beyond which I could see the sprawl of Corinth, a city a writer from long ago once described as a wretched hive of scum and villainy. I knew I would need to be cautious.

Thankfully, I could only see one port from the hilltop, which I guessed — correctly — would be Cenchreae. I started walking in that direction. As I came near, I heard people singing from within a small house. Over the door I saw the symbol Christians used to identify themselves, a fish. It was a house church. This had to be it.

Before I could knock, somebody opened the door. A young woman appeared. "Excuse me," I said in the broken Greek I learned while in seminary, "I am looking for someone who knows Paul of Tarsus. Her name is Phoebe, and I understand that she is one of the leaders here of the church in Cenchreae.

"I am Phoebe," she said. "You have a strange accent, my friend. Are you from the area?"

"I come from the north," I replied, hoping my answer would satisfy her curiosity. "I see you are holding a scroll," I said, pointing to her right hand. "Is that by chance a letter?"

"Yes," she replied. "It's from Paul. I am delivering it to our biggest community of faith, the house church in Rome."

"That is a long walk," I said, knowing the distance would be just shy of twenty miles. "At least part of it is by water," I added. "Would you mind some company? I am God-fearing, and I seek to learn more about what you and the other members of your faith community call 'The Way.'"

"You may. After all, we have a saying: 'Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it'" (Heb 13:1).

Thus, we began our journey, which was made relatively easy thanks to the incredible public roads of the Roman Empire. As we walked, I asked Phoebe a lot about her relationship with Paul.

"How do you know Paul?" I asked.

"I helped him a lot in his ministry, and because of that he has placed great faith in me. Here, look." She unrolled the last page of the scroll she carried and pointed to the top. "I commend to you our sister Phoebe," it said, "a deacon of the church at Cenchreae, so that you may welcome her in the Lord as is fitting for the saints, and help her in whatever she may require from you, for she has been a benefactor of many and of myself as well" (Rom 16:1).

"Wow," I replied after reading the passage. "But surely there must be more to his commendation of you than merely gratitude," I blurted out in the best Greek I could muster.

"Well, Paul always thinks strategically. If there are Roman Christians who are suspicious toward Paul, I can help as an intermediary. So can other people he knows in the Roman church, his co-workers in Christ who, in some cases, have suffered with him by being imprisoned for his message. He lists them here at the end."

Phoebe pointed to what later editors would identify as chapter 16 where Paul greets 26 people by name.

"So, all you need to do is deliver the letter and return to Cenchreae?" I asked.

"No," Phoebe said, rolling her eyes. "I am more than a mail-carrier! What kind of backward version of our faith do you represent? I am a deacon."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that I am a local leader of a church. I am also, as you heard, one of Paul's benefactors, which means I supported him financially. As a woman of some wealth who has enough education to read, Paul depends on me not only to deliver his mail; he also asks me to read it, in this case, to the church in Rome, because some of its members are illiterate."

"Do you do anything else?" I asked.

"Yes, as I read the letter to the church, I will interpret it for them if they have questions, which they always do."

"Wait," I said. "You have the task of interpreting Paul's letter to a community of women and men once we arrive? How is that any different from teaching?"

Phoebe shrugged her shoulders. "It's not."

"But I thought Paul said that women had no authority to teach over men, that they should not teach but remain silent.

Phoebe scoffed. "Wait until you meet Priscilla. She and her husband Aquila had to teach Apollos, a convert to Christianity who became one of its most zealous preachers, key points of doctrine that he misunderstood."

I immediately remembered the story about Priscilla and Aquila schooling Apollos in the way of the Lord according to Acts 18, one that prompted Justo Gonzalez, a historian of Christianity, to call Priscilla "a professor of theology" (56). Now I knew I had to meet her!

* * *

Time passed. I had a lot to ponder, and Phoebe—I could tell—was tired of talking. We walked the remainder of our journey in silence until we reached Rome. It was dark when we arrived. The city was quiet beneath the starry nighttime sky. Soon we found ourselves at the door of one of its many homes. Phoebe knocked quietly. A woman answered and beckoned us to come inside.

"I'm Junia," the woman said as I entered.

I was astonished. "Junia?" I said in disbelief. "I thought you were a man."

"Why?" she asked as we entered what appeared to be a large dining room. I could hardly see anything until she lit a candle on one of its several tables.

"Because Paul calls you Junias in the letter she has, and Junias is a man's name."

Phoebe looked surprised. "How do you know what Paul says in the letter I'm carrying?" she asked.

