

It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. When he saw that this pleased the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Feast of Unleavened Bread. 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. So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him. 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. 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. 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. 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. 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. Then Peter came to himself and said, "Now I know without a doubt that the Lord sent his angel and rescued me from Herod's clutches and from everything the Jewish people were anticipating." 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. Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer the door. When she recognized Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, "Peter is at the door!" "You're out of your mind," they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, "It must be his angel." But Peter kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished. 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 brothers about this," he said, and then he left for another place. In the morning, there was no small commotion among the soldiers as to what had become of Peter. 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 a while. (Acts 12:1-19)

God is Greater

When I was in fourth or fifth grade, I discovered the *Guinness Book of World Records*. I remember searching for who was the tallest or the oldest or the fastest man. I remember randomly flipping through it and finding pictures of the longest fingernails and reading about things like who made the biggest sandwich. Of course, every couple of years, I tried to get a new copy because every year, some new person is older or taller or makes an even bigger sandwich. In that narrow category, that new record holder is greater. The drive to be greater is a basic part of American life. In fact, in the year 2000, the *Guinness Book of World Records* changed its name to simply, *Guinness World Records*. With a museum and a website and TV shows, the Guinness people figure they're greater than just a book now. But of course, no one can be greater forever. Just like people break those records every day, someday some other organization will replace the Guinness people as the greatest recorder of records. But in spiritual matters, things are different. This morning, as we review the way that God delivered Peter from the hands of a man who wanted to kill him, we'll see that **God is greater**.

I. Greater than the persecutions of our enemies.

II. Greater than the foibles of his people.

I.

Where is God's greatness in this reading? We hear how Herod murdered James the brother of John, a member of Jesus' inner circle and a leader of the mother church in Jerusalem. Then he arrested Peter. His actions clearly provoked a crisis in that Jerusalem congregation. But this lesson isn't about Herod or the crisis he caused. It's about our gracious God. **God is greater than the persecutions of our enemies.**

At this moment, those enemies seemed to be holding all the cards. This was not the first time that a prominent believer was murdered in Jerusalem. That honor goes to Stephen, who was murdered by a Jewish mob. After his death, persecution broke out and scattered that original congregation in Jerusalem. But the apostles had maintained a visible presence in the city. How much time had gone by? It's a little difficult to say.

The Herod mentioned here was Herod Agrippa I, the grandson of the Herod who murdered the babies in Bethlehem. He began to reign in Jerusalem in the year 41 and he died in 44. It's a little hard to pinpoint the date of Jesus' death and resurrection, but we can use the year 30 as a round figure. So this was maybe 12 to 15 years after the day of Pentecost.

Now, the Bible doesn't say why Herod murdered James. History records him as a selfish and vindictive individual. Whatever his motive was, when he saw that killing James pleased the Jewish leadership, he arrested Peter. He planned to execute him as soon as the Passover celebration was done. Think about the effect that must have had on the church. The apostles could remember that Passover when Jesus had been arrested and murdered. It would've been hard for them not to see parallels in the current situation. Peter, above all, must have seen those parallels. After all, after that glorious Easter day when he saw Jesus alive, he had a conversation with the Lord. It was the one where Jesus asked him three times if he, Peter, loved the Lord. After that Jesus told him that some day he would die for his faith. At this time, Peter had to wonder if this wasn't the execution Jesus had told him was coming.

God allowed one of the eye-witnesses of Christ to be murdered when he were still probably in his forties and could've worked for years yet, and he allowed another to be imprisoned. He allowed the Church to go on the defensive under the constant threat of persecution. Even today, we can't help but wonder what God was doing. But God never lets persecution win. Peter shows us that. He shows it first of all with his attitude. On the night before Herod planned to execute him, Peter was chained between two soldiers, under heavy guard. What was he doing? Sleeping. Not tossing and turning. Not scheming or bargaining for his life. Sleeping. Peter knew that it was all in God's hands and if this was the promised martyrdom, well, that meant that by the time the sun set the next day he would be with Jesus again. If not, God was in charge. Of course, this wasn't the end. Peter woke up because an angel hit him in the side. His chains fell off and the doors opened and the angel led him to safety. It wasn't time for Peter to give his life for the faith yet.

Like Peter, we face persecution. Maybe we aren't chained between two soldiers waiting to die, but we live in a world that is at war with God and his truth. I read an article this week in which a psychologist documents that people who live together before they get married are far more likely to get a divorce once they get married than people who don't. Yet, she finishes by refusing to condemn cohabitation. Rather, she says more thought and planning should go into it. Clearly, she would have a problem with what God teaches. Several weeks ago, I read another article by a person who believes that until a child actually shows its own personality, the parents should have the right to euthanize it – to get an abortion after the child is born. But he recognized that you could never write a legal rule that would make sense, so you can't do that in our society. Clearly, he would regard people like us as cavemen who just don't understand the modern world.

Make no mistake about it. As long as we live in a sinful world, we will suffer at the hands of those who hate the gospel. Some day, we might come close to being like Peter chained between two soldiers. But even when we suffer for our faith, God is still in charge. Only in him will we find the peace that Peter found. He promises that he will always care for us. He will use even the most bitter attacks to strengthen our faith and to promote the very gospel those unbelievers want to destroy.

