

*<sup>12</sup> The apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders among the people. And all the believers used to meet together in Solomon's Colonnade.*

*<sup>17</sup> Then the high priest and all his associates, who were members of the party of the Sadducees, were filled with jealousy. <sup>18</sup> They arrested the apostles and put them in the public jail. <sup>19</sup> But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out. <sup>20</sup> "Go, stand in the temple courts," he said, "and tell the people the full message of this new life."*

*<sup>21</sup> At daybreak they entered the temple courts, as they had been told, and began to teach the people.*

*When the high priest and his associates arrived, they called together the Sanhedrin—the full assembly of the elders of Israel—and sent to the jail for the apostles. <sup>22</sup> But on arriving at the jail, the officers did not find them there. So they went back and reported, <sup>23</sup> "We found the jail securely locked, with the guards standing at the doors; but when we opened them, we found no one inside." <sup>24</sup> On hearing this report, the captain of the temple guard and the chief priests were puzzled, wondering what would come of this.*

*<sup>25</sup> Then someone came and said, "Look! The men you put in jail are standing in the temple courts teaching the people." <sup>26</sup> At that, the captain went with his officers and brought the apostles. They did not use force, because they feared that the people would stone them.*

*<sup>27</sup> Having brought the apostles, they made them appear before the Sanhedrin to be questioned by the high priest. <sup>28</sup> "We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name," he said. "Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood."*

*<sup>29</sup> Peter and the other apostles replied: "We must obey God rather than men!" <sup>30</sup> The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead—whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. <sup>31</sup> God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel. <sup>32</sup> We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him." (NIV84)*

## THE GREAT ESCAPE

In 1943 members of the Royal Air Force were shot down and captured by the Nazis and put into a high security prison camp. Because the allied soldiers were known for trying to escape from Nazi prisons, the Germans put them in a POW camp that was built specifically to prevent attempts to escape. It was what the Nazis called an unescapable prison.

But the prisoners refused to believe that it really was unescapable. So over the course of the next year the men dug three tunnels (three so that 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, 76 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 in God's Word we hear about a **Great Escape**. Not with human minds or human hands, but the Angel of the Lord delivers an Escape. We'll see today how God uses his power to

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deliver us as well!! Today, in the afterglow of Jesus' Great Easter Escape from the Grave, we'll rejoice that he delivers us – that he gives us Great Escapes as well!

You are familiar with the mentality that many of the Jews had after Jesus rose from the dead. They wrote off the resurrection as a fraud. They wrote off the entire Christian movement as a fraud and felt like they were a misguided sect that was veering away from the Jewish faith. So many of the leaders and most zealous Jews were the ones that most zealously persecuted God's infant church.

We are not sure which apostles were involved in this prison break. Maybe all 12 (since Judas had already been replaced). Maybe fewer, maybe it was more. But they were growing in popularity. They would preach, we're told, in Solomon's Colonnade, which was a part of the temple and their words and their miraculous works grew for them quite a following. Enough that the leaders took notice. Enough that they took action. The leaders approached the apostles and, we're told, ***"gave [them] strict orders not to teach in this name."***

The leaders knew that it would be a threat to their power if this Jesus story was perpetuated. You can hear their motives in the accusations they make. After the escape, they requested that the apostles appear before the Sanhedrin and listen to what they said ***"We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name," ... "Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood."*** "If what you are saying is true, then you'd become the leaders and not us. If what you are saying is true, then we really messed up by putting Jesus to death. If what you are saying is true, then we've been leading the people astray for a long time now!"

But unwilling to accept these truths, they tried to suppress the apostles. They tried everything that they could think of – threats, imprisonment, fear tactics but nothing could stop them. They were determined to proclaim their Jesus and his resurrection. They were convinced that Jesus is the Way!

What changed for the apostles? They were in their own self-made prison, behind locked doors and trapped in fear. What changed that would make them so bold as to leave that room, so bold as to be thrown into the city jail, yet they could stand there without fear? What changed? Easter changed them! And God changed their hearts! Now they were bold to do God's will. They were eager to obey God rather than men. They were strong to face the enemy head on and no longer fearful for their own condition. Easter made them strong and brave. Easter equipped them to proclaim his truth.

