

CHAPTER ONE

Peter's Wife, Missionary and Martyr

She must have felt some concern when Peter went off with his brother Andrew and several other young men to join the throngs that were gathering at a fording place along the Jordan River. They wanted to hear a fiery preacher called John the Baptist, who attracted disciples as well as crowds. Impulsive her husband might be, but surely not...

Concern changed to anxiety when they returned home to Capernaum and made a shocking announcement: the men intended to give up fishing in order to do more exciting work, though not as followers of the Baptist but, rather, of a Galilean named Jesus. This, on top of her mother's worsening illness, was almost too much to bear.

Surely one of the most overlooked women of the New Testament, Peter's wife is never identified by name. (Customarily, women were identified by their relationship to a man.) One of Paul's letters, however, and early Christian history make reference to her. More about that later.

In the Gospels, she is known only by inference. Jesus, in one of his first miracles, cures her mother of a raging fever—malaria the likely cause. A preview of what lay ahead for the family became evident that same evening, which Jesus spent with them. Once news circulated through Capernaum, the whole town, it appeared, arrived on their front doorstep, many in the crowd seeking healing. (Perhaps the children slipped out to tell neighbors that grandmother was miraculously well

“...Peter left his wife at home when he became a disciple of Jesus (Mark 1:22; 10:28). Later, however, Peter's wife accompanied him in his travels outside Palestine (1 Corinthians 9:5).”

—Paul Barnett, *Jesus & the Rise of Early Christianity: A History of New Testament Times* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1999), p. 232.

again. Tradition, by the way, gives the name Petronilla for a daughter of Peter.)

Life would never return to normal again for Peter and his wife, as their home in Capernaum quickly became headquarters for Jesus' ministry in Galilee.

At this point it may be helpful to visualize the setting, considerably aided by the findings of Franciscan archaeologists. Excavations show that three or four houses would be grouped around a central courtyard shared by all the families. Black basalt, abundant in the area, was the common building material. Roofs consisted of mud thatch and branches.

During this stage of her life, Peter's wife served as a stay-at-home disciple, providing indispensable hospitality for Jesus and his countless visitors, in addition to her many duties as wife and mother. When Jesus was “at home,” as the Gospels refer to the times he is in residence, her obligations multiplied. There was, for instance, table fellowship, that hallmark of Jesus' ministry, in which meals had to be prepared for members of Jesus' company. They included even “sinners” like Matthew, once a despised tax collector. Peter would remember him well from

the days Matthew extracted customs duties every time Peter took his extra catch from Capernaum to the fish-processing factory in Magdala. He and his wife must have wrestled with the fact that because breaking bread together was virtually religious in nature, then “sinners”—that is, social outcasts—ought not to participate. But Jesus saw things differently.

Perhaps just as unimaginable for a fisherman’s wife, company might turn up in the form of distinguished doctors of the Law, religious authorities from as far away as Jerusalem. They came to Capernaum to investigate, and challenge, Jesus’ teachings as well as his deeds, even the miraculous ones.

One memorable healing in that situation occurred on a day the house was filled to overflowing, spilling out into the courtyard and even into the street. Friends of a paralytic, carrying him on a pallet, were unable to get through the crush of people, and so proceeded up the outside stairway. Tearing a hole in the roof wide enough to let the man through, his friends lowered him down on his pallet to Jesus’ feet. When Jesus forgave the paralytic’s sins before telling him to rise to his feet, scribes sitting opposite Jesus ignored the consequent miracle, instead finding fault with the forgiveness aspect. But crowds in those days were still on Jesus’ side, and Peter’s wife needed to concern herself only with the practical matter of repairs to the damaged roof.

Other incidents that occurred specifically in “the house” appear most often in Mark’s Gospel, traditionally believed to be based on remembrances of Peter. His wife’s role in preparation of meals and attendant daily chores in making Jesus’ life as comfortable as possible was hardly the stuff of drama, thus

“About 400 the pilgrim Egeria wrote: ‘At Capharnaum the house of the Prince of the Apostles has become a Church: the walls of the house are still preserved.’ ”

—Eugene Hoade, O.F.M., *Guide to the Holy Land* (Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing Press, 1974), p. 918.

unremarked upon. This was the period thought of as the happiest of Jesus' ministry. Reflecting upon it in later years, she could take satisfaction in that.

In the future, she could also be grateful for the treasured times when Jesus gave private instruction to the inner circle of disciples gathered in her home. As will be seen, when she became a "fellow minister" with Peter, it was important for her to be well-grounded in Jesus' teachings. Perhaps she accompanied the band of disciples when they journeyed to Jerusalem for pilgrimage festivals. But even from a distance, based on what her husband told her, she would know of the mounting opposition to Jesus in the religious capital, eventually to culminate in the horrific crucifixion, to be followed, incredulously, by the Resurrection.

During Jesus' lifetime, Peter had emerged as spokesman for the Twelve, and now he became the logical leader of the Jesus movement, bent on perpetuating "the Way of the Lord." His wife would remain supportive by maintaining the Capernaum household. From archaeological work, it can be assumed that "the house" was the appointed gathering place for believers in Galilee, and for disciples returning for visits home to Galilee. (Of the original Twelve, all but Judas of Iscariot were natives of the province.)

