

**Somebody's Knocking**  
**Acts 12:1-19**

Open Doors is an organization that for over 60 years has worked in the world's most oppressive countries empowering Christians who are persecuted for their beliefs. They report that approximately 215 million Christians experience high to extreme persecution today. North Korea remains the most dangerous place to be a Christian but there are many countries in South and Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Africa and even Mexico and Colombia that are equally as dangerous for those who profess a faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Every day Open Doors receives new reports of Christians who face threats, unjust imprisonment, harassment, beatings, and even loss of family because of their faith in Jesus. The statistics are sobering: Every month

- 255 Christians are killed,
- 104 are abducted,
- 180 Christian women are raped, sexually harassed or  
forced into marriage,
- 68 churches are attacked
- and 160 Christians are detained without trial and imprisoned.

That translates to the current 2018 statistics of:

- 3,066 Christians who have been killed this year,
- 1,252 abducted,
- 1,020 raped or sexually harassed and
- 793 churches that have been attacked. (Retrieved from

<https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/channel/utilities/print.html?type=article&id=137402>)

A quick Google search reveals stories of John Cao, a North Carolina pastor who has been imprisoned in China for more than a year. “While working to build schools for impoverished children in Myanmar, John was detained at the Chinese border on March 5, 2017. Twenty days later, he was charged with ‘organizing illegal border crossings’, despite the fact that he had used the same route between China and Myanmar for this humanitarian work for years.” He had helped build sixteen schools in the area before he was sentenced to seven years in prison.

(<https://www.christianheadlines.com/blog/group-petitions-white-house-for-release-of-pastor-in-china.html>)

Or Pastor Andrew Brunson who was just recently released from prison in Turkey where he had been held for more than 600 days. His ordeal is not over for he remains in Turkey under house arrest. He was accused of having connections to a terrorist organization that attempted a coup against the Turkish government in July of 2016. Brunson is a native of North Carolina and an evangelical Presbyterian pastor who worked in Izmir on Turkey's Aegean coast, where he was a pastor at the Izmir Resurrection Church. He has lived in Turkey for more than 23 years with his wife and three children. The US Ambassador to Turkey John R. Bass, said "He appears to be being held simply because he's an American citizen who as a man of faith was in contact with a range of people in this country who he was trying to help, in keeping with his faith." (Retrieved from

<https://www.christianheadlines.com/blog/pastor-andrew-brunson-released-from-prison-in-turkey-under-house-arrest.html>)

I share these stories my friends because sometimes we forget, as those who have religious freedom, that it has always been and continues to be a challenge to be a Christian in our world. Our scripture today takes us back to the early days following Christ’s death on the cross when faith in Jesus was very dangerous. Our passage begins with the vicious killing of James, the brother of John. Friends, the word that is translated “*killed by the sword*” means he was decapitated for being a follower of Jesus. This was James who was part of the inner circle of apostles, those closest to Jesus -

Peter, James and John. But Scripture doesn't just record his death but also the aftermath. For it tells us that the Jews were pleased with the elimination of James for they were threatened by the disciples belief in Jesus as the Messiah. And because they seemed pleased Herod decided to arrest Peter as well. We get the impression that he was going to pick them off one by one. And that probably was his plan. Can you imagine the fear that the disciples and other followers of Jesus felt?

Herod arrested Peter but he was no fool. He had heard about Peter. For this was not the first time Peter had been arrested. In Acts 4 immediately following the day of Pentecost when Peter had healed the crippled beggar Peter and John were arrested and brought before the Sanhedrin - the Council of Jews. They were confronted with the question "*By what power or by what name did you do this healing?*" Peter declared that he had healed in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. They recognized him as a companion of Jesus. Peter and John were told not to speak of Jesus again. They were threatened but released. Scripture tells us they continued to preach in Christ's name.

Then in Acts 5 we hear they continued to teach and heal on Solomon's Portico. Solomon's Portico was a porch - an open-air gathering area on the east side of the Temple near the court of the Gentiles where teachers gathered to discuss scripture. The High Priest had them arrested for continuing to preach about Jesus and put in public prison this time. But during the night the angel of the Lord opened the door of the prison and told them to go to the temple and continue to preach. And so they did.

When the High Priest sent to the prison for the prisoners to be brought before them they discovered Peter and the other disciples had escaped even though the doors were all locked. Someone told them the prisoners were in the temple and they went and brought them before the High Priest. They were reminded that they had been told not to preach in Jesus' name and here they were doing it

again! Once again Peter and the apostles defied their warnings saying that they must obey God and not any human authority. The High Priest and leaders were incensed and wanted to kill them but Gamaliel stepped in and suggested calm. They were flogged and released.

Obviously Herod had heard these stories. So this time when Peter was arrested Herod ordered four squads of soldiers to guard him. What this means is that there were sixteen guards assigned to watch him. Four guards surrounded him on three hour watches. Two were in the room with him as he slept and two other guards watching the doors. This was during the Festival of Unleavened Bread and Jerusalem was packed with people. Herod wanted to be sure Peter would not get away this time before he could stand trial.

