

## “Believe It!”

Isaiah 12:2-6

Acts 12:5-7, 9-17

One year after Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast, a group from my church went down to New Orleans to help with the city’s recovery. Our job was to gut a couple of houses – nothing requiring real construction skill or knowledge. We were there to gather up all the flooded, swollen, mildewy remnants of strangers’ lives so that they could save that bit of money and invest it in their future. Even a year later, signs of the devastation were all around. You could still see the spray-painted emergency markings to let first responders know if there were any injured or dead in a building. So many neighborhoods remained unrestored. Being there was overwhelming even though we were doing something tangible to help.

One day, when we were driving around, I noticed a sign in front of a church. It simply said, “Jesus walked on water.” Just think about that for a minute. Here, in this city where so many were devastated, where levees broke and floods ripped away peoples’ lives, their memories, their livelihoods, their sense of what their future would be... Here, this church dared to say that, “Jesus walked on water” and to remind everyone who passed by. No matter the force of destruction, even greater than the fear and uncertainty, was their hope and trust in Jesus. Even before they saw things changing, they trusted that God would see them through. If that isn’t faith, I don’t know what is.

We get sort of funny about faith sometimes. Maybe we’re self-conscious, unsure of how deep our faith really is. Maybe we look at someone else and say, “now *there’s* a person of faith!” Sometimes it’s easier to see the light in others than to see it in ourselves. But a lot of us learn somewhere along the way that certain people just have faith and others don’t. We start to suspect that maybe it’s only the saints or the folks who are better than us who truly live in faith.

If we are tempted to think that the saints of the church have this untouchable, unassailable faith, I think our scripture lesson for this morning is a good reminder to think again. Herod is persecuting the leaders of the church. First blood has already been spilled and now Peter is in prison. Though he was sometimes deeply faithful and sometimes wildly wrong, Peter became one of the great leaders of the early church. Earlier, in Acts 5, Peter and some other apostles were put in a public prison. The doors were locked, there were guards at the doors, but an angel let them out and they were gone. Perhaps Herod knew that Peter was a flight risk and that's why he was physically chained to two guards with more guards at the door.

Yet, again, an angel jostled Peter from his deep sleep and told him to follow. Peter, leader of the church – Peter, who Jesus directly told to feed my sheep – Peter who has already been freed from a prison by an angel... Peter does not believe that the angel is real. He doesn't believe that he is actually leaving the prison. He thinks it's a vision.

Meanwhile, elsewhere in town, the church is gathered in prayer. Mary has a house that is large – it's so large that the house has a courtyard with a gate on the other side. Her son, John Mark, is generally thought to be the author of the Gospel of Mark. This Mary is well off and her faith is so strong that the church gathers in her home. Her door is open to the faithful coming in and out at all hours for prayer, for support, to build hope and spread the Gospel. By all accounts, Mary is faithful. The church is there to pray for Peter's life – to pray that he is freed from prison. They are having an all-night vigil to pray for him.

When there's a knock at the gate, it's Rhoda who goes to answer. She's probably a girl, elementary aged. This is her home where she works. This is a place where she doesn't have the full status of family, but she knows what is going on with the church. When she goes into the courtyard and realizes she's hearing Peter's voice, she bursts back into the house with

overflowing joy. This little girl gleefully announces to the community of faith that Peter is there, just outside! And the church doesn't believe her. Not a single one of them think there's a chance that she could be right. They think she's temporarily insane. She's just a kid, after all. But despite all opposition, she would not stop proclaiming what she knew to be true. Even though this is exactly what they prayed for, it never occurred to them that it might actually be happening. The most they would concede is that it might be his angel. Maybe he died and his guardian angel was saying goodbye as Peter went to heaven. Think about this for a minute, though. They don't even really believe it might be his angel. If you thought an angel was knocking at a gate, wouldn't you go look? Wouldn't that be enough to get you out of the house?

Peter kept knocking. He saw enough of the world outside the jail cell to realize that he was not, in fact, having a vision. God took him from a desperate place and brought him to one of freedom. Where else could he go but to his church family? Even if they wouldn't open the doors, even if they wouldn't believe it was him...what else could he do, but knock? And, again, with the gate being on the other side of the courtyard, he would have to be knocking and hollering pretty loudly for them to hear him from the house all that time they were hemming and hawing about him not really being out there.

Eventually, after who knows how long, the church came to the door and welcomed him in. They believed. In this fascinating story of the early church, one of the greatest leaders sees, but does not believe. One of the most faithful churches hears, but will not believe. But a little child leads them. A little child hears a knock, believes in the voice that she knows, and shares that faith and hope and new miracle with everyone gathered there.

One of the things that's so beautiful about this story is how many well-established Christians chose not to step out in faith. They were so overwhelmed and afraid that they couldn't

afford the emotional whiplash of hope. But their hesitance, their uncertainty, their fear did not mean that they would miss out on this miracle. Sure, they didn't believe what was happening and they took their time to get there, but once they believed, they enjoyed the fullness of faith.

They remind us that faith, itself, is a spiritual discipline. It's not something where you got it or you don't got it. It's like a muscle that you exercise every day. Our faith deepens when we live our lives trusting in God, trusting in the promises of the Gospel. This doesn't mean that we get exactly what we pray for every time. It doesn't mean that we're the special ones who get all of God's miracles. It means that we hold on to the holy light that the Spirit dwells within us and among us. We are bound together and held up by the grace and loving kindness of a God who gives us new possibilities every day. When times are good, do we find ways to share that joy? When times are hard, do we hold onto the hope that God will see us through? When we lose our way, do we remember that we are eternally welcomed back into our Savior's loving arms?

God is our salvation. Leaning into this, we find vast stores of strength and renewal. God tells us, "with joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation." The wells are open – they are not far from us. They are a prayer away, within the reach of a helping hand, in the songs of our hymnal, and the relief of a stranger. We do not go only once to these wells, but again and again. The water is clear and cool, refreshing our bodies, minds, and spirits. Sometimes it's hard to let ourselves be saved – by someone who cares about us or even by our Lord and Savior. But this saving is our freedom, this saving gives us more than we could ever know in this life and into eternity. Shout aloud and sing for joy – today is another day to see and to hear, to drink from the well and meet the Spirit moving all around us. Hold fast to what you believe, Christ goes with you every step of the way. Amen.