

Sermon Manuscript: Acts 12:1-19

Our Risen Jesus Opens Every Door

Third Sunday of Easter – April 18, 2021

It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. When he saw that this pleased the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Feast of Unleavened Bread. After arresting him, he put him in prison, handing him over to be guarded by four squads of four soldiers each. Herod intended to bring him out for public trial after the Passover.

So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.

The night before Herod was to bring him to trial, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries stood guard at the entrance. Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him up. "Quick, get up!" he said, and the chains fell off Peter's wrists.

Then the angel said to him, "Put on your clothes and sandals." And Peter did so. "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me," the angel told him. Peter followed him out of the prison, but he had no idea that what the angel was doing was really happening; he thought he was seeing a vision. They passed the first and second guards and came to the iron gate leading to the city. It opened for them by itself, and they went through it. When they had walked the length of one street, suddenly the angel left him.

Then Peter came to himself and said, "Now I know without a doubt that the Lord sent his angel and rescued me from Herod's clutches and from everything the Jewish people were anticipating."

When this had dawned on him, he went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying. Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer the door. When she recognized Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, "Peter is at the door!"

"You're out of your mind," they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, "It must be his angel."

But Peter kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished. Peter motioned with his hand for them to be quiet and described how the Lord had brought him out of prison. "Tell James and the brothers about this," he said, and then he left for another place.

In the morning, there was no small commotion among the soldiers as to what had become of Peter. After Herod had a thorough search made for him and did not find him, he cross-examined the guards and ordered that they be executed.

Then Herod went from Judea to Caesarea and stayed there a while. [NIV]

We have four accounts of Jesus' resurrection on Easter morning. Each of the four Evangelists gives eyewitness accounts from different points of view. The different accounts record

different details and talk about the reactions of different people to what they saw on that first Easter. One of the details that all of the accounts record is how the stone was rolled away from the entrance to the tomb when the women arrived. Matthew's account explains how this happened: *There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it.* [Matthew 28:2]

But do you know why the stone needed to be rolled away? Our first thought might be that it was done so that Jesus could get out. But if you stop to think about it, this would be silly. The one who had just risen from the dead didn't need help with a mere stone! The real reason was so that the various witnesses of Jesus' resurrection – Peter, John, Mary and the other women – needed to be able to enter the tomb to see that it was empty. By letting us into the empty tomb, Jesus opens the door of death itself. Today let's see how **OUR RISEN JESUS CAN OPEN EVERY DOOR.**

1. He Opened the Door of a Killing King

Things were pretty bad in Jerusalem for the early believers. The time described here was about 43 A.D. or about 15 years after Jesus had ascended into heaven. The congregation of Christians in Jerusalem had been persecuted off and on since the time when Stephen was martyred around 30 A.D. The ruler in Jerusalem at this time was Herod Agrippa I. This man was the father of the Herod Agrippa we heard about last Sunday who heard Paul's witness in his court nearly twenty years later. Agrippa I was the nephew of Herod Antipas who beheaded John the Baptist and sent Jesus back to Pontius Pilate. He was descended from rulers who didn't mind putting people to death. We read here how he also beheaded James who was one of Jesus' disciples. This was the James who was the brother of John and one of the sons of Zebedee. This execution won praise from the religious leaders in Jerusalem so Herod thought he would arrest Peter and put him to death too. This was a climax of persecution that was brought against the early church both by the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem and the government. Peter would be the next one to die.

Peter's situation looked completely hopeless. He was arrested at the time of the Passover most likely because he was preaching to the festival crowds in the temple about Jesus. Herod planned to give the religious leaders an extra special treat when the Passover was ended. At that time he would also chop off Peter's head. Peter's imprisonment is described here as being the highest security. He was guarded by four squads of four soldiers each. The squad that was guarding him had a man chained to each one of Peter's wrists and two more soldiers guarding the door of his cell. The plan was for Peter not to escape. Peter's death seemed inevitable until God acted. The Jerusalem congregation was praying fervently for God to intervene in this desperate situation.

The only thing that could save Peter was the Lord's power and grace. And that's exactly what the Lord Jesus provided. He sent his powerful angel. The angel appears in Peter cell and kicks him in the ribs. "Get up, Peter! It's time to go!" The angel broke the chains that were on Peter's arms and legs. The angel caused all the doors of the prison to open by themselves. It

was only by this miraculous power of God that Peter was able to walk free. It was only by the grace of Jesus that Peter was rescued. The risen Jesus open the doors of a killing king.

