

Rise Up and Go Free: The Great Escape!

A sermon based on Acts 5:12,17-32

In 1943 members of the Royal Air Force were captured by the Nazis and put into a high security prison camp. Because these allied soldiers had escaped before, this time, the Germans put them in an unescapable prison.

But the prisoners refused to believe it really was unescapable. So over the course of the next year the men dug three tunnels (three so if one was discovered the Germans would assume they cut off their only escape and would leave the other two undetected). The prisoners affectionately called their tunnels, Tom, Dick, and Harry.

And finally, in the spring of 1944, wearing civilian clothes and carrying forged papers to cross any borders, sixty-six prisoners crawled through Harry to their freedom. Six years later, Paul Brickhill, one of those escaped prisoners wrote a book about his experience, which 13 years later was turned into a movie by the same name: *The Great Escape*.

This morning we hear about another great escape. The apostles of Jesus pulled off an even more spectacular prison break! They broke out of a locked and guarded jail cell without their guards even being aware of the escape and finding the cell doors locked again behind them! They didn't tunnel out or even devise an escape plan, but an angel of the Lord miraculously freed them and told them to go stand in the temple courts and teach the people!

Of course those who imprisoned the apostles were baffled at how they escaped. Much like they were baffled at how Jesus had carried out his great escape from tomb! They tried to silence the escape artists, but couldn't. They wouldn't stop talking about Jesus.

You and I have had our own great escape. We were once prisoners to sin, to death, to hell. But we've escaped! Of course, like it was for the disciples, that wasn't because we could come up with any escape plan, but because of what God pulled off for us. By Jesus blood, by his death, and by his resurrection—by his escape from the grave—we escape sin! We escape hell! And one day we will even escape the grave! And we can't keep that message to ourselves! It's just too exciting! We have to rise up and share the message, 'We've been set free!'

I. Imprisoned

I could imagine the scene looking something akin to these presidential rallies or anti-presidential protest rallies, whatever they are these days. Not that the disciples were advocating violence or rebellion. Quite the opposite, they were proclaiming peace, the same peace Jesus shared with them in the locked room in our gospel for this morning.

On the other hand, though, were the Jewish religious leaders. They weren't happy. They were hostile, indignant, angry at the disciples and their popularity. It seemed they couldn't shut these guys up! So, then, the only solution was to lock them up...put on a show of power and authority. Maybe they thought they had learned from the whole Jesus situation, wanting to intimidate and squash these disciples before they too became too popular.

And for the disciples, I know our verses make a quick mention of their overnight stay in jail, but I'm not so sure that's what they were expecting...one of those 'pay your fine and you're free to go' deals. They were locked up. Guards were posted at the door. There was no way out. For them, it must have been a bleak few hours.

You ever felt that way? I doubt many, if any of you, have been locked up jail before. I haven't heard of the authorities searching out any of you or any other believers I know (like it was in the disciples' case), though that day may come. We've all been imprisoned in our own way, though, haven't we?

The truth is we're all guilty, guilty of a rather serious crime...murder. We have Jesus' blood staining our hands. Our sins displease God. Our sins put up a barrier between us and him. Our sins put Jesus on the cross. Our sins put us into the devil's prison.

Oh, it's easy to put up a façade, either pretending any and all of our sins aren't that big of a deal or giving the appearance that there's nothing wrong, that there are no skeletons of sin in the closets of our hearts. But they're there, and they're a big deal to God. Just look at our verses and be confronted. Unlike the disciples, we've failed to be bold; we've been scared to speak. I've been there, in situations where all I hear is cursing and swearing around me, even from believers, and I've either shrugged it off or have been too timid to speak up and defend God's precious and holy name. I've been in the gossip circles and haven't been bold enough to protect that person's reputation but have been quick to join in the trashing of it.

Unlike the disciples, we've failed to trust in God to care for us as he knows best. I've been there, when worrying seems like the much more natural reaction to the lemons life gives me, or feeling like some situations are just too tough for God...that I have to deal with them on my own. Or maybe that's not really how you feel, but the lack of prayers to God or going to his Word for comfort and encouragement sure show your self-reliance instead of God-reliance.

