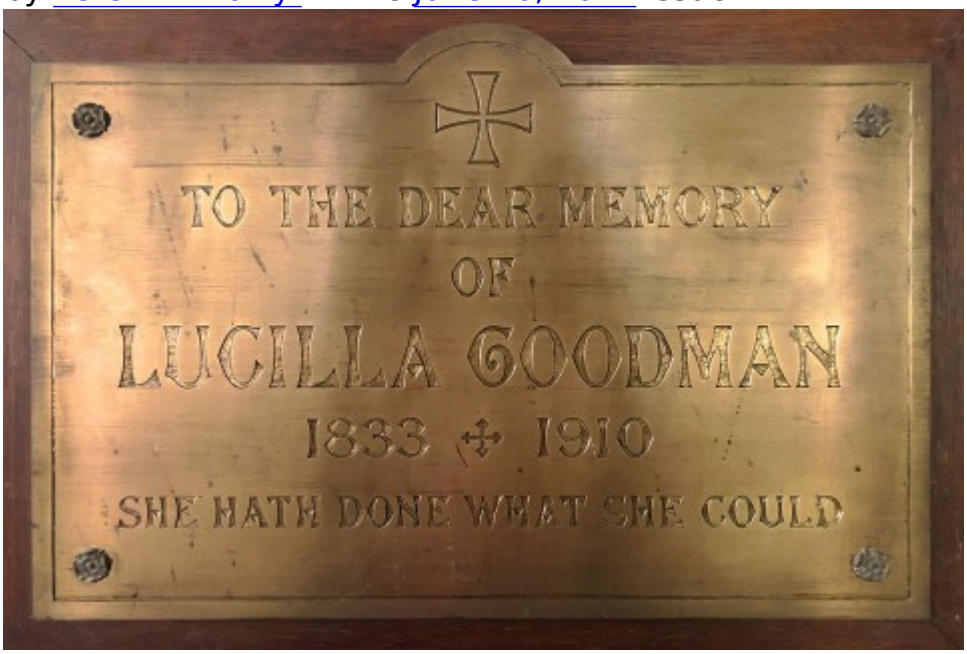
Lucilla Goodman and other ordinary saints

Her epitaph, “She hath done what she could,” says a lot.

by Peter W. Marty in the June 16, 2021 issue



When a church sanctuary feels warm and intimate, and thoughtful people settle into its ancient pews, and candlelight bounces off the ecclesiastical-looking wallpaper, and the timber beams atop the stone walls smell 172 years old, it’s easy to nestle in and believe that a real encounter with God might occur.

When I stepped into Sunday worship a couple of years ago at the red-doored Grace Episcopal Church in Galena, Illinois, I immediately felt surrounded. Not just by worshipers in front of me and a small choir squeezed behind the pews in back of me, but by a host of congregational saints whose names adorned plaques bolted to the walls.

I sat directly beneath one massive bronze slab dedicated to “The dear memory of Lucilla Goodman—1833–1910—She hath done what she could.” My mind flipped between wondering how badly I’d be maimed if Lucilla fell off that wall and wondering what her epitaph was meant to suggest—each consideration presenting

me with its own sort of encounter with God.

Was Lucilla a woman who poured out her life extravagantly for others, like the anonymous woman who broke an alabaster jar to pour costly ointment onto the head of Jesus—that one of whom Jesus said, “She has done what she could”? (Mark 14:8). Or was Lucilla’s life limited in some way by a terrible tragedy or disability that she heroically strove to transcend? Maybe her life was just ordinary, in the best sense of that word, and she was content never to have to feel she needed to achieve great things.

It’s this last possibility that captivates me. When I asked Grace rector Gloria Hopewell if she had any further historical background on Lucilla, only three things surfaced from the archives: Goodman confirmed her faith in 1861, she was single, and she died of apoplexy, better known to us as a stroke or cerebral hemorrhage.

In a world where people are expected to excel, average achievement sounds almost uncouth. It certainly isn’t celebrated. Benchwarmers, daydreamers, and piano players who practice incessantly but live with the knowledge that they’ll never be better than OK—these sorts of people don’t make it onto bronze plaques. In a world of intellectually sophisticated, athletically fit, and financially wise (or lucky) individuals, to be classified as ordinary is almost insulting.

It doesn’t have to be this way, of course. While plenty of us are busy gunning for peak experiences, dramatic encounters with God, and exceptional displays of prowess, I imagine Lucilla being unafraid to tackle the mundane. Like Jimmy Carter in his post-presidency years signing up to mow the church lawn every six weeks, as Rosalynn cleaned the church bathrooms inside, Lucilla may have relished the benefit to others of performing rather routine work. The French Jesuit priest Pierre Teilhard de Chardin once described such an approach to daily life: “What matters is not to do remarkable things but to do ordinary things with the conviction their value is enormous.”

I’m told the vestry at Grace Episcopal is deliberating whether to install more sanctuary wall plaques or not, given limited space and questions surrounding eligibility criteria. If I had a vote, I’d vote for a moratorium. Let Lucilla Goodman represent the communion of saints. She does it well. Her epitaph—“She hath done what she could”—is a legacy we should all be proud to have as our own.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Ordinary saints.”