

Peter & Paul, Apostles
Acts 12.1-11
June 29, 2008
Holy Trinity, Manasquan

When's the last time you nudged someone to wake them up? Did you tiptoe up to the bedside of your spouse, child, grandchild, or maybe another traveling companion on a trip? Or did you tap the shoulder of the passenger next to you on a plane, the person you'd never met before, whose name you didn't know, but who was sound asleep and laying a head on your shoulder?

The situation in today's first lesson is a little similar and a lot different than anything we've ever known. An **angel** is the one poking **Peter** with a celestial finger. It's amazing that Peter was sleeping in the first place. He wasn't comfy in bed – he was shackled with chains in a prison cell. Before he'd fallen off to sleep, he probably knew there was a good chance it would be his last snooze before the final sleep of death. Not long before Peter was arrested, King Herod had had James, a fellow apostle, beheaded. (Peter, James and John were in the inner circle, closest to Jesus, within the larger inner circle of the twelve apostles. They were the bigwigs. Herod was hauling in the big fish first.) When Herod saw how happy James' execution made the Jewish authorities, he caught Peter in his net, planning to subject him to a similar fate. Jesus had been crucified, Stephen had been stoned to death and James had died by the sword. How high could Peter's hopes have been that he'd get out of this alive??

St. Luke, the author of the Gospel by the same name, and also of the Book of Acts, from which this story comes, tells us that:

While Peter was kept in prison, the church prayed fervently to God for him.
Acts. 12.5

Of course it did. St. Luke's Gospel invests more time in telling us how Jesus Himself prayed, how He taught His disciples to pray, and how He continually **encouraged** them to pray, than any

of the other three Gospels. The early church pictured in the Book of Acts is a praying church. Hopefully we are, too. But they set the bar high. The church in Acts believes that God listens to prayer, God answers prayer, prayer changes things, including the praying church itself.

It's kind of funny that while the church was praying, Peter was sleeping. He has a reputation for being asleep at critical moments. Remember the night before Jesus' death? Jesus had asked that trio we just mentioned, Peter, James and John, to stay awake with Him and pray in the Garden of Gethsemane. He went a little distance away, and each time He came back to check on them, they were snoring.... Likewise, the probable night before his own death, Peter slept, until an angel tapped his shoulder.

In the moment Peter didn't think he was being awakened by an angel in real life. He thought, for however long the jail break took, that he was seeing a vision or dreaming a dream. He must have prayed that God would save him, but he didn't recognize the arrival of help, the answer to prayer while it was happening. He was so drowsy, so dopey with sleep and disbelief, that the angel had to direct him like he was a little kid. "Fasten your belt. Slip on your shoes. Put on your coat. Walk this way." ☺

No wonder Peter didn't believe this jail break was really happening. Humanly speaking, it was impossible. Someone might as well have tried to help him break out of Alcatraz. St. Luke piles on the details about the extreme security measures that Herod had ordered to deliver the lamb safely to the slaughter:

- Four squads of soldiers were assigned to the security detail, which meant that there was a continual, round-the-clock, six-hour shift of soldiers doing guard duty.
- Peter was immobilized by two sets of chains.
- The prisoner was flanked by a soldier on either side of him.
- Guards were stationed in front of the prison door, to stop the prisoner from leaving in the unlikely event he got that far, and to stop would-be rescuers from ever reaching him.

But the bottom line is, the strongest maximum security prison on earth can't keep out God.

Peter and the angel successfully leave the prison, but still have to get through the locked iron gate that leads out of the city. As they approach, it opens of its own accord. They walk a little further together, then the angel disappears and Peter "comes to," realizing what has just happened: he is free!

Let me tell you the rest of the rescue tale, which isn't included in today's assigned reading. Now that he has woken up and smelled the coffee, so to speak, Peter heads to the home where he knows the little church community will be gathered. It's a home of substance, and has a locked outer gate, on which he knocks. There's almost a little comedy routine that follows, with a maid named Rhoda (which means "Rose") answering the door. She can't see the visitor, but recognizes Peter's voice, and is so excited she leaves him standing there, still locked out, while she runs inside to tell the others the amazing news about who rang the bell ☺. Here's exactly how St. Luke describes the scene:

They said to her, "You are out of your mind!" But she insisted that it was so. They said, "It is his angel." Meanwhile Peter continued knocking; and when they opened the gate, they saw him and were amazed. He motioned to them with his hand to be silent, [in other words, "Don't wake up the neighbors; they'll call the cops!"] and described for them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. (Acts 12.15-17)

Peter had prayed to be delivered, and didn't believe his prayer had been answered even as he was safely led out of the prison and out of the city. The church had prayed for Peter to be delivered and except for Rose, the maid, didn't believe that God had delivered him to their very doorstep. Maybe in the face of a lot of bad news they found it hard to believe the Good News. That makes them a lot like us, doesn't it?

Some of the bad news we've had this year is about the deaths of three teenagers in the next town over. They were friends of some of our young people, known by some of their parents, taught by some of our members who are teachers at Manasquan High. Death is almost

always troubling, but these kinds of deaths more than most. A verse comes to mind from another jailbreak story in the Book of Acts (chapter 16), about Paul and Silas fettered in prison when an earthquake opens every door and breaks every chain. The jailer is beside himself, assuming all the inmates have fled and that he himself will be executed for letting them escape. He's ready to kill himself when Paul says,

“Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.”
(Acts 16.28)

That's the message we want to send to **all** of our young people who feel overwhelmed by life and do not know where to turn:

“Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.”
(Acts 16.28)

We pray today: for the little ones being baptized this weekend, Luke and Skyler; for the older youth who grieve their friends' passing; for those who have just graduated and face the future filled with hope; for their parents, who pray their children may grow in both age **and** grace, lifelong. We pray, because our Master prayed when He walked on this earth, and because He taught us to pray, and because God hears prayer, God answers prayer, and prayer changes things, including the praying church. May we recognize the answer to prayer when it comes, as well as Rose did, and more quickly than Peter did! Amen

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