In spreading the faith, Peter, often accompanied by the apostle John (of the Zebedee family), began evangelizing first in Samaria and in urban centers along the Mediterranean coast of Palestine. Peter was also known to travel three hundred miles north to Antioch. During this period, having been in Jerusalem for a Passover festival, he was targeted by authorities for his activities and imprisoned, though it was miraculously of brief duration. Dread must have filled his wife's heart when she heard the initial news, followed by overwhelming relief when he rejoined the others.

As time wore on, the idyllic harmony of believers noted in Acts began giving way to differences of opinion over the admis-

sion of Gentiles to the movement, a situation leading to the historic Council of Jerusalem (circa A.D. 50). Once the problem was resolved through compromise, Peter drops from sight as far as Acts of the Apostles is concerned. Acts turns its attention now to Paul. (Luke, the author of Acts as well as the Gospel bearing his name, accompanied Paul on some of his missionary journeys.)

At an unspecified stage, Peter's wife began traveling with him. Their children would have been grown, though the couple was still relatively young. (Girls typically married by about the age of fourteen; boys, usually a few years later.) Their missionary work can be gleaned from early church traditions, the rare historical mention, and observations made in Paul's letters that were preserved in the New Testament.

The first direct reference to Peter's wife (though she remains unnamed) occurs in 1 Corinthians 9:5, a letter written in the mid-50s, in which Paul notes that the apostles' wives travel with them, singling out Peter as an example.

There were definite advantages in having a female co-worker, as Paul himself discovered. A Jewish man was free to address a synagogue congregation—often the first stop abroad for a Jew, even a Jewish Christian one. But for him to give private religious instruction to a woman, Jew or Gentile, would give rise to scandal. Only another woman had access to women's quarters. Peter's wife would, of course, be well-grounded in Jesus' teachings, having heard them firsthand.

The extent of the couple's travels is suggested by 1 Peter, a pastoral letter of encouragement to fledgling Christian communities in five provinces of Asia Minor (modern Turkey). Elsewhere, Paul remarks on Peter's influence with the community in Corinth (on mainland Greece).

Eventually the couple reached Rome. The year and circumstances are subject to conjecture, though traditions offer some possibilities. What is known is that they were present during

the persecution of Christians in Rome, A.D. 64–67, by the Emperor Nero.

The story of the martyrdom of Peter and his wife is found in the pages of *The History of the Church*, written by Eusebius, a bishop in the Holy Land during the first decades of the 300s. In it he quotes from a much earlier source, *Miscellanies (Book VII)*, written by Clement of Alexandria (circa A.D. 150–215). This work describes how Peter’s wife suffered martyrdom just before him:

We are told that when blessed Peter saw his wife led away to death, he was glad that her call had come and that she was returning home, and spoke to her in the most encouraging and comforting way, addressing her by name: “My dear, remember the Lord.” Such was the marriage of the blessed, and their consummate feeling towards their dearest.

Afterword

The house that became Jesus’ home during his Galilean ministry is today a shrine. That astonishing fact is owed to the diligent work of Franciscan archaeologists in the Holy Land.

Though pilgrims in the early Christian centuries gave witness to the fact that the house in Capernaum was used as a center of worship, what later happened to it was a mystery. Until, that is, the 1960s when funding became available for excavations at a site by the Sea of Galilee, and Capernaum, lost to the world for centuries, was unearthed. Franciscans at first focused on reconstructing the ruins of what turned out to be a fourth-century synagogue. Their labors went on to include the area neighboring the synagogue. In the process, the ruins of a fifth-century basilica came to light. Digging deeper, archaeologists uncovered a first-century house beneath the basilica. Further investigation revealed that the house had been converted to

congregational use midway through the first century, with additional embellishments and enlargements made in succeeding centuries. The accumulated evidence points to this being the house of Peter and his wife, making it the oldest Christian sanctuary still in existence.

Faith-Sharing Topics

When her home became the base for Jesus' ministry, Peter's wife found her life turned upside down. But as a faith-filled woman, she met the challenge. When unforeseen events cause stress or upheaval in our personal world, we can draw strength from an inner peace that remains despite storms that swirl around us.

What spiritual disciplines might contribute to your inner peace?

Where or how do you find the coping skills to meet new challenges?

Not all unforeseen events are unhappy ones. When was the last time the God of surprises surprised you?

Peter's wife made the transition from a stay-at-home disciple to missionary work abroad. The in-between years allowed her time to prepare for a new vocation. Looking ahead to the next stage of life, we can simply let it happen or plan for the future, thereby smoothing the way.

When have you experienced a significant transition, and how did you deal with it? How resistant were you to change?

How can structure in our life help us to get through a difficult in-between period before entering new territory?

In discerning what God wants of you, to whom do you go for guidance?

Prayer

Beloved wife of Peter,
How blessed you were when Jesus crossed
your threshold,
Though his presence turned your life upside down.
Did you resist the change?
Were you beset at first by worry and fear?
Those are my feelings in uncertain times.
Yet you became a disciple, serving the Lord.
Could you ever have imagined what lay in store
When you made a home for Jesus?
Lord Jesus,
Help me to make room in my heart for you,
So that when sudden change comes into my life,
I will feel the strength of your presence.
When anxieties plague me
Over circumstances beyond my control,
Let my trust in you increase,
For faith in you
Will unfailingly sustain me.