



June 24, 2018

Overwhelmed?

**READ:** Acts 12:6 (Common English Bible)

*“The night before Herod was going to bring Peter’s case forward, Peter was asleep between two soldiers and bound with two chains, with soldiers guarding the prison entrance.”*

**REFLECT:**

The late Pittsburgh astronomer, John Brasher, wrote his own epitaph: “I have loved the stars too fondly to ever be fearful of the night.” What a beautiful and encouraging thought! As I have pondered those words it seems to me Peter, one of Jesus’ disciples, could have written them. As Jesus’ disciple, Peter did not always live in the sunlight. Followers of Jesus rarely do. Peter’s ministry was not always filled with the brightness of success and victory. Peter knew darkness and despair. He knew times of trouble and tragedy. Here, in the twelfth chapter of Acts, we learn that King Herod has begun to make life difficult for the Christian Church. James, John’s brother, is killed with a sword. Then Herod has Peter arrested and placed in prison. Peter’s fate seems as certain as that of James. In Peter’s day – as is today – following Jesus demands considerable courage.

What is remarkable is how this story unfolds. Chained inside the walls of a prison, with sixteen guards stationed on watch for a single man, Peter simply goes to sleep. At this very moment, the night could not have been darker for Peter. Yet, there is no evidence that Peter was fearful. Peter sleeps. The church of Jesus Christ is now under a most severe persecution and its continued existence seems doubtful. King Herod has found political favor among his constituency by destroying the lives of Christian leaders and – right or wrong – he continues simply because it is popular. The night is very dark for Peter; very dark for the church. Yet, Peter sleeps. But there is more in this story. While Peter sleeps, the church prays. When Peter and the church must have felt overwhelmed, the church holds onto hope.

That day is not unlike today. On our streets, in our neighborhoods, and in our places of work, the prevailing mood of the day is, overwhelmed. The world today seems to be more complex, more massive, and difficulties more insurmountable than our individual and corporate memory can recall. The magnitude of the problems we face as a nation – particularly gun violence – leaves us exhausted and frightened. Everything now seems to be beyond the power of ordinary people and governments to solve or manage. It is night, and we have become fearful. Confronted with the overwhelming problems of today the question presses, is there hope?

In his book, *Facing Death*, Billy Graham shares a story about Donald Grey Barnhouse, one of America’s leading Bible teachers in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Cancer took Barnhouse’s first wife, leaving him with three children all under twelve. The day of the funeral, Barnhouse and his children were driving to the service when a large truck passed them, casting a noticeable shadow across their car. Turning to his oldest daughter, who was staring sadly out the window, Barnhouse asked, “Tell me sweetheart, would you rather be run over by that truck or its shadow?” Looking curiously at her father, she replied, “By the shadow, I guess. It can’t hurt you.” Speaking to all his children, Barnhouse said, “Your mother has not been overridden by death, but by the shadow of death. That is nothing to fear.” Perhaps, this is a truth that Peter and the church understood. So Peter slept and the church prayed. Their witness strengthens us today.