Time and time again, we've failed, in so many different ways, and every time, it adds to our guilt. Every time, it shows where we are, locked up, thrown into the prison of sin, with a death sentence of hell placed onto our heads. A place where there's no seeming way out...like the apostles, a bleak situation.

II. Escape

And yet, we know, for the apostles, it wasn't a bleak situation. No, take a look! There was a jailbreak! I'm sure the Jewish leaders were quite surprised to see the apostles right back out in the temple courts, preaching the same message as they had the day before. I'm sure they were as perplexed at this mysterious escape as the soldiers guarding the jail doors were. You could imagine the conversations, "How did these Houdini's do it?! The doors were locked. Guards were posted. How did they sneak out?!"

Maybe their minds went back to the not too distant past, to another puzzling situation, when another thorn in their side mysteriously broke out of his own "jail." You know who and what I'm talking about? That's right, Jesus, Easter, his empty tomb.

Of course, neither situation, neither escape is a mystery to us. We know the answer. It was all God. He sent an angel to miraculously break the disciples out. And Jesus, well, he didn't need an angel for his escape...

But what about you and me? How could we escape our prison of hell? On our own, we couldn't. God sent someone better than an angel to break you out...Jesus. Jesus broke us out by his blood. How ironic is that? The same blood that stained our hands, that came from our guilt, from our failures, from our sins...that same blood saved us.

Precious blood, from the God-man who lived that life of perfection we know clearly we haven't lived. Sacrificial blood, shed for us as he hung on the tree, as he died on the cross, sacrificial blood that washed us clean of our sins, blood that won us forgiveness for every sin. That includes our failure to be as bold as the disciples, but rather being scared to speak. That includes our failure to trust in God to care for us as he knows best, instead worrying and trying to handle everything on our own. All of that...forgiven. You know, the Greek word translated here as forgiveness, it literally means deliverance, liberty, or release from imprisonment. What a neat and fitting picture of what Jesus' blood has done and continues to do for us. It has set us free, released us from bondage and imprisonment to sin and Satan...

And it even assures us we will be delivered, we will escape and rise up from death as well. You know why? Because not only did Jesus live. Not only did Jesus die. Jesus rose. His resurrection from death. His jailbreak from the tomb. His own great escape...the greatest escape! His resurrection has given new meaning for us in his words, "Because I live, you also will live," and "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live," and "For God so loved the world...that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." The truth is, because of sin...because of our own sin, we will die. We will enter the prison of our own graves. But Jesus' escape ensures our own final escape, our greatest escape from the world of sin into eternal freedom with him in heaven.

Our Prince and Savior has given us repentance (change of mind) and forgiveness of sins (for every sin). Our "Savior" has done just that; he saved us. He has set us free!

III. Proclamation

You know what the apostles did when Jesus set them free? They wouldn't shut up. Even after the Jewish leaders tried intimidating them at first by throwing them into jail, even after the disciples were brought before the Jewish leaders a second time after continuing to preach, even after the Jewish leaders ordered them to cease and desist, here's what the apostles replied, "We must obey God rather than men!"

You see, they obediently came to trial when called. They didn't disobey when the Jews' orders didn't conflict with God's Word. But when commanded to keep quiet, they could not obey. How different from before. They were no longer behind locked doors, but they went out freely and boldly preaching Jesus, his life, death, and resurrection. And they did obey the angel, God's representative and told the full message of this new life. They filled Jerusalem with their teaching.

And friends, we too can say with the disciples, "We are witnesses of these things." Through the pages of Scripture and the eyes of faith, we've seen the great escape Jesus made from the tomb! We've seen and experienced the great escape Jesus won for us! And beyond that, God has given us his Holy Spirit. He makes us bold.

And now, we rise up! Now, we must obey God rather than men. Now, what might that mean for you and me? We may face persecution of varying degrees. We may be told to shut up, maybe even threatened with job loss or friend loss.

But what really can they do? Lock us up? Take our lives? We'll escape...even from death. We'll escape hell and go to be with Jesus! So bring it!

Friends, now is the time. Easter may be over, but the Easter miracle and the Easter message live on...through us. We will boldly share the message of God's great escape from death! We will boldly share the message of God's great escape from sin! Fill this church, fill Fairbanks, fill this world with this teaching that others too may escape...the Greatest Escape! Amen.