

MESSAGE – Walking Through the Gates

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SCRIPTURE Acts 12:1-19

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 met with approval among the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Festival 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 has sent his angel and rescued me from Herod's clutches and from everything the Jewish people were hoping would happen." 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 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 other brothers and sisters 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. Then Herod went from Judea to Caesarea and stayed there.

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So much going on in this story:

- Persecution of the Christians; James' death (one of the very first disciples...)
- Repeating themes from the year before:
  - Passover,
  - Not wanting to anger the people - waiting until it was over,
  - Jesus' death and Peter's imprisonment – both "impossible" to escape from
  - The "mighty works of salvation" once again enacted by God

The God who raised Jesus from the dead - Liberated Peter from prison

- We read of the presence of angels and supernatural intervention that brings release
- The comical reaction of Rhoda....
- The sorrowful death of guards at the hand of a tyrant whose power has been put into question

So much going on in this story ... yet out of all these possibilities I want to talk about gates:

In the ancient times, gates were significant – there were the inner and outer gates in the wall of a city – they were great, tall and wide, heavy doors

They obviously were there to provide protection; closed at night

But they also served as public places

- Where legal deeds were enacted: Jeremiah's deed; Boaz contracted to marry Ruth
- They were public places where witnesses would be
- They were places where justice was called for; where public announcements were made
- Whoever controlled the gates, ruled the city

The angel led Peter out of the iron gate

They walked and the gate just opened for them....this is a door that takes multiple people to open and close. This gate opened for them and they walked through.

This was the first leg of the journey – “out of”

- To exit the hold of Herod and to re-enter the city that has been closed off to him
- Literally for Peter it was to be released from chains, to pass by those guards who would hold him and exit Herod’s stronghold symbolized by the iron gate.

Jesus said, “you are Peter and upon this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it”

That iron gate did not prevail against Peter

That gate that would keep him in prison

That gate that would keep him out of the city

That gate that would represent his condemnation

That gate did not prevail against Peter

And those gates of hell (that keep us imprisoned and removed from the “city”) will not prevail against us!

What are those gates?

Those holds over us that are not life-giving, that keep us chained:

- Shame - a painful feeling of humiliation or distress caused by the consciousness of wrong or foolish behavior....“my sin is ever before me” (Psalm 51) – a gate that keeps us away from living into the fullness of the forgiveness of God.
- Isms – living under or living by those prejudices that would keep people behind the gate
- Past hurts – the wounds inflicted on us from others....those harmful words spoken to us that can ring through our ears telling us that we will never amount to anything; that we’re not good enough. Those old hurts can be like the iron gates of hell that keep us closed off from experiencing the fullness of life

they are heavy gates – any one of these things and more

they are the gates of hell – that keep us suffering

they are like the works of Herod – that seek to stop the kingdom of God from advancing

But the good news is this: no matter the strength of the gates – represented by Herod’s attempt to stop the church by killing James and imprisoning Peter – those gates cannot prevail; will not prevail

God's life-giving good news was there to rescue Peter  
And it is here to rescue us today,  
to have a victory over those powers that would seek to destroy us

an angel from God led Peter out of prison  
the message of Jesus' forgiveness and victory over the powers of death; Jesus'  
declaration: "I hold the keys of hell and death" will lead us out of our prisons as  
well.

Have you accepted this?.....

To complete his journey, Peter also had to enter the next gate – "in to"

He went to the mother of Mark John, Mary's house where he knocked at the outer door  
(gate)

Peter didn't just wander; didn't go running off away from Herod;  
He intentionally returned to the community of the church  
His freedom wasn't only about him, it was for others as well.

As we are freed – we are also led into community

Embraced by community - a Place to belong

This is what will happen for Luna today/ this is what happened for Luna today  
Through baptism, God opened to her the door to his kingdom – and we  
welcomed her through that door and made a promise to her to be the Christian faith  
community for her

A place where she will always belong

Where we will hold onto and hold out the good news for others who need to be  
free of their prisons

### *Invitation to Christian Discipleship*

Passing through the gates is crucial for Christian discipleship.

Today's story gives us the opportunity to reflect:

- Have I experienced the freedom from the gates of hell or is something trying to hold me back?
- Have I accepted the opened gate gift from God in Jesus Christ?

- Have I chosen to follow the way of Jesus – a way that leads to life?

If not, I want to invite you to walk through these gates as we pray:

Lord Jesus we confess that through our brokenness and sinfulness we have set ourselves outside the gates. Yet you are not content to leave us there. By giving yourself for us, you have overcome the gates of hell that would keep us away from you; and you open to us the gates of righteousness. Give us your grace to walk through both gates and enter into fullness of life with you. Thank you for being the Lord of the gates; for being the king that sits in the gateway; thank you for being the ruler of the city of God. We pray in your holy name. Amen.