

August 16, 2020
Communion
Essential Faith
Acts 12:1-19
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Good morning church!

For the past 2 months, our pastor has been leading us in a study of I Peter. We have made it to the middle of chapter 3. And this morning we are going to look more in depth at the life of Peter as we prepare to celebrate communion together in a few moments. So, a little departure from the text but not the subject of our sermon series.

I don't know how many of you have seen the shirts our youth ordered for the reopening this summer.

I have been reminded of it the past several weeks as I have prepared to speak today. They chose a picture of the Last Supper with the title **Essential Faith**. Remember back in the Spring when we were all trying to figure out what was essential in terms of businesses being open—in terms of putting an item on the shopping list (wants vs. needs)—in terms of what we absolutely had to get done for school or work. So this sermon is entitled **Essential Faith** and uses the artwork that our youth chose for this season.

What have we learned so far from I Peter? It was written about 30 years after the crucifixion. Peter was an eyewitness to Jesus' ministry and the early church's formation.

- In I Peter 1: 10-12, Peter teaches that salvation comes from the suffering of Christ.
- In I Peter 1: 18-19, Peter teaches that a ransom of blood was paid by the Lamb of God, Christ.
- Peter reminds us in I Peter 1: 22 that we are called to love one another deeply.
- He calls believers "born again" in I Peter 1: 23.
- He talks about Jesus as the **Living Stone** in I Peter 2:4.
- And in I Peter 2: 13-17, he instructs those who are born again to submit ourselves to every human authority.

From our series in I Peter, we are going to jump back in time to the middle of Acts. Acts 12, where we find Peter in a bit of a pickle.

We are going to read the text in a moment—but let's review Peter's life up to the point of Acts 12.

First, what we know about him during Jesus' earthly ministry:

- He was a **Fisherman** when Jesus called him and his brother Andrew as his first disciples. (Matthew 16: 13-20)
- Peter was the disciple who tried to **Walk On Water** in Matthew 14: 22-31 to join Jesus in the middle of the night. He started sinking and cried out to Jesus to save him. Jesus responded, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

- Peter is the first disciple to declare that **Jesus is the Messiah** in Matthew 16: 15-18 and Jesus promises to build his kingdom on that rock. Jesus even changes Peter's name from Simon to Peter.
- When Jesus starts predicting his crucifixion, Peter rebukes him in Matthew 16: 22-24. Jesus says these famous words to Peter: "Get behind me, Satan!" and then **"Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."**
- Peter questions Jesus about **forgiveness** in Matthew 18: 21-35 and we hear Jesus teach us about how we should have the same mercy on others as Jesus has with us.
- During the last supper—our model for our Lord's supper, Jesus predicts **Peter's denial** in Matthew 26.
- **In the garden** with Jesus later that night, Peter and James and John fall asleep and Jesus discovers them sleeping on 3 occasions in Matthew 26.
- Peter is the disciple who cuts off a servant's ear, when they come to arrest Jesus in John 18:10.
- And before the night is over, **Peter disowns Jesus 3 times.**
- After the crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus begins appearing to the disciples. During his 3rd appearance, Peter and some of the other disciples had gone out to fish. Remember, that is how Jesus met Peter. **When Peter recognizes Jesus, he jumps out of the boat in John 21.** Peter is always jumping out of the boat to run to Jesus—very impetuous.
- After Jesus serves them breakfast, Jesus questions Peter about his commitment. He asks Peter 3 times if Peter loves. Peter has 3 opportunities to declare his love. **Jesus restores Peter and asks that he follow him.**

Then we move to Peter's leadership of the early church

We have **Pentecost** in Acts 2 when Peter preaches his famous sermon.

Then we see the **Early Church** begin to meet together—have fellowship, break bread together, share communion, pray together, worship together, grow in numbers and maturity.

And **Peter and John get arrested in Acts 4**—probably a few months after Jesus' resurrection—for healing a man in the name of Jesus. They were held overnight and then let go because the Sanhedrin couldn't refute what they had done.

More time passes, and the **followers of Jesus begin to be persecuted. The apostles are all arrested in Acts 5.** During the night, an angel sets them free and tells them to go to the temple courts and preach to everyone. The Sanhedrin is very angry but again, it is hard to refute them so the apostles are flogged and then released.

Time passes. **Saul joins in the persecution and then is converted.** Peter helps welcome gentile believers into the full fellowship of the Christian believers. The Jewish believers and the Jewish community become even more divided and are enemies.