"Just open it to the conclusion."

Phoebe complied, albeit reluctantly. She seemed somewhat suspicious.

"There!" I said, pointing to what later editions of the letter would indicate as Romans 16:7. "It says, 'Greet Andronicus and Junias . . . who were in prison with me; they are great among the apostles.'"

Phoebe laughed. "Your eyesight must be as bad as Paul's. Look again."

I took a closer look, squinting my eyes to distinguish the fine lines of the ancient Greek letters Paul was using. Phoebe was right. It said Junia. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. That's a woman's name, a woman Paul regarded literally as "noteworthy" among the apostles. Then I remembered something from my days in graduate school: the oldest copy of Romans we have uses the female name, Junia. The masculine name Junias, on the other hand, appears only in later copies of Romans probably because men like Martin Luther and John Calvin insisted that a woman could never be great among the apostles. How silly that would be, they thought.

But something else bothered me. "How," I asked, turning now to Junia, "can you be outstanding among the apostles as a woman? Doesn't the word 'apostle' refer to the twelve original disciples of Jesus, all of whom were men?" I was so confused.

Junia shook her head in the candlelight and laughed. "I thought you were familiar with what Paul has written. Haven't you read his First Letter to the Corinthians? The term 'apostle' has different meanings, but for him it typically refers to a person who has seen Jesus and became a preacher of the gospel. Since more than 500 people saw the risen Lord at one time, as he says at the end of 1st Corinthians, it would be rather astonishing if none of them were women, right?" (New Oxford Annotated Bible, 574, n. 37)

Of course, I thought to myself. Junia may not have been one of the women who accompanied the original twelve disciples, but she must have had considerable stature for Paul to call her "great among the apostles." That kind of stature must have eventually made the male leadership of the early church uneasy, which explains why 1st Timothy – written several decades after Paul wrote Romans – "puts women in their place" by consigning them to submission and restricting their role in the history of salvation to baby-making.

I felt sick.

Just then, a third woman entered through the door into the dining room. Behind her was a man. Now who might these two be? Phoebe, who was looking at Junia as we talked, turned to me.

"Do you remember when I said, 'Wait until you meet Priscilla'? Here she is.

"Who's that behind her?" I asked.

"That's Aquila, her husband."

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Now I could remember a fair amount of information about Priscilla and Aquila. This couple, like Phoebe, were of great help to Paul. They were Jewish Christians who had been forced to leave Rome when the Emperor Claudius expelled the Jews from the

city in 49 AD (Gonzalez, *The Story Luke Tells*, 56). Paul tells us they oversaw a house church, which meant they were people of means.

What I could not help but notice when they entered was that Priscilla was first.

"It's nice to meet you," she said. "We overheard your strange accent and could not resist our curiosity. Where are you from?"

"He comes from the north," Phoebe interjected.

"Ah, the north." Priscilla said. "This is my husband, Aquila. We were living in Ephesus helping Paul until God called us back to Rome. Thankfully, the imperial leadership has changed."

"Pardon my ignorance," I said, "but is it customary for a woman to enter a room before a man, especially her husband?"

"Oh, you must not know very well the teachings of Paul. He says that we are all one in the body of Christ, Jew or Greek, male or female, slave or free."

"Does that get you into trouble?" I asked.

"Not in the church," she replied. "I always like to point out to my dear Aquila that Paul and his friend Luke typically list my name before his – and not by accident. Let's see if he did that here."

Priscilla took the scroll that Phoebe had placed on the table. She turned to the conclusion where Paul typically names the people he would like to thank.

"There," she said proudly. "Do you see it?" she asked, turning to Aquila. It says, "Greet Priscilla and Aquila, who work with me in Christ Jesus, and who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles" (Rom 16:3).

Aquila looked at the letter and frowned. I quickly changed the subject.

"How did you and Aquila risk your necks to save Paul's life?" I asked.

"Yours is a question for another time. The sun will be up in a few hours, and we have a busy day ahead of us. We must prepare for Paul, who will be arriving in a couple of days on his way to Jerusalem."

"Paul is coming here?"

"Why, yes. Why else would he send Phoebe ahead of him?"

"Will he agree with what you told me about your status – and the status of women more broadly – in the church?"

"Well," Priscilla said, "I guess you'll have to wait to find out."

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Tune in next week for the final installment of our three-part series, "St. Paul and the Sin of Misogyny: A Special Report from the First Century."

Amen.