

Christ has set us free

There's a church in Rome called St. Peter in Chains. It's built upon the site of the prison where St. Peter was jailed prior to his execution by Nero. In its gift shop you can actually buy a few links of chain with a cross attached as a souvenir of your visit. Of course, as I have mentioned before, that wasn't the first time Peter found himself jailed. Shortly after Pentecost he was confined to an ecclesiastical prison in Jerusalem. It did no good, because that very night an angel let him out to preach again. So the next time Peter was arrested, they placed him in King Herod's more secure prison. Peter's hands and feet were chained and two guards assigned to share his cell, while two more sets of guards paced the corridors between his cell and the prison gate. But, as with James Cagney in those old 1930's movies, no slammer could hold Peter. Once again an angel appeared, put the guards to sleep, prodded Peter to get dressed, then escorted him to the gate which opened of its own accord.

I was discussing these episodes with a group of gentlemen who meet every week over Scripture in the back room of Palm's Restaurant. And the question came up as to who this angel might be. Could it have been a friend on the prison staff? Or a visiting relative (like Buster Keaton in *Steamboat Bill*) carrying a hollow loaf of French bread stuffed with the contents of a hardware store? But the "how" of such escapes is hardly relevant. The deeper question is: why are so many such stories told throughout biblical and even secular literature? I mean, as if two jail breaks weren't enough, we have a third later in the *Acts of the Apostles* in which Paul is a prisoner. Only this time it's an earthquake that opens up all the cell doors and flattens the prison walls - a funny outcome to everyone but the warden. And beyond *Acts* think of all those other biblical accounts: Joseph's imprisonment and release, Jeremiah's confinement to a muddy cistern, Jonah's sojourn in the belly of a whale.

Or beyond the Bible, consider all those escape stories of *The Count of Monte Cristo*, *The Prisoner of Zenda*, those real or imagined escapes from Devil's Island or Alcatraz. Or remember that touching scene in Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* in which Sidney Carton (like Christ) sacrifices his own life to liberate Charles Darnay. Or remember Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn's hilarious effort to spring Jim loose from that cabin - or the emotion you feel when documentaries show American GIs opening the gates of Buchenwald to receive the tearful embraces of walking ghosts.

Why are we fascinated by such stories? I can only guess that deep down each one of us can identify with the inmates; each of us also feels somehow hobbled, handcuffed, confined. By what? By fear, by some accuser or warden within our heads who sits in judgment upon us, who would have us doubt there is a God or any meaning to our lives and thereby drain us of all our energy, leaving us bilious and depressed - some demonic jailer who, though daffodils bloom all around us, would have us see only dungeon walls.

Isn't that why we are drawn to such stories? Because we, too, long for some angel to lift our spirits, to set us free - be it Mark Twain and his delightful duo Tom and Huck or the loving affirmation of a friend or some other agent of Christ who summed up his mission in the words of Isaiah: *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me to announce good news, to proclaim release for prisoners, to let broken victims go free.*

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