

Written In
Romans 16:1-7
August 7 2016

This past Friday, I was up in the attic digging through boxes.

I was actually searching for a picture to post on Facebook to embarrass my cousin on his 38th birthday.

Benjamin had gotten me good on my birthday last month; *he'd* posted a picture of me from my perm years, circa 1991, and if the perm wasn't bad enough, the outfit was, well, so '80s. Clearly, payback was in order.

I knew that somewhere in my attic was a picture of Benjamin in sagging diapers from one of the evenings I got stuck babysitting all the cousins.

So I went hunting.

To cut to the chase, I never found the picture.

And this sermon isn't about diapers *or* perms.

But in the process of hunting for that picture of Benjamin, I opened up a box I'd forgotten was there -- isn't that what attics are for?

Boxes you'd forgotten?

And this one was full of diaries, all my diaries.

I honestly thought they'd disappeared in the last move.

But there they were - diaries I'd kept from age 6 on, if you can imagine .

I grabbed one from sophomore year of high school.

1978.

There were a lot of things written in there that I still remember -- my obsession with Shaun Cassidy, star of *The Hardy Boys*, Sunday nights on ABC ...

lamenting my unsuccessful attempts to get my hair to flip back the way Farrah Fawcett did it.

Going to see the movie 'Grease' in June of that year with my friend Sarah.

"John Travolta's not really cute," I said, "but there is something about him."

All that stuff I remembered.

But I was struck by how much in there I didn't remember,
and also struck by how much was left out.

"Oh my God, Jimmy Locke," said one entry. "He's driving me crazy."

I don't remember Jimmy Locke. I don't know if it was good or bad that he was driving me crazy.

"I guess Diane's my friend, I don't know," it says on another page. Who's Diane? I guess we weren't friends? I'm not sure?

And there are whole sections that are missing, tantalizing in their absence.

"Sorry I haven't written in a while," it says, apologizing, I guess, to Alida in 2016.

"Not much has happened though, just Christmas, and we went on vacation, and I went on the ski club trip with all the popular people."

What? Tell me more! Who was there?

Here's why I'm talking about diaries,
with all their juicy details *and* cryptic comments *and* left out bits.

We have a whole section of our Bible,
a whole section of the New Testament,
that's like finding someone's diaries.

Once you get past the four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John,
and past the Acts of the Apostles,

all of a sudden you're in a treasure trove of what is essentially like diaries.

It's a bunch of letters,

a bunch of letters written by Paul, who did more to get Christianity started than anyone else.

He traveled here, there and everywhere preaching about Jesus,
and starting up churches for Jesus-followers.

And then he wrote letters. He wrote letters to his friends in those churches,
and all those letters are the records we have now --

of Paul's life and of what life was like in the church when it was just getting started,

when there were still people alive who had walked with Jesus.

And just like my diaries, just like anyone's diaries,
there are parts full of details,

And parts that are missing completely,
and parts that are cryptic and intriguing.

I had Kristin read you a section of scripture that doesn't get read too often in church.

The parts of Paul's letters that usually get read in church are the super-famous parts, like

"Love is patient, love is kind, love bears all things, believes all things,"
or "The church is the body of Christ."

But I had Kristin read you the end of Paul's letter to the Romans,
the part of the letter where traditionally greetings were put --

"tell Joe and Johnny I say hi", etc.

What I wanted you to notice, though, is not the Joes and the Johnnys.
Listen again to who Paul gives a shout-out to.

"I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church;
she has been a benefactor of many and of myself as well.

Greet Prisca and Aquila, who risked their necks for my life.

Greet Mary, who has worked very hard among you.

Greet Andronicus, and Junia, who were in prison with me, and who are prominent among the apostles."

Phoebe. Prisca. Mary. Junia.

Remember how I told you my diary says "oh, that Jimmy Locke," and that's all it says? Leaving me wanting to know more.

Well, that's exactly what happens here.

This is like the cryptic part of the diary that leaves you wanting more information.

Paul gives a huge shout-out to Phoebe, and Prisca, and Mary and Junia --
and then we never hear about them again.

He probably didn't figure he needed to say anything more, 'cause probably everybody knew who they were.

So why does this matter?

Why did I make Kristin read this list of names?

Because these people, these folks who Paul says were a deacon, and a prominent apostle, and risked their necks for Christ, even went to prison for Jesus --

they were all **women**.

And that, that's a pretty big deal.