Peter's escape shows us that God is greater than any persecution. He can do miracles if he chooses to. Now, he doesn't promise to send an angel to open doors and remove chains. But he can if that's what is best. And it's not wrong for us to pray that he would stretch out his mighty arm and do something extraordinary. But usually he works through ordinary means to rescue us. He hides behind simple and surprising things and if we didn't know it was him, we might miss him. Sometimes, we will experience what James experienced: persecution will seem to win. Sometimes we will suffer and it will never be made right in this world, as far as we can see. But even if we can never understand how it was good for the early church to lose James only twelve or fifteen years into its existence, God did that for a reason. The Church is still here, so clearly, he was right. And when he allows us to suffer ridicule, when he allows the enemies of the cross to dominate our society and when sinful attitudes and practices are normal and people look at us funny because we don't join in, when people use the power of the government against us, even then God is still in charge. He makes all their efforts work for our good. We will win in the end. We will live with Christ in heaven. Jesus will return and destroy the works of the devil and openly rule for all eternity.

II.

God is greater than all the enemies that line up against his Church. But you know what? Sometimes, our biggest enemies aren't the people out there. Sometimes, our biggest enemies are in here. Have you ever said that someone was his own worst enemy? Sometimes the choices a person makes only make their lives harder. Some people could be so much more than they are, if they would just wake up and realize how much damage they do to their own cause. Sometimes, here in the church, even when we are trying to do what's right, we sinful human beings can't help but do dumb things that seem to hurt our work. But don't lose heart! **God is greater than the foibles of his people.**

That's a funny word, foible. What does it mean? My dictionary says it means a small weakness or a weakness in character. None of us is perfect. You see that in our text this morning, too. After the angel springs Peter from prison he goes to a house where he knows that believers will be meeting. It appears to be a rather large place with a door and maybe a courtyard and a slave girl to open the door. Peter knocks and the slave girl, whose name was Rhoda, comes to answer. Apparently she called through the door and asked who was outside. When Peter answered, she recognized his voice – so clearly she was also a believer. Wonder of wonder, Peter, is outside! Inside, the church has gathered to pray and ask God to set him free and now, here he is! So what does Rhoda do? She leaves him standing outside, banging on the door and runs into the main part of the house to tell everyone.

And they don't believe her. Peter's still outside knocking and if Rhoda had just let him in, they wouldn't have had this argument. But when Rhoda tells them that God has indeed given them exactly what they gathered there to pray for, they call her crazy. When she finally convinces them, they say, "**It must be his angel.**" What does that mean? Some Jews believed that each person has a guardian angel that can look like that person. Now the Bible never says that, but it was a popular belief – kind of like today, when people believe that their dead grandparents are in heaven watching over them. So, when Peter is outside, they would rather believe that it was his fictional guardian angel than believe that God answered their prayer.

Now, these people were believers. But like us, they had weaknesses in their faith. They didn't trust God perfectly when things went bad and they didn't understand everything that he says in his word. But God is greater than the failings of their faith. He showed that by sending Peter to them. Why did Peter come? Not for help. Not for sanctuary. He left right away. He came for one reason only: to let them know he was alive. To tell them how God had answered their prayers and give them a practical lesson in the gospel. He came for them, not for himself. Then he left again, because it was too dangerous for them if he stayed.

Peter demonstrates how God deals with our failings. We might like to call all of the shortcomings in our faith foibles – small weaknesses, that we can shrug off or even smile about and make into a joke. But the truth is, we're weak because we're sinners and sin is always a serious matter. Sin corrupts us totally and part of that corruption is our failure to see how major it really is. How often isn't it true that we can't see God's grace when it's right in front of us? How often aren't we like Rhoda? We get so excited about what we think God is doing that we run off half-cocked and we completely miss the point. We can even ruin the gifts God gives us that way. How often don't we find that we didn't really expect God to do what we prayed for? Have you ever found yourself just going through the motions on your prayers? Have you ever been surprised when God gave you exactly what you asked for?

All that is what sin does to our minds and hearts. If God were like us, he'd run out of patience after a while. He'd quote us and say, "I'm done! I'm not doing this anymore!" And we'd have no one to blame but ourselves. But he doesn't do that. God sent his son to die for the sin in our hearts that keeps on corrupting our faith. Jesus died and paid for all the times we ran off half-cocked and totally missed what he was doing. Jesus died and paid for all the times we failed to trust that he would actually hear and answer our prayers. He died and he paid for everything that is wrong with our faith. And then he rose. He rose and told us that all our sin is paid for and forgiven. God has thrown it all away. He rose and told us that no matter what happens to us here, no matter how hard it is for us to follow him, no matter what confusion we struggle with and what weakness torments our faith, he will always come back to us and forgive us. He will always love us. He will always come to us in the gospel and rebuild our faith. He will nurture us through that message until we stand with him in heaven.

God is greater than every problem we can invent for ourselves. God is greater than every challenge the devil and the world can throw in our path. God is greater than sin and death and hell. That's who's fighting for us. Amen.