

## ***Just Too Excited!***

A Reflection for Morning Worship on the Star Words: *Purpose & Excitement*  
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

Sunday, January 23, 2022

Text: Acts 12:5-17

This story from Acts which we read this morning is, in my humble opinion, one of the most overlooked and underappreciated stories in the Bible. It is not part of the Revised Common Lectionary which means it never comes up in the three year rotation of Bible stories and texts for worship followed by many churches. And, as a result, it is a challenging one to find decent commentaries on. But, it is still an absolutely wonderful story, complete with action and adventure reminiscent of Harry Potter. Like so many other stories in Acts it draws us in very directly and intimately with the challenges Peter and Paul and the other apostles faced as the movement Jesus started began to spread and expand throughout the Roman Empire. Stories like this one are intended to draw us in to the miraculous adventures of these hand-picked apostles and how they overcome one challenge after another as they continue to deepen their faith and understanding of Jesus' message along the way. Acts is both entertaining and evocative, inviting us in to the exploits of the disciples even as it is intended to inspire everyone to have the same faith, courage and commitment the apostles display time and time again. So, when I decided to focus on the Star Words "purpose" and "excitement," there was just no question as to where I would search for a story to share with you.

This particular story actually unfolds in three distinct scenes, each intended to heighten our excitement and engage our rapt attention. The story begins with Peter having been put in prison

by Herod, the evil king, once again. Peter and the other apostles and their followers made Herod very nervous. Herod had assumed that by convincing the Romans to execute Jesus as a revolutionary, his Jesus problem would be resolved once and for all. That didn't happen. In fact, Herod's actions had the reverse effect of his original intention as word of Jesus' Resurrection spread far and wide. Peter and the others were actively preaching and teaching, healing and in general getting the locals all riled up. This meant that the established religious leaders of Judaism at that time didn't like them. So, their dislike of Peter combined with Herod's insecurities meant that Peter and the others had targets on their backs.

In today's story, Peter has been arrested by Herod and thrown in prison, guarded by four squads of soldiers so there would be no possibility for escape. This is the point where our text for this morning begins. Peter is bound in chains and sleeping between two guards. Suddenly a light shone in the cell and angel taps Peter and says, "get up quickly." His chains fall off and he gets up and follows the angel who tells him to "wrap your cloak around you and follow me." They make their way past first one and then another guard without incident. When they arrive at the iron gate leading into the city it just swings open and they walk out on the street. They continued walking and suddenly the angel disappears. That's when Peter realizes this is really happening and not a dream. Luckily, he recognizes where he is and makes his way to the house of a friend and knocks on the gate. This is my favorite part of the story! The maid, named Rhoda, comes to answer and, when she hears Peter's voice asking to be let in, she gets so excited she forgets to open the door.

Instead, she runs back inside to tell everyone Peter is there. They don't believe her. Peter continues knocking so they finally go to see for themselves and there he is.

They bring him inside and he tells them all that has happened, tells them to tell the others and then he leaves.

What a story! And that's exactly what it is intended to be – a fantastic story that illustrates several things for the followers who will hear it later on. First, it reminds them that they are always in danger from the authorities – secular and religious – who saw Jesus' message as dangerous because it threatened the status quo. Second, it makes it clear that if you have faith in God, if you never give up hope and if enough people are praying for you, things work out okay. These subtexts of the story are simplistically drawn and yet they are still powerful. We are left with the sense that the all the people praying for Peter were somehow able to summon an angel who miraculously rescues Peter from an impossible and dangerous situation. The imagery used is powerful! Chains falling off, sleeping guards slumbering through the whole thing, including angel light shining presumably right into their eyes! And the angel's instructions to Peter to wrap himself in his cloak before they leave definitely recalls Harry Potter's invisibility cloak!

Yet this story also reveals the people involved to be very human, just like you and me. Peter thinks he's having a dream as this fantastic escape is under way and is genuinely shocked when he actually finds himself outside. And my favorite character, Rhoda the maid, is just so incredibly excited by the whole thing she forgets to open the door, leaving the escaped Peter very vulnerable outside the gate! And she hasn't even heard the

miraculous escape story yet. She just knows that for Peter to be there, something miraculous had to have happened. It is interesting that the others in the house don't believe her, reminiscent of another biblical story where women find an empty tomb instead of the body of Jesus they had come to anoint. No one believed them either. Apparently, that particular lesson of listening to the women still remained unlearned. Luckily Peter kept knocking so when the guys went to check things out, they found out Rhoda's story was true, and they let him in.

