

One day back in the 16th century Pope Leo X was captured by enemy forces and imprisoned in the town of Ravenna. He escaped and returned safely to Rome. As silly as this sounds, when he got home, he decided to redecorate. He hired Raphael – the painter, not the Ninja turtle. In one of the rooms at the Vatican Raphael created a famous fresco, which depicts today's first reading.

In that reading from Acts of the Apostles, Peter, the first pope, was arrested and put in prison. His security was very tight. Peter was bound by double chains. Two soldiers slept at his side and other guards kept watch outside the prison. An iron gate enclosed the whole area. They wanted to make sure he'd never get out.

But he did. An angel of the Lord stood by him, tapped him on the side, woke him up, and the chains fell from his wrists. The angel told him to get dressed, and Peter followed the angel out past the first guard, and then the second. The iron gate opened by itself, the angel disappeared, and Peter walked away free. Raphael remembered this story when Pope Leo X was freed from prison, and all Christians remember it as a sign of God's ability to break us free from injustice.

Today we celebrate Saints Peter and Paul, the two greatest apostles who spread the Christian faith. Peter preached to the Jews, and Paul preached to the Gentiles. They had amazing success in spite of hardships. The word of God cannot be chained.

Each June 29 our church commemorates the martyrdom of these apostles. History doesn't tell us much about their deaths, so legends have developed. According to one tradition, they both died on the same day, Paul by the sword and Peter on the cross. They brought Peter to the Vatican Hill to be crucified during the persecution of Nero. Peter objected that he was not worthy to be martyred on a cross as Jesus was. Jesus came from heaven to earth, he was upright, and so was lifted up on a cross. But Peter was going from earth to heaven, and he was a sinner. The legend is that Peter asked to be crucified upside down. You can see images of an upside cross all over the Vatican today.

The Catholic Church still suffers from persecutions without and from sin within. Those who have been hurt by the church need God's protection even more than our pope and bishops do. God's angel freed Peter from jail, and we believe God will free all those who suffer unjustly at the hands of others. The word of God cannot be chained.