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Sermon Title: Redemption
Scripture: Acts 12:1-11
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Acts 12:1-11

About that time King Herod laid violent hands upon some who belonged to the church. He had James, the brother of John, killed with the sword. After he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. (This was during the festival of Unleavened Bread.) When he had seized him, he put him in prison and handed him over to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending to bring him out to the people after the Passover. While Peter was kept in prison, the church prayed fervently to God for him.

The very night before Herod was going to bring him out, Peter, bound with two chains, was sleeping between two soldiers, while guards in front of the door were keeping watch over the prison. Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He tapped Peter on the side and woke him, saying, 'Get up quickly.' And the chains fell off his wrists. The angel said to him, 'Fasten your belt and put on your sandals.' He did so. Then he said to him, 'Wrap your cloak around you and follow me.' Peter went out and followed him; he did not realize that what was happening with the angel's help was real; he thought he was seeing a vision. After they had passed the first and the second guard, they came before the iron gate leading into the city. It opened for them of its own accord, and they went outside and walked along a lane, when suddenly the angel left him. Then Peter came to himself and said, 'Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hands of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting.'

Our adult class on Sundays, "Religion in the News," has been popular a long time, and the reason is that the news keeps giving us such great religious stuff to talk about. For example, Tucker Carlson, a news pundit, talking

about Michael Vick. Michael Vick is the quarterback of the Philadelphia Eagles, and is having a tremendous comeback season, single-handedly destroying the New York Giants. What he's coming back from is he was arrested and imprisoned for dog-fighting, allowing his property to be used for dog fights, a particularly cruel sport, if you can call it that. So he was kicked out of football, thrown in jail, did his time, then resurrected his career and is doing quite well this year. Here's Tucker Carlson's take. He said, "I'm a Christian. I've made mistakes. I believe in second chances... Michael Vick should have been executed."

Those are interesting, short, pithy, declarative statements that don't actually go that well together. "I'm a Christian. I believe in second chances. Michael Vick should have been executed."

Maybe we should remind ourselves of why we are called Christians. We are named after Christ. We are supposed to be Christlike. We are not called Tucker Carlson-ites or David Rowe-ites. We're Christ-ites. We are little Christs. There would be nothing wrong with Tucker Carlson's saying, "I'm a dog lover. I think Michael Vick should be executed." There is no inherent contradiction there; there is even a certain logic. But you can't start off saying, "I am a Christ-lover," then expand on that, "I believe in second chances," which is practically the centerpiece of being a Christ-lover, **and then** proclaim, "I think Michael Vick should be executed." Of course, all this is important only if Christ is important, and Christ is important.

Last Monday we had our weekly confirmation class, 25 eighth-graders preparing to join our church. And the subject was Jesus Christ. Who was this guy? Why does it matter? Does it matter? Why would we take his name? Why would any eighth-grader want to add the word Christian to his name, to her résumé, to his identity? In the class, we approached it from different angles. We'd all just been through Christmas, so we knew the Christmas story. "For God so loved the world that he sent his only begotten son so that whosoever believed in him shall not perish, but have everlasting life."

So God chose Mary and Joseph and gave us Jesus through them, born of the Virgin Mary, as the Son of God, the Savior of the world. Then I told them if that's too supernatural for you, there is another explanation called "the adoption theory." God adopted Jesus as his son. God looked down on earth and saw what an amazing guy Jesus was, and God said, "If I ever had a son, I want him to be just like Jesus." So God, being God, just did it. God adopted Jesus.

I also reminded them of one of my favorite quotes, "Jesus is the near end of God." If the concept of God is too remote for you, too vague, too invisible, too "out there," don't worry about it. Look at Jesus. Jesus is the near end of God. Jesus is the part of God we can see and know and understand. But he can't be ignored. Nobody does. Every religion in the world is intrigued by

Jesus, and impressed. Islam? Absolutely. Buddhism? There are a lot of books out there comparing Jesus and Buddha. Hinduism? I received a movie for Christmas about Jesus's life in India when he was a young man. Mahatma Gandhi revered Jesus.

If we were to think of our church as a business, and we wanted a successful business model, we'd ask ourselves, what is our core product? What's our business? What do we have to offer? And the answer is Jesus. That's what we have to offer. Everything else flows from that, from him.

We went into New York City on Tuesday to The Park Avenue Armory. You know what an Armory is, a huge, cavernous building, where armies used to train. Now it is a major arts and cultural center, and we went in for a most extraordinary exhibit called "Leonardo's Last Supper: a Vision by Peter Greenaway." Da Vinci's "The Last Supper" is actually painted on a stone wall of a monastery cafeteria in Italy, almost ruined by centuries of moisture and war. Now carefully restored, Peter Greenaway has re-created the painting, the stone wall, the monastery, using visual techniques – photography, film, music – a multimedia extravaganza. It puts you right there at the Last Supper. You feel it. We then went to the next room, another re-creation of a famous painting, Paolo Veronese's "The Wedding at Cana," where Jesus turned water into wine to save a wedding reception.

It's a multimedia extravaganza, with surround-sound and surround-art and surround-light, yet wherever you looked, always at the center, it was Jesus. I'm not doing justice to the art exhibit, but the art exhibit did justice to Jesus. Truly, the art exhibit's focal point was not da Vinci or Veronese or art history. It was Jesus.

So, what's the attraction? I'm sure there are a million reasons people still turn to Jesus Christ, but for today let's zero in on one. Jesus gets us out of stuff. It's popular to quote Jesus, who said, "I am the way," but add one more word, "I am the way **out**." Down through the ages, people have found in Jesus a way out, a way through, a way beyond. He led people out of sickness, out of demon possession, out of mental illness, out of social ostracism, out of personal despair, out of fear, out of grief, out of guilt, out of bias and bigotry. Jesus took people who were stuck somewhere, imprisoned by something physical, emotional, psychological, spiritual, and he led them out of their own private hell, their own private wilderness. He led them out and planted their feet on higher ground.

