

## Closed Doors in a Violent World

sermon digest

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Acts 12:1-17

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The primary symbol of the Christian faith, the cross is a constant reminder of the violent world into which the church was born. Rome controlled the entire Mediterranean world with an iron fist that included occupying armies and puppet governors ready and willing to administer capital punishment at the drop of a hat. The violence of the Herodian dynasty dates back to Herod the Great, the King of Judah at the birth of Jesus, charged in Matthew with the slaughter of babies in Bethlehem, historically famous for killing his own sons. Herod Agrippa, Herod's grandson became the regent of Judah through deposing his uncle Herod Antipas. Antipas was responsible for the beheading of John the Baptist. According to Josephus, Agrippa's reign was characterized by violence and caprice. A chip off the old block, Herod ordered the decapitation of the Apostle James, the brother of John, and the imprisonment of Peter to await execution the next day.

Several miraculous prison rescues occur in Acts, but Luke makes no attempt to explain why Peter was saved by an act of God while James was executed. Such is the random nature of evil and suffering in our world. In spite of Herod's precaution of double-chaining Peter behind locked doors, sleeping between two soldiers, an angel awakened Peter, released his chains, and walked him through an open prison gate into the street. Peter "came to himself" as if he had been sleep-walking, realized that he had been rescued by an angel, and made his way to the home of John Mark's mother Mary, where the church was praying for his release.

Here Luke, the master storyteller, engages the light side, a bit of comic relief for the tragedy of imprisonment and death. Peter knocks for entrance to the house at the outside gate. A servant girl Rhoda answers his knock. When she hears Peter's voice, rather than opening the gate, she rushes to the praying church to announce that Peter was at the door.

Luke wants you to grasp the irony. The church is praying for Peter's release, but they refuse to believe that Peter is at the door. A debate ensues: Rhoda is crazy. It can't be Peter. It must be his angel, his spirit. But Peter keeps on knocking. Finally, someone decides that the best way to settle the argument is to open the gate. When they discovered Peter at the gate, "they were amazed," much like the disciples before the risen Christ. Peter motioned for silence, described his rescue, asked that his story be passed on to the others, including James the brother of Jesus, and he went on his way.

I suspect that Luke wants us to have a taste of the political instability and violence in his world. When Herod discovered the missing prisoner, he ordered a search for Peter. When Peter could not be found, Herod had the soldiers killed. Finally Luke describes an appropriate exit for Herod. When the people of Tyre and Sidon greeted him as a god, Herod exulted in being worshiped until "an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died."

Perhaps it is only rhetoric, but Luke makes a word play on the doors, the gate to the prison (*pule*) and the gate of Mary's house (*pulos*). Locked in by the prison gate, Peter is led to freedom by the messenger of God who breaks chains and opens locked doors. But when Peter is locked out of the house where the church has gathered in prayer, the angel is no longer available. The door to the prison cannot keep him *in*, but the door of the church keeps him locked *out*.

**Doors control passage.** That is the way with doors; they provide controlled passage in both directions. They either keep something in or something out. Prison doors keep bad people locked in, while the doors to your house or car are designed to keep bad people out. No one knows exactly who invented the door. Like shoes, doors seem to be the children of necessity.

In Genesis, Cain is warned about sin "lurking at the door." The reference obviously is not to a building. Very early in biblical thought the door came to function as a symbol of the passage between the human soul and the outside world of good and evil, flowing in two directions. Good or evil is allowed in or out through the door to the same mind. It appears that Cain is responsible for allowing the passage of evil into his mind.

But the door also represents a passage into promise and possibility. Through prayer, Jesus affirmed the promise of God that the door will be opened for those who knock. In John, Jesus identified himself as the door to the sheepfold. Paul asked the Colossians to pray that God will open a door for the word (4:3). In Revelation, the Christ has set before the church at Philadelphia an "open

door, which no one is able to shut.” The church at Laodicia seems to have shut Christ out. The image is vivid: Christ stands at the door and knocks, “if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.”

**Modern church doors are designed for protection.** Peter was locked out of the church. The reason is obvious. Herod, not Peter, was a threat. The locked gate provided a measure of protection from the violent world outside, but the gate, intended to keep out evil, was effective in locking Peter out in the street. Such is the risk of locked doors. They are indiscriminate barriers. Doors have no mind or conscience to distinguish a threat from a promise. They are barriers to everyone with absolutely no ability to filter out evil.

