

Mary, Peter and Rhoda Acts 12: 1-17

Part 1 (Mary)

Hi. My name is Mary. I'm here because I have come to believe in miracles and in the power of prayer and I would like to tell you why. Let me introduce myself to you first. I'm one of the very first Christians, the mother of John. You know, times for us Christians are really tough here at the moment. We are suffering from oppression and persecution. None of us is safe during these times.

Herod, whose grandfather already had all the children killed in Bethlehem many years ago, is our King. His father was involved in Jesus' condemnation and now he is after us. We who are Jesus' most faithful followers have to hide and come together in secret and yet Herod managed to find James, a friend of Jesus and myself. James was immediately killed with a sword... dead just like that.

Can you imagine how shocked we were? How sad... how frightened? How many more of us would have to die for our belief like Jesus and James did...? We were ever so petrified and didn't dare to leave the house. Day and night we mourned over the death of our dear friend and came together to pray for strength, for hope and better days to come. My sisters and brothers joined me at my house and we felt so much safer when we were together. It was such a good feeling, not to be alone and to have a community to rely on and support. But then a message arrived, that brought even more despair into my house. Peter had been arrested and put to jail.

Part 2 (Peter)

I was arrested, but the Passover Feast had already begun and King Herod could not fulfill his plan to execute me during this holy season. So I was thrown into prison and there were 16 men responsible for guarding me. There was no chance of escape – my hands and feet were bound with chains, and even when I slept there were two men lying on either side of me. King Herod didn't take any chances. He showed no mercy. And I knew that my days were numbered. I can't say that I had any real hope of being released. And though I knew there was no chance for escape, still I had many feverish nights filled with dreams of freedom, preaching again on the banks of Galilee, rejoicing again with Jesus. And in waking and in sleeping, I continued to pray

and plead for my release, knowing that many brothers and sisters in Christ were also praying for me and pleading with God.

Part 3 (Rhoda)

I was part of this group... terrified, praying behind locked doors while Peter was in prison.

I am Rhoda – to begin with.

King Herod had had Peter imprisoned, under maximum security. And we all thought that this was it: done with Peter.

With James just killed, we didn't expect them to spare Peter.

We were afraid that they would just do the same with him. Kill him. Kill one after the other. First the men, then us women. Kill us all, until none of us remained. All the followers of Jesus would be wiped out and forgotten.

Part 4 (Mary)

I will never forget the tears we cried, when we heard about it. The air was filled with fear, with sadness and anger. We had no reason to believe that Peter would be spared from death. He was safely guarded, for sure, and Herod was in the midst of preparing a big execution that everybody would talk about and that would limit our freedom even more. At first there was nothing but silence and grief but then one of us started to pray. The words were spoken so softly and shaky. But then one after the other mixed in by speaking words of assurance, prayers of hope, support, protection and love. It didn't take long until the desperate atmosphere had vanished and the power of prayer filled my kitchen. We held each other by our hands and were connected with each other, with God and with Peter by the words we spoke and the praises we sung. None of us even thought about sleeping during this night. There was not a minute in which the chain of prayer was interrupted.

Part 5 (Peter)

During this night when I was sleeping, I dreamed that a bright light filled my room and someone struck me on the side with a heavy blow, saying, “Quick, get up!” This dream was so real that I imagined the chains truly falling off my wrists and ankles, and I was filled with joy and happiness. I didn’t want this dream to end. But then the voice spoke again, “Peter, get up. Put on your clothes and sandals.” And then, half-awake, half-asleep, I opened my eyes and saw the two guards still asleep on either side of me. But a bright light filled the room and a voice, possibly the voice of God, was telling to get up and get out of here! To be honest, I was a bit afraid that I had lost my mind, and I already dreaded waking up to realize that I was still about to be executed. But suddenly, the impossible seemed possible – and even if it were only a dream or a crazed vision, I was going to do what God said. Quietly, ever so quietly but also with the speed of a racing chariot, I jumped to my feet, pulled on my cloak and sandals and began to follow the Angel, as it said, “Wrap your cloak around you and follow me.” We silently passed all 16 guards, the light from the Angel brightening my path. This cannot truly be happening, I thought over and over to myself. But when we reached the prison gates, they opened automatically and we crept outside into a dark black night. As soon as we reached the end of the first street, my angel guide disappeared. And I thought, “Oh NO, not yet – please let this wonderful dream just go on a bit longer!” I squinted my eyes shut and waited for the moment to arrive – the moment when I would roll over and see my guards, feel the chains of my prison and know that there was no savior angel, no miraculous prison break

Part 6 (Rhoda)

When Peter was imprisoned, we all met together. All the friends of Jesus who were still in Jerusalem.

We gathered at the house I shared with Mary.

Actually, I am the servant, and Mary is the head of the household, the owner of the house. But by then we’d all learned our lessons well...

