

Meeting Christ in the Strangest Places

June 2, 2019 – Easter 7C

Rev. Rebekah Sweet

Acts 16:25-34 (NRSV)

²⁵ About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. ²⁶ Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened. ²⁷ When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped. ²⁸ But Paul shouted in a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." ²⁹ The jailer^[a] called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. ³⁰ Then he brought them outside and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" ³¹ They answered, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." ³² They spoke the word of the Lord^[b] to him and to all who were in his house. ³³ At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. ³⁴ He brought them up into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.

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(Inspired by the message "Liberated" by Rev. Whitney Rice, Episcopal priest from Webster Groves, Missouri.)



LIBERATION ~Today's scripture text teaches us that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is about liberation.

We see this dynamic all over our story from Acts. Just prior to the passage Wendy shared with us, we hear that Paul and Silas, as they minister in Philippi, attract a follower. She is an enslaved woman, and she is said to have a "spirit of divination." Other translations call her a fortune-teller or psychic ~ the result of which was that: "[She] brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling."

This woman was being doubly exploited. First, she was held in slavery, and second, she was used to make money by manipulating what was either a genuine spiritual gift of her own or the gullibility and spiritual hunger of anyone her owners could attract. She had no freedom of self-determination, and she was being used as a circus side-show act.

But she could sense the true spiritual power of Paul and Silas, and she pursued it. "She would cry out, 'These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.' She kept doing this for many days," the story says, and then Luke tells us that Paul was "very much annoyed." Why was he annoyed? Well, anyone following you around shouting out the same sentence for days at a time might get a bit annoying after a while. It's also possible that Paul was irritated that someone was constantly calling attention to him, especially when that attention was unwelcome. This woman trapped in slavery would not be silent. And when oppressed people refuse to be silent, people with the power to do something about that oppression, who don't really want to deal with it, get very annoyed.

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For those of us in the dominant culture, this is precisely our situation with those suffering from racial, gender, and economic injustice in our own country and around the world. We do anything we can to not hear their cries and the proclamation that God's power could make a positive change if we would let it. Most of the time it's a low level of discomfort that we can stifle with materialism and busyness. But sometimes it gets loud enough to annoy us into action. We don't want to admit that there are enslaved people around us and we are not doing our best to seek the LIBERATION that the reign of Christ requires.

Awful as that truth is, we're in good company. Saint Paul himself fell into the same trap. But Paul eventually lets his discomfort drive him to do the work that he is being called to do. He, through the power of Jesus, liberates this woman from her exploitation. Luke tells us: "Paul, very much annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, 'I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.' And it came out that very hour." And then they all went home and lived happily ever after.

Oh, no, wait, that's not what happened. "When her owners saw that their hope of making big money from this slave was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the authorities...The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped, and ordered them to be beaten with rods. After they had given Paul and Silas a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. Following these instructions, the jailer put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks."

Ouch. Paul and Silas have succeeded in unleashing the liberating power of the gospel, but the result is that they have exchanged their own freedom for the freedom of the slave woman. And that's another truth that we don't really want to grapple with. If and when we finally listen to the Spirit enough to get serious about participating in the liberation of oppressed people in our communities, there will be a cost.

For some activists, it is as literal as actual jail time for civil disobedience, just like Paul and Silas. But for most of us, the cost will be much more subtle. It will be the loss of some of our own privileged position, some of our own wealth, some of our own comfort and security, some of our own certainty that we are right. And some of us would frankly prefer literal chains around our hands and feet like Paul. That's much more glamorous and dramatic and noble than the humble spiritual discipline of letting go of our own power.

We have seen the liberation of the enslaved woman, and we are about to see the liberation of Paul and Silas from their unjust imprisonment. But what makes this story remarkable is that there is much more liberation happening here than just the obvious. What makes this story about the transformative power of Jesus Christ is that the oppressors are liberated right along with the oppressed. The enslaved woman cracks open the fault line of liberation, and Paul and Silas help the seismic shift along until God's earthquake comes and the jailer himself, the ultimate oppressor, says yes to the liberation of Jesus.

When people are willing to give themselves for the liberation of others, to walk freely the way of the Christ for the sake of those denied their dignity as children of God, the rocks and stones themselves start to sing, as Jesus foretold. Justice rolls down like waters. Every valley is exalted and every hill made low. This is the earth-shattering power of the

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marriage of justice and mercy that is the gospel of Jesus Christ, and this remaking of the earth is the laying of the foundation stones of the new Reign of Christ.

Do we live our lives as though that were true? A great deal of the time, the earthquakes of God are shattering walls all around us, and we're so terrified of that **loss of control** that we cling to our chains and call them comfort and harmony. **Liberation**, which is Jesus by another name, is disruptive and scary and can feel out of control. It changes things forever, and for we who are powerful and comfortable, it rarely feels to us like it's for the better. Among the many who are liberated in this story, the owners of the slave woman were also liberated ~ from their wealth and their ability to continue exploiting her. But they probably didn't call it liberation. They likely called it unfair and wrong and a threat to the rule of law.

Are we doing the same? Is God's earthquake knocking at our doors while we're calling it unseemly and unnecessarily divisive and a distraction from the REAL business of the church? The liberation of Jesus Christ breaks open not just our own chains but those of everyone we have failed to support in their quest for justice. It will, in the long term, free us from those very labels of oppressed and oppressor that imprison us now. God's people, healed, forgiven, and free, will be known by new names: Beloved, Precious, Heirs of Life Eternal, Disciples of Jesus Christ.

This is the last Sunday of Easter. For forty days we have proclaimed the Resurrection, but each of us must ask in the privacy of our own hearts whether we are actually living as though it were true. Perhaps that should be the topic of our individual and corporate reflection as we come to Christ's table today.

Proclaiming truth to power and singing to God from jail are terrible risks, but the earthquake of God is our liberation made real. Amen.