Locked church doors with alarm systems are common these days. I recently heard a pastor say that his church was locked from outside entrance during worship services. After the shooting at the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Church in 2008, a lot of congregations have taken measures of protection, and a local congregation now has a security committee that keeps a watchful eye on the people coming and going. I might add that the church is also active in ministry to the poor, opening its building to feed the public.

Now we can add the murder of nine people in the Mother Emmanuel Church in Charleston, SC. The violence of our world is worse than that of the early church. At least, they did not have guns available to anyone who chooses to make a violent statement for some social or political issue. We lock the doors to our churches without apology especially in recent days. We have every reason to wish that the church in Charleston had locked the doors to Dylann Roof, the young man who came to the Bible study with a gun that he should not have been able to purchase. One critic blamed the pastor, also a state legislator, for opposing gun freedom. He insisted that the congregation should have been armed and ready to execute intruders. Now we can add guns to locked doors to the way the church ought to greet the world.

I was visiting family in Texas several years ago when the State Legislature was debating a law that would allow churches to choose whether people should leave their guns at home or in the car. The image of armed worshipers in the house of God devoted to the Prince of Peace would be laughable if it were not so ridiculous.

In the 1980's, I visited the Zion Baptist Church in Louisville with the pastor, my friend Don Cockerham. He served an inner-city, African-American church in a rough part of town. Martin Luther King's brother had preceded Don as pastor. The church had a small chapel on the sidewalk outside the building that was kept open for anyone at anytime. It was furnished with indestructible pews and an altar anchored to the concrete floor. It was designed as a place of prayer, but it became a harbor for street people and a target for vandalism. The church should be commended for presenting an open door to the public in hope that they would help someone, but they dared not leave the building unlocked any more than you are willing to leave your home or car open 24/7.

**People of good will are vulnerable.** More than any other time in my life, the church hangs on horns of dilemma. The church is called to ministry to a world in great need. We answer that call by sending money to agencies that serve on the front line, but we also have seen the need to act directly in our Table of Grace. On the other side of the dilemma, we live in a world of increasing violence with growing availability for personal as well as mass destruction of human life and property. Shall we lock ourselves behind closed doors and tremble in fear of possible harm? Or shall we take on the risk of a violent world to follow the calling of God?

There is indeed a risk in ministry. I recall a news article about the “Son of Sam” killer in New York City that traced his history to a church in southwest Louisville very near where I had been a pastor. He was a soldier at Fort Knox. During the Vietnam War my church was a way station for Fort Knox soldiers en route to the war. The Son of Sam could have been in my church as well as the one he chose. I had a phone call one Sunday afternoon by a distressed woman who asked me to help calm her disturbed husband. He was a soldier who had returned from Vietnam on drugs and angry. I found him sitting at the kitchen table with a butcher knife in his hand. I was eventually able to get a chaplain involved to get the help the man needed. Ministry in this world carries risks.

Jesus is reported to have advised his disciples, “be wise as serpents and innocent as doves” (Mt.

10:16). With the wide proliferation of guns, increased population density in the world, and angry, confrontational political debates, people of good will like the congregation in Charleston are vulnerable. In fact most churches are vulnerable on any given Sunday or any day of the week. I would not suggest that we invite disaster by removing the locks on our doors, but we also need to be aware that the church cannot respond to the example and call of Christ to ministry in this world by either becoming an armed fortress or a hiding place locked away from all danger.

In the Gospel, Luke proclaims the word from Isaiah that Christ has come to set prisoners free. For slaves and chosen enemies of the state, God was about opening prison doors. At the death of Jesus, Mark and Matthew reported the ripping of the veil that separates the Holy of Holies from the world, a symbol of God's open door to the world. John the visionary saw Jesus standing at the door of the church, not the world, seeking entrance like Peter to enter the life of the church. James was beheaded and Peter imprisoned during Passover. The God of the Exodus is about opening doors, parting seas, and breaking down barriers so that God's grace may flow freely through the church into this world. The risk and danger to people of good will has always been real, but it has also been a risk bound to the cross, the risk of the gospel: "God so loved the world that he gave his only son."