

Streetsville United Church
Sunday, June 20, 2010
Rev. John Tapscott

"IT REALLY HAPPENED!"

Acts 12:9-11

So-called "reality programs" are quite popular on television these days. These programs follow people in their daily lives as they really are, raw and unedited, with maybe with the odd beep for impolite language. There is no chance for rehearsal or second takes. There certainly are many of these programs. There's "The Nanny", that child-rearing expert who brings order to homes where kids are running wild; and "Canada's Worst Drivers", though we don't need a reality show for that. We see plenty of examples every day on the roads, knowing, of course, that none of us would ever qualify. One reality program I enjoy is "Ice Road Truckers", which follows the adventures of those brave souls who drive 18 wheelers along northern Canada's ice roads in -40' temperatures.

The book of Acts gives us a look at the reality of the early church. Acts was written by Luke, who also wrote the Gospel of Luke. At the beginning of his Gospel Luke tells of his desire to get things right. Luke 1, verses 3 & 4, "I decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed." This applied to the Book of Acts, as well. There were no video cameras in the early church, but we have an account from someone who was committed to accuracy. That's why I'm always surprised at sceptics who say, "No, no, Luke got it wrong. It was different. It wasn't like that." Well, how do they know? They weren't there. And what about the Holy Spirit, who surely would prevented Luke from writing things that would misinform us. In fact, archeological evidence over the last century has tended to confirm Luke's account. It shows us that he was a master historian. We can trust that this is the way it really was.

In Acts chapter 12 we see the reality of life in the early church, both the persecution the church suffered, as well as the church's active prayer life.

About that time, Luke tells us, King Herod laid hands upon some who belonged to the church in Jerusalem This was the early 40's A. D. He beheaded James, the brother of John, then arrested Peter and planned to kill him, too. Two guards were with Peter in the prison cell, both attached to his wrists by chains. Two more guards stood at the door. From a human perspective, Peter

was going no where except to his death. But says Luke, while Peter was kept in prison, the church prayed fervently to God for him.

The night before Herod was to bring Peter out, Peter was asleep between the guards. Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. The angel tapped Peter on the shoulder and said, "Get up quickly." The chains fell off his wrists. The angel told him to get dressed and to follow him. Peter did not realize that what was happening with the angel's help was real; he thought he was seeing a vision. But they passed the guards inside the prison and came to the iron door which swung open for them. They began walking along a city lane, and suddenly the angel left him. By now Peter was fully awake in the cool night air. He came to himself and said, "Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hands of Herod..." In other words, "This was no vision. It really happened. I am really free." And he started off to the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark, where many had gathered and were praying. "It really happened."

Now here's the first lesson that leaps out of this truth. **Our Christian faith is grounded in things that really happened.**

Some people deny that, seeing the Bible as sort of a fairy tale or myth. But our faith is rooted and grounded in real historical events. Now we cannot always explain or fully understand these events. That's because they are the mighty acts of God. But real events were the basis of Israel's faith. Think of the creation, the flood, God's calling of Abraham, the Hebrews' escape from Egypt, the parting of the Red Sea, the giving of the commandments to Moses at Sinai, the settlement of the Promised Land. These events were the basis of our Israel's faith and the forerunner of our Christian faith.

For our Christian faith too, is based on a real historical event - the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God's mighty act in history for our salvation unto eternal life. Jesus was not the figment of someone's imagination. He was a real flesh and blood person, foretold by the prophets, living in a specific time and place. His death on the Cross and his burial are among the best-attested events in the Bible. And his resurrection was real too, very well supported by the evidence. Consider the resurrection appearances to many people, the unlikely choosing of the women as the first witnesses, the empty tomb, the rise of the early church, the change in the disciples. All this helps us to believe that at Easter God really loosed his Son from the bonds of death and caused him to appear for forty days in his resurrection body. Some claim that the resurrection stories were the disciples' way of saying that they experienced Jesus' on-going presence after he had died. But that's not how the Bible reads. It reads as if

something happened which was unique and unexpected and beyond full explanation but very real nonetheless.

