

“Out of Our Minds”

A sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt
At Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA
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Acts 12:4-19, I John 4:16-21

Our series of sermons on strange and rarely preached on texts in the book of Acts continues today with a look at Peter being set free from prison by an angel and a servant girl named Rhoda recognizing him at the door. Listen now for God's word in Acts 12.

When he had seized him, he put him in prison and handed him over to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending to bring him out to the people after the Passover. While Peter was kept in prison, the church prayed fervently to God for him.

The very night before Herod was going to bring him out, Peter, bound with two chains, was sleeping between two soldiers, while guards in front of the door were keeping watch over the prison. Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He tapped Peter on the side and woke him, saying, 'Get up quickly.' And the chains fell off his wrists. The angel said to him, 'Fasten your belt and put on your sandals.' He did so. Then he said to him, 'Wrap your cloak around you and follow me.' Peter went out and followed him; he did not realize that what was happening with the angel's help was real; he thought he was seeing a vision. After they had passed the first and the second guard, they came before the iron gate leading into the city. It opened for them of its own accord, and they went outside and walked along a lane, when suddenly the angel left him. Then Peter came to himself and said, 'Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hands of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting.'

As soon as he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many had gathered and were praying. When he knocked at the outer gate, a maid named Rhoda came to answer. On recognizing Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed that, instead of opening the gate, she ran in and announced that Peter was standing at the gate. 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, and described for them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he added, 'Tell this to James and to the believers.' Then he left and went to another place.

When morning came, there was no small commotion among the soldiers over what had become of Peter. When Herod had searched for him and could not find him, he examined the guards and ordered them to be put to death. Then he went down from Judea to Caesarea and stayed there.

So we have known and believe the love that God has for us.

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgement, because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because he first loved us. Those who say, 'I love God', and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

Earlier this week, casting about for a quote for the front of the bulletin, I came across the work of Sir Ken Robinson. A British-born author and educator who is professor emeritus at the University of Warwick in the U.K., Sir Ken is perhaps best known for his TED talk on Creativity and how schools kill it and his 2009 best seller, *The Element: How Finding Your Passion Changes Everything*.ⁱ I'm sure that's a great book, and finding your passion is a good thing, but what grabbed me about Robinson was his notion that "Our ideas can enslave us or liberate us."

How appropriate for today's text, which begins, fittingly, with the Apostle Peter in chains.

Peter, who had found a passion that changed everything for him, has been arrested and imprisoned by King Herod, who has just put the disciple James to death. In the prison, Peter is being guarded by four squads of soldiers. He is bound with two chains, sleeping between two guards, and there are guards in front of the door keeping watch over the prison.

Peter is locked down. Tight. He is, if not literally enslaved, then certainly not physically free. Herod and the Roman legions are colluding to do everything in their power to keep him that way, **their idea being** that if they could just keep him in confinement, or do away with him all together, then that would stop this growing movement of people following the Way of Jesus

Meanwhile, Acts says, the church was praying fervently for Peter in prison. The text doesn't let us know the content of their prayer, but apparently it was effective, because in the middle of the night an angel appears to Peter, nudges him in the side, says, "Get up quickly," and the chains fall off his wrists. The angel tells him to get dressed, and the two of them proceed to walk past two guards and through the iron gate out to the city, which opens for them without them touching it.

What an incredible story! And when Peter is outside the gate the angel, whom Peter had thought was just part of a vision, disappears and he's left alone. That's when he comes to himself and thinks, "I'd better get out of here before the people who imprisoned me find me." He knew he was in peril.

My old professor Walter Brueggemann wrote recently, "The Gospel is a very dangerous idea. We have to see how much of that dangerous idea we can perform in our own lives. There is nothing innocuous or safe about the Gospel. Jesus did not get crucified because he was a nice man."ⁱⁱ

No, Jesus was crucified and Peter was imprisoned because they stood for an idea, they stood for the idea of the Gospel. They learned and then stood for the notion that the love, justice, and welcome of God called the old exclusionary "I'm and you're out," ideas of established religion and the dog eat dog, survival of the fittest, violent, fear and death-based mentality of the Roman Empire into question. So they lived a different way, a way that was threatening to those in power.

Insiders have always had a difficult time being called to welcome and care for outsiders. Empires do not want to be challenged to attend to the needs of the most vulnerable in their midst, even by priests in their prayers. Which makes the Gospel a dangerous idea.

But it is also a liberating one, because it sets us free to acknowledge and embrace our common humanity, to move beyond the confines of tribe, and--in the words of our PCUSA Brief Statement of Faith--*to hear the voices of peoples long silenced.*

Which brings us to Rhoda, the maid servant, who enters the story when Peter shows up banging at the gate of John Mark's mother Mary's home. Rhoda hears the knocking, recognizes Peter's voice, and then is so overjoyed she goes to tell the others that Peter, the very one for whom they had been praying, is at the gate.

Here's the remarkable, and yet not very surprising, thing. They don't believe her. They tell her that she's **out of her mind**.

This, by the way, is not the first time that the testimony of a woman as **to what she has experienced** has been dismissed by men in Luke and Acts. It happens in Luke when the women return from the tomb on Easter morning to tell the disciples that Jesus had risen. Luke says of the disciples and their reaction to the women that, "These words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them." Now to be fair, both *resurrections* and *dramatic escapes from well-guarded prisons* would be and **are** the sorts of things that are hard to believe, but here's Rhoda, telling them that the very thing they have been praying for has happened, and they dismiss her.

