

THE STORY OF
Katie Luther

– The Nun Who Escaped to True Freedom –



Written by

GRETCHEN RONNEVIK

“A runaway nun marries a university professor. Together they have six children and cause waves that change life across Europe and beyond. Gretchen Ronnevik captures the dynamic relationship of Katharina von Bora and her initially reluctant husband, Martin Luther, from its roots in her cloister experience to the end of their life together and the years of her widowhood with insight and sensitivity. This entertaining telling of the adventure that drove the Wittenberg Reformation brings to life Katie’s vibrant personality, her sense of the gospel of Christ, and her skills at managing a household often bursting at the seams. A delightful, inspiring read for young and old.”

Robert Kolb, Professor of Systematic Theology
Emeritus, Concordia Seminary

“As a pastor and father of five kids, I am so grateful for Gretchen Ronnevik’s book about the life of Katie Luther. *The Story of Katie Luther* is much more than an excellent children’s biography. As she tells Katie’s story, Ronnevik teaches us about Reformation history, key theological concepts, and the freeing power of the gospel. This book is a wonderful resource for Christian parents and educators, making the riches of the Reformation accessible to young children.”

Adriel Sanchez, Pastor, North Park Presbyterian Church,
San Diego, California; Host, *Core Christianity Radio*;
author, *Praying with Jesus*

“In *The Story of Katie Luther*, Gretchen Ronnevik introduces readers to a pillar of the Reformation whose courage, intelligence, and trust in God make her well worth getting to know.”

Lucy S. R. Austen, author, *Elisabeth Elliot: A Life*

“An utterly delightful tale of one of the Reformation’s unsung heroines!”

Jared C. Wilson, Author in Residence, Midwestern Seminary; author, *Echo Island* and *The Storied Life*

The Story of Katie Luther

Lives of Faith and Grace

Edited by Champ Thornton

The Story of Katie Luther: The Nun Who Escaped to True Freedom

The Story of Martin Luther: The Monk Who Changed the World

The Story of Katie Luther

The Nun Who Escaped to True Freedom

Gretchen Ronnevik

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To Knut

*Love,
Your Kette*

“So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.”

JOHN 8:36

Contents

- 1 The Escape (1523) *1*
- 2 A Life without Freedom (1504–1515) *9*
- 3 Life as a Nun (1515–1523) *21*
- 4 Reformation Rumblings (1505–1523) *31*
- 5 Falling in Love (1523–1525) *43*
- 6 Marriage before Love (1525) *53*
- 7 An Unusual Marriage (1525–1546) *63*
- 8 Blessing of Children (1526–1552) *75*
- 9 Loss upon Loss (1527–1542) *87*
- 10 An Open Home (1525–1546) *97*
- 11 The Aftermath (1546) *103*
- 12 War in Wittenberg (1546–1552) *115*
- Conclusion: Lessons from a Life *125*

- Study Questions *129*
- Timeline *137*
- More to Explore *141*



1

The Escape

1523

EARLY EASTER MORNING, before sunrise, Katharina von Bora (*kah-tah-REE-nah von BOH-rah*) wrapped a shawl around her thin wool dress. It was chilly, but there was no frost that night. Without a sound, she walked softly and carefully down the hallway, along with a dozen or so other nuns. They did not say

a word to each other, but exchanged glances full of terror and excitement. They were escaping.

As they reached the courtyard, they motioned to each other using hand signals to communicate so no one even had to whisper. Once outside, they heard a horse shaking his head, as his owner tried to keep him quiet and calm. Behind the horse was a cart that usually carried groceries or supplies. This was their way out.

The women climbed into the cart, and the man, Mr. Koppe, pulled a tarp over them to hide them from view. He flicked the reins, and the horse started walking across the courtyard, toward their gateway to freedom. As the pre-dawn sky began to turn from black to gray, these nuns made history. In the midst of the Protestant Reformation, these were the first nuns who dared to escape to freedom.

Escaping a cloister was dangerous. If they were caught, punishment could have been the death penalty. But for these nuns, this Easter Sunday, April 5, 1523, was about life not death. How fitting

that on this Resurrection Day, they claimed their glorious new life of freedom in Christ!

But the decision to escape on Easter wasn't just fitting. It was smart. On this night the whole schedule of the cloister was different. All the nuns had stayed up the entire night for special services. That meant they were distracted and extra tired during this pre-dawn escape, and even the caretakers had extra duties.

Before this group of nuns slipped out, they had heard the Bible read, from Exodus 13–14. What better night to once again hear how Moses and all the Israelites had fled the slavery of Egypt! And how they, like the Israelites, were to be silent and make their escape:

And Moses said to the people, "Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the LORD, which he will work for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall never see again. The LORD will fight for you, and *you have only to be silent.*" (Ex. 14:13–14)

Tonight was the perfect night to escape. They had to go; so much had changed in the past few years. What they had learned meant they could not stay. Their home, the cloister, was a place to try to live a holy life, a life devoted to God and separate from the world.

Yet, their whole lives, the nuns had been told that they must try to attain perfection so that God would

— In Other Words —

A **cloister** is a home for a group of nuns or monks that is walled off and separate from the rest of society. Sometimes the place where nuns lived is also called a *convent*.

Indulgences were a practice by which people could pay money to the church to remove the consequences of their sins or their relatives' sins.

The **Protestant Reformation** was a movement in the 1500s to deal with corruption within the church. It ended up in a church split resulting in

look kindly on them. The more perfect they were, the more God would hear their prayers. And because their prayers were supposed to be extra holy, people paid the church money to have nuns pray for them.

But recently there had been whispers among the nuns. Rumors swirled about the teaching of a monk. (Nuns were women, and monks were men.) His name

those who protested the corruption (Protestants) splitting off from the Roman Catholic Church, which was led by a man called the pope. This Reformation was led by Martin Luther.

Grace describes the forgiveness that God gives us, because of who he is, not because of what we have done or earned. God chooses to love and forgive because he is a loving and forgiving God, not because we have done things to make him love and forgive us. When God chases down sinners for the purpose of loving, forgiving, and freeing them from the trap of sin—this is grace.

KATIE LUTHER



was Martin Luther, and he had questioned all this teaching about needing perfection and money to earn God's love. He had even challenged the pope!

And even after this monk had been kicked out of the church, he kept writing and teaching. His papers were passed around and discussed. They were so revolutionary! He said that God forgives us because of Christ's death and resurrection not because of what we do or don't do. In 1520, he published *The Freedom of the Christian*. He also started to publish writings specifically about the freedom of monks and nuns.

Martin Luther said that if any monk or nun had been forced *against his or her will* to take vows of obedience, poverty, and chastity, he or she was released from those vows. He said God wanted all Christians to live in freedom and that Christ's death on the cross paid for their freedom, not their money or good works. They couldn't earn grace. God didn't love monks or nuns more because they prayed several times a day, woke up throughout the night to pray, or because they took shelter from the world

inside a cloister. Instead, they were free because of Jesus's death and resurrection, and this freedom was given freely through faith in Jesus. Life in the cloister wasn't a life of freedom; it was like a prison.

And now Katharina von Bora and her friends were escaping. But what lay ahead of them?

People all over the empire wondered: Was Martin Luther encouraging nuns to *not* pray several times a day and to *not* dedicate their lives to holiness? Was he actually encouraging a life of sin? What exactly did this "freedom of the Christian" mean practically?

On this Easter Sunday, Katharina von Bora was about to find out. It was Resurrection Day. It was the day her new life of freedom began.