The Lord's power and grace have also freed us from death. We faced certain and ETERNAL death because of the reign of sin. We were locked and chained in death's prison house and guarded by the righteous justice of God. But Jesus entered that prison and broke us out. He willingly allowed himself to be chained to our sins. He willingly faced the execution of God's justice with his death for us on the cross. It was his grace that was a reason he went to the cross and hell itself. He allowed himself to be sealed in the prison of death's tomb for us. He was a perfect and complete substitute. As Paul says: *He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.* [Romans 4:25] Jesus accomplished this by being the prison breaker for us. The killing king of sin reigned when Jesus was forsaken and died on the cross. But that king was dethroned when Jesus rose again by his power as our Savior. As we sing in the Easter hymn: *Hallelujah! Jesus lives! He is now the living one; from the gloomy house of death forth the Conqueror has gone.* [TLH 188:1/CW153:1]

Death no longer is the king that kills everyone because of sin. The sword of sin's guilt has been taken out of his hand. Death had imprisoned us. The only thing that sinner's like us could look forward to was awaiting execution like Peter. It seemed inevitable. But Jesus broke the chains and burst the open the doors so we can escape death's prison. As another Easter hymns says, Jesus has *loosed the souls long prisoned, bound in Satan's chain.* [TLH 202:4/CW 163:4]

This is good reason for astonishment and wonder. Peter was astonished at Jesus' rescue. He thought he was having a vision. He thought he was dreaming. It wasn't until he "came to himself" standing free and unbound in the street outside that he realized he had been miraculously saved. The believers at Mary's house were also astonished when Peter showed up free. It was like the first Easter all over when Peter and the others disciples were astonished by Jesus' appearance among them behind locked doors. Paul expresses the same astonishment when he declares: *"Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.* [1 Corinthians 15:55-57] In the same way let our risen Jesus fill us with the same amazement because of how he has opened death's door and broken us out of its prison!

Jesus opened the door of death itself and so we have no reason to fear death or anything else. Yet our hearts still often don't think Jesus can open the doors that stand in our way. This story of Peter also shows us that our risen Jesus can open all doors, even the doors of hesitant hearts.

2. He Opened the Doors of Hesitant Hearts

We see a lot of hesitant hearts in this story. Peter thought he was dreaming when the angel came to set him free. He couldn't believe it. He was experiencing Jesus power and grace that came to save him. Yet he was hesitant in his mind and heart to accept it as real. Until he was standing alone on the street a block from the prison, he didn't really believe it. We can

imagine him standing there in the middle of the night pinching himself to make sure that he was awake.

The believers who were at Mary's house praying fervently for Peter to be set free also were hesitant in their hearts. Peter came to their door and knocked. When they heard the report that he was free they couldn't accept it. They told Rhoda she was out of her mind. Their fear and hesitation made them think that the very miracle they were praying for was crazy.

Rhoda was overjoyed to hear Peter's voice but she failed to open the door for him. She heard the sound of his voice. She knew that he was free. And yet she didn't act to let him in the door.

Take a look at your own heart. Aren't our own hearts often hesitant too? Like Peter, we live in the results of Jesus' power and grace. We know his forgiveness. We have the hope of life to come. But like Peter how often do we hesitate to trust Jesus and fail to believe that he can indeed save us? We have to admit that we have our fears about death itself, don't we? How often don't we roll around in our guilt because we think that we really aren't forgiven? How often do we agonize over our problems without taking them to the Lord Jesus with the trust that he is able to help?

Like the believers at Mary's house, we hear the report of Jesus power and grace. And yet our hearts are hesitant like theirs were. They hesitated to believe that their prayers were going to be answered. They prayed an awful lot but then when God answered the prayer they couldn't believe it. How often haven't we failed to believe in the true effectiveness of prayer?

And aren't we sometimes like Rhoda? We are filled with joy because of Jesus' power and grace. And yet we hesitate to act on the good news. She heard the sound of good news but didn't open the door. We've heard the good news of Jesus as our Savior and our hope for eternal life. But how often do we open the door to show that joy in our lives and tell other people? How often do we neglect to go through the doors Jesus opens so that we can praise and serve him?

Because Jesus has risen from the dead the door of death now stands open for us. Freedom is before us. We have no reason to hesitate! Let's break out of the prison of our own hesitation. No doors can remain closed to Jesus. Pinch yourself and make sure that you are awake to the truth. Come to Peter's realization to trust in God's power and grace to save you. Jesus forgives our hesitation to believe in him and put our trust in him. Because of him the door of life is now open. That door is open so that we can live free from sin and guilt in our lives now. That door is open for us to trust in Christ's love and power when we need his help and rescue. That door is open so that we can believe in the hope and have the absolute certainty of resurrection to life in heaven forever with Jesus. The door is open so that we never have to fear death.

Our risen Jesus opens all doors! Amen.