Hadn’t Jesus told us: no more servants, no more masters...?

Weren’t we now all equal in God’s new family?

So, Mary and I came to call the house ours... We share everything. We opened our home for Christian worship, and we were proud of hosting one of the first early Christian churches.

So on that day when Peter was arrested, all the sisters and brothers immediately came to our house, knocked at the door, begged us to let them in, and urged us to lead them in prayer. Prayer for Peter. For protection. For perseverance. For strength. For release. For a quick death – if it came to that.

Anything that came to our minds.

We could only hope that he wouldn't have to suffer too much!

After all he wasn't the first martyr.

Stephen stoned, James killed.

Hundreds of us persecuted and scattered all over the place...

What would they do with Peter?

Times were frightening.

And there wasn't much more we could do but pray...

On that night of Peter's arrest, we were all panicking.

Only prayer and the fact that we were all together in one place, helped us not to lose our minds...

Part 7 (Peter)

Was I crazy? There I was, having just experienced a beautiful dream and just waiting to wake up and find myself still in chains... but nothing happened. Slowly, I opened my eyes. Finding myself in the street where my dream just left off, I was amazed! Could it be? Could this be reality? Could I truly have just escaped from Herod's prison with the help of one of God's own angels? But no, I was not crazy. I could smell the animals from a nearby barn, hear a man snoring in a house just above me. Somewhere in the distance I heard strains of music and laughter – and I was a free man! I was filled with joy. I wanted to shout Hallelujah, to sing and praise, fall down on the ground and kiss it with thanksgiving for God's mercy. But I knew that the prison gates were only one street behind me – and I had to move fast. After all, I was a wanted man, and if anyone strayed from the Passover feast and were to meet me on this road, I would find myself right back in prison. No, I had to move quickly... and quietly. But where should I go?

Part 8 (Rhoda)

And while we were still praying, I heard a persistent knocking at the door.

Since Mary was leading prayer, it was my turn to answer the door. I left the big meeting room, carefully closed the door behind me (you never knew in those days), went through the courtyard and opened the gate enough to peek through.

It is difficult to explain what happened then...

I glimpsed through the narrow slit and couldn't believe my eyes.

It was Peter out there. It was really him.

The very person we were praying for so hard. The one we'd already thought lost.

Gone. Tortured. Killed.

There he was.

And I don't know what came over me: I closed that silly door and ran off.

Ran back to the others – through the yard, and told them: Peter had arrived.

Can you imagine? I didn't let him in!

Instead I ran to the others and experienced what Mary experienced after Jesus' resurrection: they didn't believe me – in the first place...

I had to hear all sorts of remarks on my possible mental instability... whether I was out of my mind... suggesting I had seen an angel...

Part 9 (Peter)

I had no idea about what to do next – so I began knocking a bit louder. I would not leave without an explanation. God did not rescue me from prison to leave me standing outside Mary's gate. Soon, I saw a flicker of light from the other side of the gate. I heard whispers and footsteps, and then a voice called out to me. The door was opened just a crack – I saw fear and doubt in the eyes of Mary, perhaps worried that Herod's guards were here to torment her. But as soon as she recognized me, the gate flew open and she raced out to embrace me.

Part 10 (Mary)

There had been another knock on the door. This time it was me, who carefully opened the door. I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw his familiar face and heard his voice whispering to us. My friends came running to the door, touching Peter, laughing, crying and all talking at the same time. Peter put his finger on his lips and shoved us inside. We were so thrilled to see him that we had forgotten how dangerous our situation was. It took some time for us to realize that it was really him.

Part 11 (Peter)

Inside the comfort and safety of Mary's home, I told all of my friends about how God and his angel had rescued me from prison and death – we celebrated quietly together throughout the night – praying, singing, embracing and dancing. God had done a miracle – a BIG one – and here I was to prove it. Our joy was overflowing... but then I realized that I needed to get going. When the guards realized I was gone, Mary's would be one of the first places they looked for me. And I didn't want to endanger her or the others – not after their hospitality and Christian love. Asking them to relay the events of my prison break to James and the other Apostles, I fled into the early light.

Part 12 (Mary)

He vanished into the dawning morning.

Our situation hasn't changed much. We are still persecuted, have to hide and are afraid. But we will never forget how faithful God answered our prayers. And whenever fear comes up, we take each others hands, speak the words that come to our minds and get connected with our Lord and with each other.

On the night of Peter's arrest I was the host and I was able to lead the friends around me in prayer. My house was the gathering place in which we shared our sorrows and pain. But in the days to come others followed my example and opened their hearts and houses to each other.

Sermon for Three Voices – Caro Voss, Emily Zumpe & Christine Erb-Kanzleiter

So whenever life gets tough or daily routines drag you down, think of me and gather some friends around you. Be the host or be the guest. But never forget how powerful a common prayer can be.

Amen.