

Knock, knock, who's there? There's no punchline here except for a wonderful Bible story; likely one you've never really had a good look at before.

The story of Peter's miraculous escape from jail and surprising appearance at the door of Mary, the mother of John Mark (presumably the author of the Gospel of Mark), is a tale told on many levels.

This is a great story in its own right. Once you start reading it, you really want to find out how it all ends up.

It is a meaningful story, for without it the early church would not have had one of its most important, foundational leaders, Peter.

It is also a story that lives on in our lives. The key metaphor in the story (the open door), invites us into both the drama and humanity of this account, and also begs us to consider what doors might stand before us, either to knock on or to open, awaiting the welcome and opportunities that God has in store for us in our lives.



The details of the story are significant; they come in four main scenes. We open with the hatred of King Herod manifesting itself in the beheading of James, son of Zebedee, one of Jesus' first disciples.

The young Christian movement was apparently proving to be a threat to Herod, so without calling for the support of the Temple High Priest, James is executed in Roman fashion, by the sword. Peter is to be next, now put in prison for his eventual execution.

All this takes place during the celebration of Passover; a similar time when Jesus was summarily tried and crucified.

The next scene shifts to a dark prison cell. Whether or not Peter would have been put on trial we'll never know, because the night before Herod was going to bring him out, he escapes with divine assistance. While Peter is sleeping with both arms chained to Roman guards, an angel appears to awaken him, the chains fall away, he puts on his belt and sandals and off he goes! Not realizing what is really going on, Peter follows instructions, almost sleepwalking past the guards. When the iron city gate opens of its own accord, Peter acknowledges the source of his amazing rescue. It is the Lord's doing. This is too good to be true. Now he has to share the news.

The scene shifts once more. Still nighttime, but now in the city, Peter heads to a safe place, the home of Mary, mother of John Mark. She is presumably a widow and wealthy enough to have a home large enough to host a 'house-church', with a servant girl to attend to necessary needs. He knocks on the door and the servant girl, Rhoda, comes to open it. (This next part of the scene could come from an old "I Love Lucy" episode!) Whether Rhoda is scared out her wits, surprised beyond belief, or just overly excited, when she opens the door to see Peter standing there, instead of letting him in, she leaves the door locked and runs back to tell the others who she has just seen. (When they tell her that she 'is out of her mind', you may well recall a similar claim made by the disciples when the women claimed to have seen Jesus risen from the dead.)

After insisting that it is indeed Peter and not an apparition or an angel, they go to the door to find that it really is him, and they hear the tale he tells of how the Lord had saved him.

The final scene brings us back to Herod, now angry at everyone that his plan was foiled. He travels to his administrative capital in Caesarea where he proceeds to put on a show to demonstrate his supposed power.

According to scholars, what likely happened was this. Herod wanted to 'play God', so he donned a very shiny garment (with metal plates?) and had his voice amplified so that

the crowds would take him as greater than a mere human. He apparently did very well at playing God (the people acclaimed him as one.) But doing that has its consequences; violating the first commandment has its downsides. Whether Herod was consumed by intestinal parasites or died of some sort of internal hemorrhage, his end was sudden and surely not pretty. Case closed.

But the word of God prevailed, continued to advance and gained adherents.

That's a first look at the story. Yet there is more than meets the eye.

There are a few underlying important observations that can be made from this story about the nature of the early church. The church in Jerusalem was clearly not very well connected to either the Jewish or Roman power structure and was consistently persecuted and under pressure in differing forms of severity.

Yet despite these hardships and persecutions there were clearly some converts of social means, those who owned homes and had servants (or slaves). The social dynamics of the early church was complex and diverse. Even under threat of imprisonment, some people of means were drawn to "the Way," and welcomed others to join them. The social dynamics of the early church was fluid and inclusive; all worshipped together in the many places where fellowships grew. The early church seems not to have required everyone to sell or give up their property and social divisions that existed in Roman society did not seem to extend into the new Christian communities.

What this story finally means for us is not so much about the past but about our futures. After numerous readings, the most compelling scene for me in this story is not Peter's shackles falling from his wrists, the amazement he experiences in his astonishing release from prison, or even the grisly death that Herod surely had coming to him.

The most memorable scene, regularly replayed in daily life, is the action of the servant girl Rhoda, opening the door for Peter.

Knock, knock- who's there? It's not a punch line that we're to expect, but rather a question for us to answer in our lives. What door is there for you to knock on or open? Which side of the door are you on; are you knocking or opening?

Either way, an opportunity awaits. This is the real question for us today.

There's lots of ways we encounter doors; some much more memorable and important than others. I'll share a couple examples to get you started to think about yours.

Now that it is summer bicycling season for me, I remember years back when my older brother and I did a cycling tour of Scotland. It was glorious, mostly. We carried our tents and clothes in panniers and camped when we could. One memorable day, though- the rain came down in sheets, sideways. It was so windy we had to walk our bikes, downhill!

There was simply no way that we were going to try to pitch our tent in that kind of weather, so we made it to the nearest town (Elgin, as I remember), and knocked on the door of the first B & B we found. The nicest lady in the world opened the door and let us in, bikes and all. We had a good meal, warm, dry beds- and then clear skies in the morning. I can still remember the look of that door, and the response of that dear lady when she saw the two drenched guys standing at her door... "Oh dearie, we must do something about the two of you!"

My next example is from the other side of the door. You know how it is that sometimes on Saturday afternoons you get an unexpected knock on your door at home? Who does that? If its not Peter, miraculously escaped from prison, I'm honestly not so sure if I want to open the door to find out. Is it someone selling magazine subscriptions, soliciting for a local charity, or someone surveying the neighborhood to petition for a zoning change? In any case, I have to make a deliberate choice to go to the door, open it and be ready to respond. I know that I need to decide what I'm going to do and say before I open the door. Will I keep an open mind, or will I find a way to say "no thank you" as politely and convincingly as I can?

Opening a door to the unknown means taking a little bit of risk, opening yourself up to new possibilities that aren't of your own making.

Which all leads to the real question behind this story. Who are you in this story? Do you see yourself as a Peter, knocking on a door to make yourself known, or a Rhoda, opening up to a new possibility knocking on your door?

What door awaits you in your life? A new job, a new move, a new friend, a new decision; they happen in more ways than we realize, every day.

What door do you have to open for another? What help can you provide, what comfort can you give; what resources do you have to share?

Who is that's knocking?

You know who it is... It is the Lord, ready to join you on your journey, wherever it is that you will go...

Jesus joins us, always. Amen