This was in a time

when women weren't let into the inner sanctuary of the temples, weren't allowed to be students of rabbis, weren't supposed to speak without being spoken to.

Our sister Phoebe, Paul says, a deacon of the church.

In our bible studies for the past six weeks, we've been looking at women of the bible.

And in these past couple weeks, we've been looking at women in the New Testament,

We've looked at the ground-breaking way that Jesus treated women, with welcome and respect and affirmation --

And we've looked at Paul's letters, at these tantalizing *clues* that let us know this:

that long before the church said that only men could be priests, long before pulpits were barred to women, way back when the church *first* got started,

the church treated women with the same respect that Jesus had:

The earliest Christians welcomed everyone into leadership. Everyone.

And then, and then, it all changed.

The years passed, cultural norms intruded, Jesus' extraordinary inclusion was forgotten, dismissed.

And the women, the women got written off, and they got written out. I mean that absolutely literally.

Written out of the scripture.

You heard Kristin read the words "Phoebe, a deacon."
But if you go look at the old King James translation,
it says "Phoebe, a servant." A lot of translations put "Phoebe, a helper."
After all, she couldn't have been a 'deacon', right??
And Paul's friend Junia, who had a **common** female name,
got turned into Junias, a not-so-common **male** name.
The women Paul knew as fellow leaders got written out, and written off.

That wasn't Jesus' way.
What Jesus did in his ministry, over and over again,
was to write people **in**.
Leper and tax collectors,
the hurting and the dispossessed,
the forgotten and the overlooked.
Children. Foreigners. And women.
He didn't write anyone off.
He didn't write anyone out of the script.
He wrote everyone in.

And for those brief few years after him, so did his followers write everyone in.
But there is that human tendency to want to close the circle,
to draw the lines,
to create the barriers.
And that's why the people that Jesus had written *in* -- like women --
started to be written out.
There were no more Deacons named Phoebe.
No Junia was proclaimed as a prominent apostle.
Whom Jesus had written in, humans started writing out.

So how much does this matter?

Phoebes and Junias and all of them, these women we get just a *glimpse* of in
Paul's "diary".

Is this ultimately just an interesting discussion for bible studies? Does it matter?

You know, it really does.

To see those women's names in these ancient letters helps us to remember that there was something pretty amazing about Jesus, something pretty groundbreaking about the Jesus movement.

We should never lose sight of how startlingly inclusive Jesus was, how jaw-dropping his actions would have been back then.

He sat beside a well in Samaria chatting with a woman about her life and faith; he hung out talking theology with Mary and Martha, women like Susanna and Mary Magdalene were part of his group.

He also had no problem eating dinner with lepers, going to the home of a Roman centurion, inviting tax collectors to hang out with him.

All of that would have blown people's minds then.

He was a barrier-breaker; he wrote people in, and so should we.

And it matters, all of this matters, because we live in a world where -- and there's nothing new about this --

people would rather draw lines, close doors, and write people off rather than writing them in.

We do, after all, live in a world occupied by humans, and we humans tend too easily toward exclusion.

The Phoebes and Junias remind us, that's not God's way;

the Susannas and Marys remind us, that was never Christ's way.

In the Kingdom of God, the circle is widened and widened until everyone's in.

There aren't lines in the sand, there aren't checkpoints, there aren't bouncers at the door.

In the Kingdom of God, everyone is written in.

Jesus wrote people in, and so should we.

And finally, it matters to us because we are Christians, and the christian church still hasn't figured this one out.

There are still a lot of churches that will not let a Phoebe in the pulpit in 2016,

that won't let a Junia head up a church.

When I was doing my homework for the last couple weeks of Bible Study, I stumbled upon a group called *The Junia Project*, an online group for American church women in the evangelical tradition, whose mission is “to advocate for the inclusion of women at all levels of leadership in the Church.”

That's all. Just to ask for women to be allowed some leadership.

And boy do they get some pretty nasty emails -- from [quote] “Christian leaders.”

So, yeah, it still matters.

Christ welcomed all people -- but his church is still working on it.

It still matters.

In just a few moments,

we're going to share in the meal we call the Lord's Supper.

With a little bit of bread, and a little cup of juice,

we're going to bring into our midst the one who welcomed all people.

With a little bit of bread, and a little cup of juice,

we're going to remember the one who never met a barrier he didn't break.

With a little bit of bread and a little cup of juice,

we're going to find ourselves in the presence of the one who wrote everybody into the story,

including us, each one of us.

Amen.