

“Prison Break”
Acts 12:6-17
3rd Sunday of Easter

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Westminster, Greenville
Ben Dorr

Back in 2001, *Time* magazine named Dr. Stanley Hauerwas—a professor of theological ethics, who is now retired from Duke Divinity School—as America’s “best” theologian.

Hauerwas responded to the award—
not by saying thank you, what an honor this is...no.

Hauerwas said:
“‘Best’ is not a theological category.”

Now Hauerwas is known for that kind of startling remark, and his response to that award is my SECOND favorite comment that he’s made. But my favorite remark, the one that has always stuck at the forefront of my mind, is this:

“Christianity...is an adventure we didn’t know we want to be on.”¹

An adventure...we didn’t know...we wanted to be on?
Do you think of your faith as an adventure?
I know I don’t.

As a journey, yes.
As something I wrestle with, of course.

¹ Stanley Hauerwas, “Christianity: It’s Not a Religion, It’s an Adventure,” in *The Hauerwas Reader*, John Berkman & Michael Cartwright, ed., Durham: Duke University Press, 2001.

As a gift of God, a gift that exists at the core of who I am, a gift that has been nurtured throughout my life by too many people for me to name...absolutely.

But faith...as an adventure?

Our sermon series this Easter season is “Then and Now: What does the early church [back then] have to teach those of us in God’s church [right now]?”

And if we read the book of Acts,
 which tells the story of the early church,
 there are plenty of narratives that paint a picture
 of Christian faith as...well, adventurous.

Just take our text for today.
 It has all the elements of a good adventure story.

There’s danger—Peter is imprisoned.
 There’s uncertainty—the church is praying fervently for Peter.
 There’s hope—an angel mysteriously sets Peter free.
 There’s joy—Peter is reunited with his community, and then he
 continues on his way.

It’s a good story.
 But to be blunt, it doesn’t feel much like my story.
 Does it feel like yours?

Who here has ever been on a faith adventure LIKE THAT before?

Those of you who heard our Heritage Lecture speaker this past January, Dr. Craig Barnes, may recall that he has spent most of his career in Presbyterian churches.

Serving good people, faithful people, he said.

And then he said something like this:

“I’ve spent my career serving cautious and careful people.”

To which I said, “Amen.”

That fits me to a tee.

Look, I’m still the person who, every Sunday morning, sets two alarms, triple checks the number of pages in my sermon manuscript, and fills two cups of water and brings them up here to the pulpit before worship.

Why do I fill my own water?

After all, our head ushers are very happy to do this.

They’ve told me, Ben, you don’t have to do this.

Why do I do it?

Because years ago, when I was serving a different congregation, there was a Sunday in which an usher forgot to put a glass of water in the pulpit, and I didn’t check...so when it comes to making sure that everything is lined up for Sunday morning, I think to myself, Ben—you cannot be too careful.

Which is probably why describing faith as an adventure, something in which caution is thrown to the wind—it kind of SCRAMBLES my brain.

It gets me asking questions I don’t want to ask myself.

Questions like:

Are there ways in which my faith is TOO CAUTIOUS?

Too cautious about how much money I give away?

Too cautious about how I welcome the stranger today?

Too cautious about ways that I practice kindness, or work for justice, or love my neighbor every day?

Let me get at it like this.

In our text from Acts, when Peter knocks at the gate outside the house where the early church was gathered, what happens next?

A maid named Rhoda comes to the gate.

Luke writes:

“On recognizing Peter’s voice, she was so overjoyed that, instead of opening the gate, she ran in and announced that Peter was standing at the gate.”

And how does the early church respond to Rhoda?

Do they leap for joy?

Do they shout, OUR PRAYERS WERE ANSWERED!?

Do they run to the gate to see for themselves???

No, no...

They say to Rhoda, “You are out of your mind!”

In other words:

It could never be Peter at the gate!

You must be imagining things, Rhoda.

Never in our wildest dreams would Peter—who is probably going to die at the hands of Herod, just like James just died at the hands of Herod...it could never be Peter at the gate.

Even though we’re praying to God, God would never answer our prayers this way....

Never.

That's what the early church said.
 They said...never.
 Have you ever said "never" before?

I've told you before what happened when the Pastor Nominating Committee called and left a message on my voicemail in January of 2018. I called back and said sure, I'll be glad to set up a time to talk.

We were in Dallas at the time. I told my wife that I was talking with a pastor nominating committee from Greenville, South Carolina the following Wednesday. I'm embarrassed to admit this today, but after I listened to the voicemail, I had to pull up a map of South Carolina on my iPhone, because I did NOT know where Greenville was...

But I do know what I said to Heather.

I said, "This is nothing...no need to worry.
 I'm just seeing what's out there.
 We're not moving to South Carolina."

Hmmmm....

Have you ever said never before?
 Not just to your spouse or your child or your friend...
 Have you ever said "Never"...to God?

I recall years ago, reading about a woman named Adela Rogers St. Johns.

Do you know that name?

In the first part of the 20th century, she worked for William Randolph Hearst newspapers.

She covered all the big stories.

She was a powerful woman.

At the conclusion of her career, she received the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

In Hollywood, she met a cowboy actor named Tom Mix.

Anyone remember Tom Mix?

Mix made westerns and he recited Shakespeare. He loved to memorize passages of Shakespeare, and Adela Rogers St. Johns loved to listen to him.

The two had a conversation once.

She said, “I was talking to Tom Mix and we got to discussing religion. And I really didn’t have anything to do with religion.”

“Do you believe in God?” he asked her.

“Well,” she replied, “I don’t know. Probably not.”