So, what is this story really about? Why did Luke, the author of Acts, feel it needed to be included? Traditional commentaries emphasize here that this story is intended to show just how intense the persecution of these early Christians was becoming so soon after Jesus' death. Unfortunately, these commentaries also tend to emphasize the Jewishness of those doing the persecuting. This tendency, which only intensified as time went on, soon gave rise to a serious problem we still contend with today – antisemitism. This intentional demeaning and blaming of “the Jews” for the death of Jesus, which is inaccurate because Rome killed Jesus, and the later persecution of the apostles like Peter and Paul, created an intentional mistrust and even loathing for the Jewish people which was never what Jesus intended. The hatred of those who believe differently than us was never the purpose, the intent, the reasoning behind Jesus' life and ministry. Jesus was a faithful, practicing Jew until the day he died, a fact we should never allow ourselves to forget. The purpose of Jesus' life and work, his message to all was very simple and never changed: Love God with all that you are and all that you have and love the other as much as you love yourself. That's it. Period, end of

discussion. Sharing this message became the foundation and purpose of Peter's life and work. The fact that it became so dangerously misinterpreted is one of the greatest failings of early Christianity, a sin we still contend with today and for which we all must remain on guard.

This story is also about excitement. Actually, I would argue it is primarily about excitement! What was there to be excited about? Jesus! Peter and the apostles were so excited about Jesus, so transformed by him and the Holy Spirit he sent to empower them to continue his work, that they were emboldened to do whatever it took to spread Jesus' Good News far and wide. They knew the community leaders didn't like them and would make things difficult for them, but they didn't care. What Jesus was asking of them was too important and the work needing doing was just too exciting to do anything else. Their love of Jesus, their commitment to do as he asked, combined with their excitement and incredible sense of purpose made them feel invincible! So, they just did it. They just lived and worked and ministered as Jesus had taught them to and let the chips fall where they may.

And that excitement was contagious! Rhoda was so excited to hear Peter at the gate that she forgot to open the door! The people she told didn't believe her at first but then they got excited when they realized that she was telling them the truth. The message of these early Christians was exciting! Jesus was alive after they knew he had been killed! Peter had escaped from prison with the help of angels and was back on the road, doing as Jesus had asked. How exciting was that? It is not difficult to imagine Rhoda and all her friends being swept up in the excitement and energy of this whole new way to have God as a

part of your life! God wasn't just an invisible presence waiting to be appeased through rigid rules and rituals. God was paying attention to the lives of ordinary people and making things happen. Anyone could be a part of this whole new way of being in relationship with God! Anyone could be a part of this new way of being a community of faith together! This was new and different, exciting and purpose driven. No wonder the movement spread like wildfire across the Roman Empire.

But what of us, here on a cold January Sunday in coastal New England, not even able to gather together in person because of a global pandemic? Were we ever that excited about our faith? Are we still excited about it? Are we filled with purpose as we consider the possibilities of living our lives more intentionally with the love of Jesus as its foundation? It's an important question for each of us to ponder seriously. What about your faith is exciting and if it isn't exciting, why isn't it? Has it just become routine, just another thing on the list of things to do in life? What would it take to reclaim the excitement of our faith, the purpose we could have in being people of faith? Is it even possible? Well, of course, you would expect me to say "yes, of course it's possible" and I do. But I'm also a realist. Two years into this pandemic, it's difficult to get excited about anything when our lives have been so completely upended for so long. We are weary of so many things – masks, all things medical, having to think very carefully about doing all those things we used to take for granted like going to a store or a restaurant or a concert. Excited? What is there to be excited about? Also, a tough question. But, an important one, because in excitement there is hope, and hope is something we all need a lot of right now.

So, here's my homework assignment for you for the coming week. I want you to work on a list of things you could get excited about in your life and faith. I want you to write them down. Then, I want you to share them with somebody else because talking about them is one way of making them more real. I want you to ask those others what they could get excited about, what they are excited about. And then, I want you to pray for and about each one of those exciting potentials, your own and your friend's. Yes, pray for them. Because, dear ones, you can pray your way to joy and hope and excitement. Make that list of things to be excited about – the first crocuses, the first time it stays light after 5pm, that vacation you plan to take someday, that new purchase for your home – and pray for them. Include on your list things you could get excited about or all already excited about here at church. Don't worry about whether or not it's something we're already doing. Imagine what might be possible in our wonderful church if there were no boundaries holding us back. Make a list again and share it with someone. Then, give thanks to God for your thoughts and invite God to inspire you to share that excitement and hope with others. In other words, I'm asking you to take to heart the angel's promise to Mary that all things are possible with God. What might be possible here? I can't wait to hear your ideas.

So, there's your assignment, a purpose to pursue this week. Seek excitement and hope. Note it. Tell it. Pray it. Live it. Share it with others, maybe even me. I'm excited to hear what you discover! Well, that should keep you busy on these cold January days! Amen.