

It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. <sup>2</sup> He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. <sup>3</sup> When he saw that this pleased the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Feast of Unleavened Bread. <sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.

<sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> 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.

<sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> 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. <sup>10</sup> 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.

<sup>11</sup> 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."

<sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer the door. <sup>14</sup> When she recognized Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, "Peter is at the door!"

<sup>15</sup> "You're out of your mind," they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, "It must be his angel."

<sup>16</sup> But Peter kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished. <sup>17</sup> 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.

<sup>18</sup> In the morning, there was no small commotion among the soldiers as to what had become of Peter. <sup>19</sup> 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. (NIV 84)

Theme: Christ's Resurrection brings Courage

1. We are calm when under attack
2. We are unafraid of the future.

Courage. We all have to show some aspect of courage from time to time; for instance, when we apologize and admit that we did something wrong, when we stand up for what is right despite what other people think, or when just be ourselves no matter what everyone is doing; that takes at least a little bit of courage. Then there are those who show courage on a regular basis, like those in the military, police officers, or fire fighters. What do all three of those have in common? They risk their lives—putting them on the line for the sake of others. Today we talk about another aspect of courage. Because Jesus was willing to give up his life for us only to rise from the dead we have courage. Since he rose from the dead are calm in the face of persecution and we are unafraid of what the future holds.

Go back to a few weeks ago—to late Thursday night/early Friday morning. Jesus was arrested and taken to the high priest. Peter followed as did John who got him into the courtyard of the High Priest. But people began to recognize him as one of his disciples. His north-country, Galilean accent gave him away as someone who was from the same area as Jesus.

And we all know what Peter did. He didn't want to be associated with Jesus. He was afraid that he might get made fun of, or arrested like Jesus, or maybe even killed. So he lied—he denied that he was a follower of Jesus; he claimed that he didn't know Jesus or even know who Jesus was. He then began to curse those who were accusing him

of following Jesus, even swearing. Peter was so afraid of what would happen to him that three times he denied knowing the Lord.

What about you—what are you afraid of? Often, it's the same thing as Peter—afraid of what others may think about you as a follower of Christ. Not that you deny knowing Christ, but you may downplay your faith before friends and family. You know what they say, "You go to Church? Why do you waste your time? Why are you just giving your money away like that, talk about a waste!" We don't like being made fun of, so we may downplay the importance of Christ and his Church in our lives.

They say, "Wait, according to the Bible you can't sleep with anyone you're not married to, or get drunk, or even say anything bad about anyone. That doesn't sound like fun at all. Why would you ever want to be part of that?" And sadly, we may often agree with them to a certain extent. We want to fit in; we want to be just like everyone else. So we act like them. We go along with the world during the week—denying the Lord, and go off to worship on Sunday and call ourselves Christians.

And then there are some of the teachings that the Bible teachings that get attacked again and again. "You mean to tell me that you think evolution isn't true, despite all the scientific evidence in favor of God creating the world in six days, only 6000 years ago? Why is your Church so hateful—I mean there are many other churches who don't have a problem with homosexuality. Are you serious when you say that only men can vote? That is sexist and demeaning." What do we do then, when the world attacks the truth because of social issues? Well, we might say, "yeah, that is what we teach, but I don't really understand why, or I don't really agree with it or go along with it." So when we are under attack, we deny like Peter—and it is doubt for God's promises of protection that leads us to do so.

Fast forward about 10 years or so to our text. And look at Peter now. Arrested by Herod. His fellow Apostles, James had already been beheaded by this tyrant, who had planned on doing the same to Peter as soon as he brought him in front of the people. Chained between two guards with other guards watching the door to the prison, Peter fell asleep. There is no denying that he knew Christ, no longer is he lying, or calling down curses upon someone; but calm and trust.

How can you explain the change? Peter was in a much worse situation in our text than he was during Holy Week; and yet, the change. How?

Jesus rose from the dead! That is the difference, which changed everything in Peter's mind. Jesus' resurrection from the dead meant that he was the Lord of all, the everlasting God. It means that his sins were forgiven, and eternal life in heaven awaits. Peter realized that just as Jesus had complete control over death, so he had complete control of the world—in all of history. So even in the face of death and persecution Peter was calm.