And Tom Mix looked at Adela Rogers St. Johns, and recited—not Shakespeare, but two lines from an Ezra Pound poem:

*“I have seen him eat of the honeycomb
since they nailed him to the tree.”*

When Adela Rogers St. Johns published her autobiography in 1969...do you know what she titled it?

*The Honeycomb.*²

² As told by Fred Craddock in his sermon, “The Announcement,” in *The Collected Sermons of Fred B. Craddock*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011.

Do you see what we're talking about?

One of the most dangerous words we can use, when it comes to following the God of Easter...is the word NEVER.

That could never be Peter at the gate...

You see, the risen Christ isn't just calling us to go on a comfortable stroll with him. According to the book of Acts, Christ is calling us...
on an adventure.

To do things we never dreamed we might do.
 To go places with Jesus we never imagined we might go.
 To meet people we never thought we would meet.
 To love someone we never thought we would love.
 To become someone, in the hands of the living and loving God,
 we never pictured we might become.

The next story I'm going to share is going to take a little bit of time.

I need to ask for your patience while I tell you this story.
 Will you be patient while I tell you this story?

It's a Greg Boyle story.
 Some of you are familiar with the work of Gregory Boyle.

Boyle, of course, has gained national recognition in the past two decades for his work with gang members in Los Angeles. Boyle's life of faith has been nothing short of an adventure!

But adventure—does not mean all fun and games.
Adventure means loss and sorrow as well.
And Boyle has had to bury dozens upon dozens of teenagers,
young women and men whose lives were cut short far too soon.

In one of his books, Boyle tells the story of Speedy.

Speedy was a “thrill seeker,” always putting his life in danger for the heck of it, going into enemy territory and sticking his thumbs in his ears and TAUNTING a rival gang—LIKE THIS—and then racing away.

One day Speedy comes racing into Boyle’s office.
He says:

“You know, G...I don’t really care if I live or die.”

Boyle is late for the 5p Mass that he needs to lead.
He doesn’t have time for a counseling session right then.

But he says to Speedy:
“Look...I have to [lead worship] right now...[but] I care whether you live or die.”

Speedy weighs these words.
“Okay,” he says, and he’s gone.

Three hours later, Boyle is back at his desk when Speedy appears again.

Speedy’s mood is much improved.
He says: “Look, I don’t want you to get red [in the face] at what I’m about to tell you...[but] I walked Karla home.”

Karla is a girl that Speedy fancies, but Karla lives in enemy territory. To walk Karla home was to endanger both Speedy's life and Karla's life.

So of course, Boyle turns BEET RED right away!

But then Speedy goes on to say how, immediately after he dropped Karla off in her second-story apartment, and as he's going down the stairs, he encounters eight members of the rival gang.

They're not displeased to see Speedy.
They're SALIVATING.

They chase him and throw empty bottles at him, but Speedy picked up his name for a reason...and he outruns them.

That's scene one of the story.

Scene two begins like this:

Just as Speedy reaches the safety of his home turf, he bumps into Yolanda.

Yolanda is an active member of Boyle's parish.
Yolanda barely knows Speedy.

But she sees Speedy panting, out of breath, she correctly assumes that Speedy has been where he was not supposed to be.

So Yolanda says to Speedy, "If anything happened to you, it would break my heart in two."

“I’ve seen you playing with your nephew in the park. What a good uncle you are. I’ve also seen you feed the homeless at the church. What a generous and good thing that [you do].”

And she says to him again:

“If anything happened to you, it would break my heart in two.”

Speedy’s telling all this to Father Boyle:

“You know...”

He’s tapping his heart with his finger—

“that [stuff she said]—that made me feel good!”

End of scene two.

Final scene:

What do you think happened to Speedy?

If anything happened to you, it would break my heart in two...

On the heels of hearing those words, Speedy unexpectedly and inexplicably turned his life around. He ended up getting married, going back to school, having kids, landing a job.

He and Father Boyle stayed in touch through the years.

One day, they’re having dinner, and Boyle knows that Speedy’s still running, but running for different reasons: job, kids, school.

Boyle asks if he ever gets a break.

And Speedy says that on Sundays, he takes his family to Barnes & Noble, and they all go to different parts of the bookstore, and they read for two straight hours.

One day, his kids talked their dad into buying them the latest Harry Potter book.

So they go home. No tv that night.
Speedy sits on his recliner.
And his eldest daughter reads a page.
She hands the book to her younger brother, he reads a paragraph.
He hands it to the youngest, who manages to read a sentence.

And Speedy says to Father Boyle—
and his voice is trembling—

“I...just close my eyes, sitting in my recliner...
listening to my kids...read...out...loud.”³

Thank you for your patience while I shared that with you.

Let me ask you something...when I started the story about Speedy, did you think that was where his life would end up? Listening to his kids read Harry Potter at night?

Did you expect the God of Easter to turn Speedy’s life around?

Maybe you did.
Maybe you didn’t.
In the end, though, I’m not concerned about Speedy.

What interests me...is you.
Have you ever said “Never” to the God of Easter?

“I’m never going to be able to forgive him.”

³ Gregory Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion*, New York: Free Press, 2010.

“I’m never going to get over what that church did to me.”

“I’m never going to find true love again.”

“I’m never going to have hope again.”

Have you ever been too cautious with your imagination about what the living and loving God can do...with you?

If you ever find yourself saying “Never” to the God of Easter, may I suggest that the story you have patience with...is your own story?

Because God is NOT done with you.

The Love that raised Jesus from the dead,
the Love that freed Peter from prison long ago...
that very same Love is coming...
for each...
of you...

Amen.