

Give thanks to the Lord for he is good and his love endures forever. Amen.

¹ It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. ² He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. ³ When he saw that this pleased the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Feast of Unleavened Bread. ⁴ 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.

⁵ So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him. ⁶ 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. ⁷ 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. ⁸ 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. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ 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.” ¹² 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. ¹³ Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer the door. ¹⁴ When she recognized Peter’s voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, “Peter is at the door!”

¹⁵ “You’re out of your mind,” they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, “It must be his angel.”

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

¹⁸ In the morning, there was no small commotion among the soldiers as to what had become of Peter. ¹⁹ 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.

Dear Friends,

Each month, throughout the world, 255 Christians are killed and 104 Christians are abducted because of their faith. 66 Christian churches are attacked and 160 Christians are detained or imprisoned without a trial. ¹ That’s every month on an ongoing basis. Sometimes we hear about some of this persecution in the news but often we don’t. Persecution is meant to stifle or even destroy Christianity but as we consider the portion of scripture before us today, we have to note that **God’s Word cannot be silenced – it cannot be stopped.**

¹ <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/>

I. About ten years after Jesus rose from the dead and ascended into heaven the disciples are busy spreading the good news that Jesus paid for our sins and they are forgiven. Many people came to faith but some of the Jews wanted to maintain the old ways – they wanted to celebrate all the Old Testament festivals and they liked the idea of work righteousness.

“It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. ² He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. ³ When he saw that this pleased the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Feast of Unleavened Bread. ⁴ 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.” All the Jewish kings were named Herod and they all were violent in nature. This King Herod is King Herod Agrippa I and he was just as cruel and violent as his grandfather who killed the babies in Bethlehem.

Like any politician, He wanted to be popular with the people because this was good for his political career. He had James, one of Jesus’ disciples, arrested and executed and the people cheered. So he went after Peter, the leader of the disciples, figuring that this would bring him even greater favor among the people. But the arrest took place during the Feast of Unleavened Bread and so Herod waited to bring Peter to trial. He understood that there were some things you just didn’t do during this time of the Passover celebration.

Herod didn’t want anyone to break Peter out of jail so he had four soldiers constantly on guard. Peter sat between two soldiers and was connected to them with chains and then just outside of his jail cell door were two more soldiers standing guard. Then, of course, there would be the regular contingent of soldiers guarding the prison as well.

“So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him. ⁶ 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.” Even though there were many Jews against Christianity, there were also many Christians in Jerusalem and they were praying for Peter. Why? Well, **“The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.”** (James 5:16) and the people knew that God could intervene if he wanted.

We should also note that Peter was sleeping between these two guards. It was no secret that Herod was going to bring him to trial the next day, find him guilty and sentence him to death. Peter knew that within 24 hours he would probably be dead. You might wonder how Peter could sleep with a death sentence hanging over his head. Peter trusted and believed in Jesus for his salvation and so he knew that death meant heaven for him and if he were to somehow go on living then he could continue to share the good news about Jesus. Either way, it was all good for him and so he could sleep without any worry on his mind. He was content and he was at peace.

There are a number of lessons for us in these opening verses. Certainly there is an encouragement to pray. God tells us, **“Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you will honor me.”** (Psalm 50:15). But another lesson that comes to us from this portion of scripture is that we can be content and at peace no matter what is going on in our lives.

God is in control and he promises that he will work out things for our good, according to his plans. We all have a tendency to worry, but many times our worrying doesn't change anything and it just makes our lives miserable. God knows our troubles and he promises that he will never leave us or forsake us. That's why Peter could sleep even knowing that his life might be taken the next day – he trusted that God was in control and he knew his life was in God's hands.

So, no matter what you are dealing with today or tomorrow or in the weeks and months to come, trust in the Lord and talk to him in prayer and believe his promise to work things out for you according to his plans.

II. After all, look what the Lord did for Peter. **“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. ⁸ 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. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ 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.”** God had plans for Peter and so he sent an angel to deliver him. Peter wondered if he was dreaming or if this was real but it became apparent that this was really happening.

Peter then went to a home where he knew his Christian friends often gathered. He knocks on the door and the servant who answers is so excited she runs to tell the others but forgets to let Peter in. He continues to knock and eventually they let him in – in a way a little bit of Biblical humor.

Peter has to go into hiding for a while and we hear, **“In the morning, there was no small commotion among the soldiers as to what had become of Peter. ¹⁹ 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.”** Things didn't turn out so well for the guards and Herod was still pretty ruthless.

Do you ever feel worn out as a Christian? There are times when living our Christian life is just plain hard. You defend someone only to hear how they've said something negative about you. You help someone out, but they never say thanks or show any appreciation. You try to love that person who seems to be trying as hard as possible to be unlovable. You're hurting and the doctors can't figure out what's wrong or how to help you. So how do we handle this?

It's by looking at every Sunday as a little bit of Easter. Each time we come to worship, we come to worship a living Savior who assures us that every one of our failures has been forever forgiven. He assures us of his love and his power to provide for our every need. He strengthens our trust in him, leading us again and again back to the empty tomb and saying, “See, I told you that you could trust me. Trust me today and tomorrow also.” So Easter reminds us that we have a living Savior who watches over us and cares for us and that Easter message reenergizes us week after week as it reminds us to confidently go to our Savior in prayer, to trust in him and to continue to live for Christ who lived and died, and lives again. Amen.