Some of you may remember an old gospel hymn, "Higher Ground":

*Lord, lift me up and let me stand,
By faith, on Heaven's table land,
A higher plane than I have found;
Lord, plant my feet on higher ground.*

And the verses go on to declare

*I'm pressing on the upward way,
New heights I'm gaining every day;
Still praying as I'm onward bound,
"Lord, plant my feet on higher ground."*

*My heart has no desire to stay
Where doubts arise and fears dismay;
Though some may dwell where those abound,
My prayer, my aim, is higher ground.*

This hymn was written over 100 years ago, and people still sing it because for 2,000 years people have found it to be true. Jesus had a way of lifting us up or leading us out or getting us beyond whatever threatens to trap us: doubt, sorrow, anger, disease, fear, worry ... and worse.

I'm not just waving the Christian banner in your face and saying things I'm supposed to say because that's my job. I'm afraid I'm one of those preachers who decided ages ago that I couldn't say what I don't believe. I'm not that good an actor. I'm expressing a lifetime of experience in churches large and small, rural and urban, rich and poor, thriving and dying, liberal and conservative, and experiences around the world, first world and third world, in the midst of war, famine, and poverty; among violence, disease, and oppression; in times of terror, disaster, and fear. I remember being in Uganda with Habitat for Humanity after the fall of Idi Amin, a ruthless, cruel, evil dictator. I was there during the civil war aftermath, with rebels still a force to be reckoned with, with hope and despair in equal measure, and I was there to start the rebuilding.

We were invited by the victims of Idi Amin. I met with the widows and orphans whose stories chilled my soul. And one day I asked a group of widows how they kept going, how they kept their spirits up. How did they keep their faith? How come they didn't give up on God? Or just quit on life altogether? Those women laughed out loud at me. "Aren't you a Christian?" they asked. "Aren't you a church pastor?" "Don't you read your Bible?" "Don't you remember Daniel in the Lion's Den? Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace?" "We are Daniel. We are Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. We've come through the fiery furnace. God took us out of the Lion's Den."

That's why I picked the Scripture for today, another one of those amazing escape stories in the Bible, Peter's miraculous escape from jail. It was a time of persecution against the early Christian church. In fact, they were hardly a church. They were a movement, a sect within Judaism, and as such an annoyance and an irritation, a trouble spot, a threat against tradition, against the way things were always done and understood and believed. So

nobody knew what to make of them. The Roman leadership, the Jewish leadership, these folks wanted calm, routine, everything in its place. Nothing new. Nothing unexpected. Nothing revolutionary. Christianity was all three: new, unexpected, revolutionary.

So King Herod killed James, one of the disciples, and tossed Peter into jail, until he could kill him. One night "an angel of the Lord appeared" inside the jail, woke Peter up, broke off his chains, and led him straight past the guard, right out of jail, free and clear. (Acts 12:1-12)

The New Testament is full of such stories. God getting people out of jams. Jailbreaks. Sick people healed. Slaves set free. Miraculous escapes. Dreams and visions leading folks in the right direction, away from danger. All of this against the backdrop of the Resurrection, the greatest escape of all, Jesus leading us out of the grave, beyond death into eternal life.

That's part of the power of Scripture. It's not Pollyanna. It doesn't gloss over reality. Even today's Scripture begins with James been killed. For James, his escape is into heaven, and for James that was as real an escape as Peter's jailbreak. We wish all the sick got better. We wish all the hungry got fed. We wish all the oppressed were set free. We wish all the innocents, all the poor, were blessed and protected.

It happens. In this life or the next. In Christianity that's equally true and equally important.

In preparing for this sermon, I found a wonderful story in *The Boston Globe*. It was around Christmas Day, and it was about Cardinal Sean O'Malley, the Roman Catholic cardinal of Boston. A man of great simplicity and humility, even as a cardinal he continues to do a lot of personal ministry among the poor, the homeless, even bringing Communion into Boston city jails. He said he loved going into the prisons, being with the most down and out, the most forgotten and abandoned and lost. In fact, Cardinal O'Malley has done it his whole career. And he told about his first year as a priest back in Butler, Pennsylvania. His bishop sent him to the local prison to preach his first sermon ever. He remembered being taught in seminary, in preaching class, to "speak into the horizon of your congregation." In other words, to help people see beyond where they are stuck, to see in Christ the way out.

So Cardinal O'Malley then a young priest, went into the Butler, Pennsylvania, prison and preached a wonderful sermon, much like this one today, based on the great escape stories of the Bible, he said, like Daniel in the Lion's Den and Peter's jailbreak out of prison. That night, several prisoners, no doubt inspired by a great sermon, escaped.

That's the problem with the Bible. Some people take it seriously! And the truth is some folks do get out of prison, prisons of all kinds. And some don't. Some are stuck in the prisons of sickness, the prisons of poverty, the prisons

of despair, the prisons of injustice, even the prisons **of** justice.

But the lessons of Cardinal O'Malley's sermon are still true, as are the lessons of this sermon, as is the hymn I quoted earlier, that Christ will lift us up and help us stand on higher ground and heaven's land. We can help that happen in this life, and God makes it happen for all of us in the next life.

Cardinal O'Malley, on his Christmas visit to a Boston jail, said his message is a simple one: "you are not forgotten ... there is a way beyond this." And one prisoner said, "I have moved beyond ... I used to just pray, 'get me out of this jam.' Now I've moved into a real relationship with God." That's a taste of freedom right there.

My prayer for all of us in 2011 is that we allow God to lead us to "higher ground."