Now we are at our text today. Please stand if you are able and while I read from the beginning of Acts 12.

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.

The word of the Lord...Thanks be to God

All of the introduction leads up to this great episode of Peter's life.

King Herod had arrested some of the believers. He had James the brother of John put to death. Peter, James and John were the three closest friends of Jesus so they were also very close friends. And then because Herod wanted to curry favor with the Jews he had just started governing—He was the new King—same name as other family members but he was new, he took on the enemies of the Jewish power base. The Jews didn't really like Herod and his oppressive government but the enemy of my enemy becomes my friend. And Herod followed this principle.

Herod seizes Peter, the leader of the early church during the feast of unleavened bread which is the beginning of Passover. He places 16 guards around him. Herod announces the trial will begin after Passover concludes—sound similar to Jesus' trial—very similar timing.

Now Peter has seen it all at this point.

- He knows Jesus is the messiah.
- He knows Jesus is resurrected.
- He knows that Jesus promised he would live until he is old. He is probably middle aged at this point so he may not be completely sure of the timing.
- Peter knows his good friend James has just been executed.
- He remembers the other times he has been let out of prison—once miraculously.
- Peter, himself, has done miracles.

So he is able to sleep—on the night that Passover ended. Perhaps he was given a Passover meal. Perhaps he had to imagine a virtual communion. He knew the believers were praying for him. But he is able to sleep.

And the angel of the Lord comes to him and wakes him up. The chains fall off. But here is the interesting part. Peter still has to dress himself. I find that very comforting—the things we can't do ourselves—God will provide. The things we are equipped to do and able to do—God also provides—he provides us with the ability to do those things.

The angel keeps leading Peter past the guards. Peter thinks he is seeing a vision or dreaming. The gates open to the city from the prison by themselves. Peter and the Angel walk a city block to the end of the street and then the Angel leaves.

It is only at this point that Peter really knows this is happening. He gets his bearings and decides to go to Mary's house. Mary is the mother of James and John. Remember—James who recently was put to death on orders of Herod by the sword. It is a house still in grief. It may also be where this part of the church in Jerusalem regularly meets. Either way, Peter knows he will find his supporters there.

He knocks on the outer entrance. This is a fairly large home or compound because lots of people are there. I imagine it is much like the church in Comerío, Puerto Rico—One church with Pastor Jorge and Rebecca. The gate and fence secure the compound. Peter is knocking on the outer gate. One of the young servants, Rhoda, goes to answer the door. She recognizes Peter's voice and is so excited, she forgets to let him in.

Rhoda runs to tell all those gathered there who have been celebrating Passover and praying for Peter. They don't believe her—even though it is an answer to their earnest, specific

prayer—they decide it must be his angel. But because Peter keeps knocking, they all go to answer the knock. Once they see him they are astonished and probably very loud.

But Peter is on the run—he manages to quiet them—he probably has them move away from the outer door or gate—possibly inside. He relates to them all that has happened that night. Gives some quick instructions to share the story with James, the brother of Jesus—who has also become one of the leaders of the church in Jerusalem and the other believers and then he leaves to go and hide in a place where he won't be found.

This story ends with the guards discover Peter missing in the morning. Herod conducts a search and investigation and then has the soldiers executed. It was a harsh world then. It is a harsh world now.

I chose this part of Peter's story as a way to introduce our time of communion today. Like Peter, many of us are separated physically from our church family because of the quarantine. We aren't able to physically worship together. Knowing that your community is praying for you is not quite the same as being there in person.

Like Peter—many of us are frightened and anxious about the future—about the times we live in—with good reason. Most of us know someone who has gotten very ill with Covid. Many of us have a friend or family member who has died. All of us have had normal routines disrupted significantly.

And like Peter and the early church—there is civil unrest that is the result of sinful attitudes and discriminatory practices—all resulting in broken trust between different groups of people and political factions. Herod was trying to gain the support of the Jewish majority by persecuting the Christian minority.

So today—we can do what the early church did in verse 5 of Acts 12 “So while Peter was kept in prison, the church was earnestly praying to God for him.”

So while I invite Bill and Kevin up to help serve the Lord's supper—remember Peter might have been alone too—but he knew his church was praying for him—even in the most difficult of circumstances—and in the midst of the Passover they celebrated the promise that Christ has left all of us—He is always with us.

Communion