What has Easter done to you? Has it changed you at all? Too often we have to admit that it hasn't! We see Jesus and his resurrection. We are among the ones that Jesus blesses in the gospel lesson "Blessed are they who have not seen and yet have believed!" That's us! We don't see Jesus in person, we meet him through the Scriptures. And we are blessed that through faith we can see him.

But has that changed our lives? Are we bold to obey ***God rather than men*** or do we usually put more concern on what man might do? If we tell that friend about Jesus, then they might get angry and stop being my friend! Do we become slaves to fear when it comes to living our faith? Are we scared that others might know who we really are and it might have negative implications for us at work? Do we easily bottle up the great news that God has put inside of us because we think life will just be easier if we keep it inside? Maybe we are OK with others knowing the joy of Easter victory as long as it doesn't inconvenience me? If I have to spend time talking and studying and answering questions, if I

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have to be involved in an Outreach effort, if I have to put myself out there to share the message – then forget it!

Too often it's not God we are obeying, but men, but ourselves. Our sinful nature is lazy and selfish. It hates that you have faith in your heart and gives you every excuse not to share it or live it. The pressures of this world skew our worldview so much that we forget what really matters. We end up living life to serve ourselves and we miss so many opportunities to serve others.

And for our selfish sins, we deserve to stay in our self-made prisons. We are afraid of the consequences of living our faith. We should be afraid of the consequences of not living our faith. When we serve ourselves instead of others, follow our own easy paths, write off the privilege of heralding a resurrection message, we deserve to be thrown into prison. And one that is way worse than the one the apostles were in. We deserve to be thrown into the real unescapable prison, the one called hell. For denying and rejecting God, we deserve to be denied and rejected by him – forever.

The apostles were thrown in prison for following the Lord's command. They had done nothing wrong, but that was the result. But God had a reason. God had a plan. ***During the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out.***

We deserve the prison that we are in. We deserve to be captive to sin, Satan and hell. We are every bit guilty of that sentence, but God has broken us out. He sent his angel, his messenger, the Word himself! He sent Jesus to break us out of prison. He did it by putting Jesus in. Jesus became like us, even to the point of taking our sins as if they were his own. He endured the pain and punishment and the separation that should have been ours. He was treated as if he'd rejected God, though he never had. He was punished as if he were embarrassed to talk to others about God, though he never was. He was punished for each of our sins and he was given the death sentence that was ours.

Yet the Word of God, of Word of Peace came to deliver that peace. He broke us out of prison, by breaking himself free from the shackles of sin and death. That's the message that the apostles couldn't keep to themselves. <sup>30</sup> ***The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead—whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree.*** <sup>31</sup> ***God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel***

And that word repentance. ***That he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel*** is an interesting word. That is a word that means freedom, liberty, and release. God has given us a Great Escape. Greater than the apostles, he has set us free forever from sin and death. He has conquered in the fight! And now that victory is ours.

And set free and washed clean and made new, we can have the boldness that the apostles had! Having been given new life, we can tell others that life is theirs, too. Like the angel told the apostles ***“Go, stand in the temple courts,”... “and tell the people the full message of this new life.”*** We can do the same. We can find our temple courts –wherever they might be - our homes, social circles, work, the gym, the computer. You find your temple courts and boldly proclaim an Easter victory. Use the strength and the freedom that God has given you and watch him free others by the power of his Word. Serve the God who has so graciously served you with forgiveness, freedom and life.

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And when sin comes knocking. When guilt whispers its way back into your ears, when we fail again in the future, remember to preach it to yourself. Remind yourself of your ***Prince and Savior*** who gives ***repentance and forgiveness of sins***. That's Easter victory! That's Easter joy! NO longer do we need to bottle it up, but we can stand and shout and proclaim. He is Risen! He is Risen Indeed Alleluia!

The prison break that was chronicled as the Great Escape was impressive. But for most it was only temporary. Of the 76 that had escaped, only 3 made it out of occupied Poland and to ultimate freedom. That means for 73, the escape was only temporary. But your escape, my friends is permanent. You have been set free and in Jesus you can never be bound again! Heaven is yours and no one, no enemy, no jail, not even death can take it from you, because Jesus has conquered, so will you! Because Jesus is glorified, you'll be one day too! Because Jesus lives, you also will live! Alleluia! Amen.