Now historical evidence does finally prove these events, but such evidence brings us much to the event, and makes the leap of faith much shorter. One thing that makes Christ's resurrection so likely to be real was that the disciples disbelieved at first. They certainly weren't expecting it. But the evidence changed their doubts into faith.

That's a good clue that our story today really happened. We can't explain it other than to say that it was God's mighty intervention to set Peter free. At first even Peter didn't think that it was real. But as he walked along the Jerusalem streets he realized that it really had happened. When initial doubts in an account give way to faith, that is a real sign of a real event.

Now not everything in the Bible is the report of a real historical event. The Bible contains metaphors and parables. It is a historical reality that Jesus taught in parables. But the parable itself may not have been a historical event in the sense that you could put a name and face to the characters. Jesus was describing the truth of God's Kingdom through earthly stories. And when the 23rd Psalm says "The Lord is my Shepherd," it doesn't mean that God is literally a shepherd. It is a metaphor meaning that God acts towards us as a shepherd acts towards his sheep (which may not be particularly flattering to us). The Bible contains metaphors and parables, but mostly the Bible is an account of events that really happened. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is a God who intervenes in history to accomplish his purposes and to save his people. Our faith is based on real events. That's what we teach the children in Sunday School. The Bible is not a book like Aesop's fables, but a record of God acting and revealing himself through actual events. Next fall, when the children return to Sunday School they will be taught the Bible in a way that links stories together in chronological sequence, so they see the Bible as a record of God's real actions in history. "It Really Happened."

And here's the second lesson that leaps out of this truth. **We can expect a real answer to our prayers.**

The rest of the story is interesting. As soon as Peter arrived at Mary's house, he knocked at the outer gate and a maid named Rhoda came to answer. When she heard Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed, that instead of opening the gate, she ran in and told the others that Peter was there. They said to her "You're out of your mind!" But she insisted. The rest of them said, "It is his angel." But they couldn't ignore Peter's continued knocking, so when they went and opened the gate, they saw him and were amazed. Now they knew that "it had really

happened.”

Now we must give a lot of credit to that early church. Despite opposition and persecution, they gathered together often and prayed fervently, as Luke tells us. We can learn much from their example of faith and perseverance. But though they were praying fervently for Peter, they weren't really expecting an answer, at least not this answer. They were very surprised at what actually happened, yet another sign that it really did happen.

Certainly we need to recapture something of the fervent prayer life of the early church. And let's pray expecting a real answer to our prayers. Now we usually have a part to play and we must do our best, but let's pray with the expectation that something will happen that wouldn't happen without our prayers.

Now God's answer may sometimes be different than what we specifically pray for. Sometimes God may answer prayers for someone's healing with release from the disease. Or sometimes he may answer by helping someone to enter into the valley of the shadow of death with peace and courage and faith. But in either case, God provides a real answer to a specific prayer. The Psalmist writes, "I waited patiently for the Lord, he heard and answered my cry." Praying often takes much patience and perseverance. But we can't allow ourselves to become frustrated. For God is God and we are not. God might say "No" to our particular prayer in order to say "Yes" to something better or greater than we can imagine. Our God is a God who does real things in our lives and in the church and in the world. So we pray for specific things expecting that God will answer in a real way according to God's plan and his will. God lets no prayer go unheard or unanswered.

The end of the story shows us that God often answers our prayers at a higher level than we can imagine. Acts tells us that after Peter's escape, Herod went down to his place in Caesarea. Putting on his royal robes he took his seat on the platform and delivered a public address to the people of Tyre and Sidon. They kept shouting, "The voice of a god, and not of a man!" And immediately, because he had not given glory to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down and he was eaten by worms and died, a way of saying that his death was unpleasant. Exit Herod. But, says Luke, the word of God continued to advance and gain adherents. Did the church expect that answer? Probably not, but "it really happened." Yes, God does answer prayer in a real way, often beyond our expectations. God really answers prayer, therefore we really pray.