I think they do that for two reasons. First, they discount Rhoda's testimony about what God can do because it runs counter to their expectations. Did you hear that? They discount Rhoda's testimony about what God can do because it runs counter to their expectations. Even though they've seen God do amazing things in the past, even though they say they believe in a God who raised Jesus from the dead, they don't *really expect* anything different or that God can do amazing things through them and their prayers. By the way, I think the church and individual believers over the centuries have always had an uncanny ability to sell themselves and God short, shying away from stepping out in faith in daring new directions or moving with confidence into change and transition in life *because we don't really trust that God has us no matter what*.

I heard the other day that sometimes, the only transportation available to us is *a leap of faith*. When you make that leap, there will always be people around to tell you that you are out of your mind to do that.

You are out of your mind to spend time with that person who thinks differently than you. You're out of your mind to begin that new project in the church. You're out of your mind to forgive the one who hurt you so deeply. You're out of your mind to love your enemy. You're out of your mind to think that you or someone you love will ever get free of the bonds of addiction. You're out of your mind to believe that prayer really works—even if one of the biggest ways it works is to change you. I mean, the very idea of it!

Maybe getting out of our minds is not always a bad thing. I have a good friend who is fond of talking about the limits of Enlightenment rationality. The Enlightenment—let's be fair to it, too--brought Western culture out of the Dark Ages and into a period of great progress and it has had many benefits. But he says that what lies behind the Enlightenment project is the idea that the more you know, the more you can understand, and the more you can understand, the more you can control, and the more you can control—and here's where it starts to go off the rails—the more you can manipulate, and the more you can manipulate, the more ultimately you can exploit for your own benefit. The bitter fruits of that way of thinking, and the way it breaks down, are all too evident today in our society and our world. Let's give the Enlightenment its props, but also recognize that there is a dark side to it, too.

Could it be that the Gospel is centered in a different and more liberating idea? An idea that Rhoda and people who live towards and on the margins of society—the maids, the underclass, the people

who are unjustly treated because of their skin color or their gender or their sexual orientation, know better than we do and share what they know with us if we will only listen to and come to believe them? The idea that there is room at the table for all, that I AM my brother's and sister's and sibling's keeper, that life is not about what I can *acquire for myself* but what I can *give of myself*, that the axis of the world does not in fact go through the center of my head as a white, male, cisgendered, heterosexual male, that we can admit privilege and share power rather than hoarding it?

Yesterday, the larger church lost a Rhoda when James Cone, an African-American liberation theologian, died. Here's something James Cone said, "If the Church is to remain faithful to its Lord, it must make a decisive break with the structure of this society by launching a vehement attack on the evils of racism in all forms. It must become prophetic, demanding a radical change in the interlocking structures of this society."ⁱⁱⁱ James Cone. The man was out of his mind.

Our ideas, you see, our ideas can keep us trapped in the way things have always been. They can keep us trapped believing that nothing can or will ever change in our society or in our individual lives. Our ideas can cause us to believe that certain things are too outlandish to hope for and to work for. Our ideas really can enslave or liberate us.

I was on my way to Immanuel yesterday morning to finish getting ready for Marjorie McGough's memorial service when I heard a little segment on NPR from Scott Simon^{iv}. Maybe you heard it, too. In the segment he talked about seeing a photograph of 13 semis, tractor trailer trucks, parked side by side, shoulder to shoulder, below an overpass in Michigan at 1 a.m. this past Tuesday. *Police in the Detroit suburb of Huntington Woods had received a call: There was a man on the Coolidge Highway overpass who said he was going to jump.*

What happened next was that local authorities and the Michigan State Police immediately closed down all lanes on both sides of Interstate 696, which runs below the Coolidge overpass. According to a state police lieutenant interviewed for the story, that's the first step in a potential jumper situation.

Simon said, *Who is driving along I-696 at 1 in the morning? Probably late-shift maintenance workers, hospital staff — and lots of cross-country truck drivers.*

State troopers went from truck to truck backed up in the stalled traffic and told drivers, who were probably disconcerted to be delayed, that a human life was at stake on that overpass. They asked the drivers to pull out from the long line of vehicles and park their big rigs under the bridge.

Thirteen trucks soon filled the lanes below the overpass, the intention being to provide a safety net for the man in case he happened to lose his grip and fall or decided to jump. It would have meant he only fell 5-6 feet rather than 15 or 16.

"The trucks—Simon said—stayed there for about three hours, until the troubled man came off of the overpass and could be taken to a hospital for examination and counseling. One of the truckers, Chuck Harrison, said on Facebook that a highway patrol officer walked to the cab of each truck and shook the driver's hand to thank them for answering the call to help.

Scott Simon concluded his story by saying, *"That man on the overpass has not been identified and may decide to keep his story confidential. But he was able to see, in his lowest moments, in the middle*

of a desolate night, that 13 strangers who happened to be truckers were willing to help bring their busy lives and the fast-passing world to a halt for him, for a while.

Well, the very idea of it!

If you would have asked me yesterday morning at 9 a.m. if something like that could happen, that traffic could be shut down for three hours for the sake of one person's life, that 13 strangers on a deadline to get somewhere with payloads would stop and help a stranger, that the machinery of our busy world where time is money would stop for one person in need, do you know what I would have told you? "You are out of your mind."

In Jesus' name. Amen.

ⁱ Sir Kenneth Robinson with Lou Aronica, *The Element: How Finding Your Passion Changes Everything* (New York: Penguin, 2009)

ⁱⁱ Dr. Walter Brueggemann, in a recent lecture.

ⁱⁱⁱ James Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: Orbis, 1997).

^{iv} Scott Simon, "Below A Michigan Overpass, Truckers Make a Safety Net" *Simon Says on Weekend Edition Saturday*, April 28th, 2018. <https://www.npr.org/2018/04/28/606598688/below-a-michigan-overpass-truckers-make-a-safety-net>