And it wasn't just in our text for today. Just 50 days after Jesus' resurrection, on the day of Pentecost, Peter stood up and told the Jews Jesus, whom they killed, is both the Lord and Christ. Peter and John would share the same message with those in the temple not long later after when they gave a crippled man the ability to walk. And then, those two Disciples of Christ, now Apostles stood before the Sanhedrin—the same group of Jewish leaders that sentenced Jesus to death; and they boldly confessed their faith in Christ! **It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. He is 'the stone you builders rejected, which has become the capstone.' Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.** Jesus' resurrection gave Peter courage in the place of fear.

And look what happened. God rescued Peter. He sent his angel who dropped the chains and opened the doors to the prison. Peter walked right out of the prison without anyone noticing! All 16 of those guards were no match for an angel of the Lord. And when they woke up the next morning and Peter was gone they were filled with confusion and no doubt accused each other of helping Peter escape.

The next day Peter was going to stand in front of the Jews. It was likely that he would have faced the same fate as James; and yet God miraculously saved him. On that day God chose to save Peter. But he didn't always save his people. Stephen, of course, the first Christian martyr was stoned to death in Jerusalem. We've already mentioned the Apostle James. Eventually Peter would die because of his faith. Christian tradition tells us that he was murdered by Emperor Nero in AD 68. At times God chooses to save his people and at other times, he doesn't.

The same will be the case for you. At times, God may choose to save you from whatever fears you may face, and at other times, he may not.

When you face death, or persecution, when people make fun of you, or whatever it might be he may rescue you—or he may not; we don't know for sure. But what we know to be true Paul recorded in Romans 8, **And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.**

The risen Christ rules history for the benefit of the Church; whatever serves the best interest of his people—especially in their lives of faith, that is what he permits, that is what he sends. This time—not every time—it is Peter's release. Next time—not every time—it may be saving you from earthly peril. But whatever happens to you, know that the Lord is in charge. Know that the Lord is watching over you; and no matter what somehow, in some way, it will be for your eternal good and the eternal good of your fellow believers.

People may make fun of you for worshiping the Lord; they may wonder why you spend your Sunday mornings here. They will mock you for believing the teachings of the Bible. They may even attack you for sticking with the truth despite what our society says is right. But in the end, that doesn't matter to you; for your God, the Lord of history is watching over you and will rescue you when he sees fit. Plus he is the resurrected Lord, who defeated death and gives eternal life to all who believe! God or may not choose to rescue you; and if he doesn't—well you will be better off. Because no matter what happens, you'll be in heaven. There is no real harm that any man can do to you. Even if they kill you, you'll be living with your Savior! Because he rose from the dead, you know that you too will rise from the dead. An eternal life, free from pain or sorrow; free from sin and those who sin against us, awaits. We are unafraid of the future, because the Lord is watching over the future. Maybe you are afraid of the future not because of someone else, or persecution; but perhaps it's sickness or disease, financial problems, or family issues. Whatever it might be; we don't have to be afraid of the future because no matter what happens, through faith you'll end up in heaven for eternity!

God may or may not choose to rescue his people from earthly peril every time; but why did he save Peter this time? For the good of his Church; so that he could strengthen people who heard the Word by that Word. What did Peter do when he was rescued? He went and told a group of believers how the Lord saved him. And then he went on; we are told, **he left for another place.** We don't know for sure where he went. From the Bible we know that he eventually went

North to Antioch and later to Asia Minor. Church Tradition tells us he made it up to Rome before he was executed. That day, he left not to hide but to share the message of the gospel—not just retelling the story of how the Lord rescued him from prison; but more importantly how the Lord rescued us all from sin and death by his death and resurrection.

And so we do what Peter told the group of believers to do—tell this to others. We tell others about what Christ has done and is doing right now. We give them the comfort of the gospel—the peace of forgiveness through Christ's suffering and death on the cross and the sure hope of a perfect and eternal life in heaven through his resurrection from the dead. For it is through the gospel that the Lord calms our hearts and strengthens our faith so that we know that he is our Lord.

Because our Lord lives, you can be just as courageous as anyone else. You may not be putting your life on the line in the same way, but your friendships and reputations as you defend the truth of God's word and share the one true faith. Whatever or whomever you might fear, hold fast to the Word and the risen and ruling Christ in it. Come prison, come death, come what may, he is risen and he rules. He will not forsake you but remains with you through his Word. He will continue to rule so that you come to be where he is. Amen.