But something amazing happened. An angel of the Lord appeared. A light shone in the cell. Remember there was no electricity in those days so it was pitch dark so the light was necessary to lead Peter out and to enable them to not wake the guards. But it was not a spotlight that would awaken everyone but probably more like the light that comes from a flashlight - enough to guide them. The angel tapped Peter on the side to wake him - our vivid imaginations imagine the angel covering his mouth to be sure he didn't make a sound and whispering "Shhhhh..get up quickly." Before Peter could wonder how he could get up with the chains attached the chains fell off giving him freedom of movement. "Put on your belt and sandals...hurry! And here is a cloak - put it around you and follow me." Friends, think of a cloak like a monk's cloak with a hood that would hid his identity if anyone saw him. He was sneaking out of prison after all even though an angel was leading him. Peter followed the angel thinking he was dreaming. They passed the first guard and were not stopped. Then on past the second guard - almost to freedom. Then they came to the iron gate leading into the city. The final impediment. How would they get past this? Suddenly it swung open as if it was

automated and they walked quickly down the lane. Suddenly Peter realized he was alone and he was really free.

Immediately he headed for Mary's house - the mother of John Mark. We don't know if it was the closest house or just where he knew believers would be gathered. But when he got there he discovered the outer gate locked - where was the angel when he needed him! We really shouldn't be surprised that the gate was locked with all the persecutions happening. But there was nothing for Peter to do but to knock on the door urgently. Everyone inside was praying - praying for his release - so they sent the servant girl Rhoda to the door. She heard Peter's voice - recognizing it but instead of opening the door she was so excited she ran in and announced that Peter was standing at the gate. Can't you just imagine Peter's reaction! Afraid the guards were after him standing at the door waiting to be let in. He kept knocking....insistently. On the inside Rhoda kept trying to convince the believers that it really was Peter at the door. Finally they went to the gate and discovered it was Peter and opened the door for him.

This is one of the funniest and most tragic of scenes in scripture. But friends, there is a powerful lesson here if we examine the responses of the characters. We laugh because we can just imagine Rhoda forgetting to open the door in her excitement.

This scene reminds us of Holman Hunt's famous painting entitled "The Light of the World" which depicts Jesus standing outside a door that has no handle knocking waiting for someone to open the door. Of course that passage depicts the words of Jesus we have heard so many times from the book of Revelation "*Listen! Behold I am standing at the door knocking, if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come into you and eat with you and you with me.*" And yet my friends, as I was reflecting on that this week, I was reminded that those words in the book of Revelation were spoken to

the church of Laodicea which was the church that the writer identified as the lukewarm church - neither hot nor cold. We laugh at Rhoda until we face the truth that maybe we are like her.

Do we like the idea of being with other Christians,  
hearing their prayers, but prefer to stay behind a locked door  
that keeps us away from danger?

Do we prefer to come to worship  
and go home to the comfort of our homes  
never putting ourselves on the line for our faith?

Do we prefer that someone else, someone with more authority,  
more faith, more ability make the decision  
to deal with whatever is on the other side?

Or what about the believers gathered in that home. They were so busy praying that they almost missed God's answer. After all they were praying for Peter's release. But did they really believe God would answer them? Obviously not for when Rhoda said Peter was outside the door they didn't believe her - after all she was just a servant girl. What did she know. They didn't even get up for a while to go and see if it was true. They preferred to stay and finish their prayers. And yet they could not get their answer unless they got up and responded. When they finally went to see who was knocking at the door they stood there in amazement. Are we like them?

Do we pray and pray but not really believe that God answers prayers? When the very answer to our prayers is knocking at our doors and on our hearts are we hesitant to respond? And when God does answer our prayers do we just stand there dumbstruck - frozen in place - not moving into action?

Reading this passage I found myself wanting someone to make the first move - to pull Peter

inside out of danger but we are not told that happened. More than likely they were just full of excuses why they didn't answer the door more quickly. Just as we seem so often to have excuses of why we can't respond to those who knock at our doors.

But it is Peter who reveals how we are called to respond. Scripture says "*He motioned to them to be silent*" and then he told them what God had done. Nothing mattered but what God had done - how God had rescued him from danger. And then he told them to tell James - this was Jesus' brother James who became a leader in the church in Jerusalem. Peter wanted to be sure that James and the believers knew what God had done so that they could tell others what had happened. So that the good news of God's grace could be spread. So that others would come to believe.

As I was rereading this story this week I discovered that this is the last story told about Peter in the book of Acts. No doubt after this he had to go into hiding at least for a while until Herod died. Peter does appear in the story of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 which was probably a few years later which tells us he was still active but this is the last specific story about Peter's life and ministry recorded in Acts. And it ends by telling us he left Judea and went to Caesarea.

This final story about Peter reminds us that the only thing that mattered to him was that the story would be told of how God had opened the doors of the prison for him saving his life. For he believed this good news would lead others to trust in God's saving power and move them to believe that God had the power to save their lives also.

Friends, we cannot tell the story if our doors remain locked and we don't respond to those who come knocking. We cannot tell the story if we are more concerned about the act of worship - praying and singing and hearing God's word - than how to respond when the spirit nudges us to get up and act on our faith. We must open the door to experience and hear the good news. And it is up to us - those

who hear the good news and believe to continue to proclaim what God has done until all the world knows the good news of salvation.

Friends, somebody's knockin' on our door - will we open the door, so that others can come in and tell us what God has done in their lives and then share that good news with others?