

Acts 16, 7th of Easter, June 2019

This morning we are celebrating the 7th Sunday of Easter, bringing this current season of the Church Year to a close. Next Sunday is the Festival of Pentecost and begins the liturgical season of Pentecost that will carry us through the summer. One of the symbols of this change of season can be found in our Paschal Candle here, the Candle of the Resurrection. It is lit at every baptism, every funeral, and throughout the season of Easter as a reminder of resurrection and new life. So, it's been lit every Sunday since April 21st. It's lit throughout today's service and it will be lit at the beginning of next Sunday's service, but will be extinguished during that service at the traditional point, as a visual reinforcement of moving from Easter season to Pentecost season; one being the season of resurrection, the other the season of growing in discipleship. Throughout this Easter season we've heard a recurring theme: we've heard about resurrection, new life, a new creation. And today, as the season ends, we have a final dramatic story of new life and creation in the lesson from Acts. So, if you are feeling a need to be made new, you are in luck; this is the text for you!

A little context here for this remarkable lesson. The time is the 1st C. AD, likely in the decade of the 30s somewhere; Christ has died, been raised, and ascended already and the fledgling church is just underway for perhaps a few years. The setting is the city of Philippi in the region of Macedonia, an area of Greek background under Roman rule. We're not in Israel anymore. The church is stretching out into the larger world. Paul has gone to Macedonia to spread the new Christian faith, and with him are Timothy, Silas, and Luke, the latter being the author of both the 3rd Gospel and the narrator of this book of Acts. This is a first person account, for the most part. That's who is meant by the word "we" in our lesson.

The text begins with the four men heading out to a place of prayer, and on the way they encounter a slave girl who provided a source of income for her owners through her fortune telling. It was a most profitable business, the people of the 1st C. being as gullible as are the people of our own century. This slave girl, though, is represented not so much as a

fraud, but as one possessed by an evil spirit which provided her this dubious gift of foretelling. We frequently see in Scripture that the evil recognizes the Godly and tries to gain control over it by naming it. That happens in this instance as the slave girl takes to following the men, doing it for several days in a row. She cries out, “These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.” Interesting, isn’t it? She, a slave to human greed and demonic possession, (however we might understand that,) perceives that the four *apostles* are slaves—not to evil or to human bondage, but to *God*. She tells the truth, but her persistent and shrill cries disturb Paul. In an honest retelling from Luke, our on-the-ground correspondent and historian, we learn that Paul was “very much annoyed” by this slave girl. Annoyed? This girl was, after all, victimized by both humans and the power of evil; her owners are exploiting her for money. We would imagine Christ responding to her out of compassion, but Luke tells us frankly that Paul is motivated by irritation. Maybe we’d be more annoyed than filled with compassion also. At any rate, we read on, “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 did. Paul performs an exorcism; however we might understand *that*; he frees this young woman from her captivity to evil. But at the same time, he takes away what made her valuable to her owners and destroys their profitable business. We hear no more of the slave girl, which is unfortunate; we can but hope that now freed from this dark gift of fortune telling she found another way to prove her value and live in the light of God. But, while the ending of her story is unknown, we do know how her owners react. They are furious that they can no longer exploit this young slave woman for profit! In our day, they would file a law suit. They take more direct action in Paul’s day, having him and Silas dragged away, beaten, and imprisoned. Lots of drama and trauma in this story, but who has been made new so far, who has experienced an Easter event? The slave girl, most certainly. She has been released from captivity to dark forces. She literally has a new life. But what of Paul and Silas? They are arrested, and primarily for the crime of being *Jewish, not Christian*. At this point, Christianity was so insignificant and new as to pass mostly unnoticed by the Roman

empire, but the *Jews* were a small, but persistent annoyance to Rome; kind of like a mosquito buzzing in your ear, tiny but irritating. The authorities are only too ready to appease the rich slave owners and indulge their own prejudices against Jews by locking up these two men. The captive-slave girl may have been liberated, but her liberators are now literally captive, in stocks and chains in a jail cell. Lots going on here, right?

In spite of their captivity, though, Paul and Silas have also been made new. Years before this, we read of Paul's conversion experience on the road to Damascus. Silas has also converted to Christianity. These men have *already* been made new. And perhaps because of that, they don't simply languish in captivity; they demonstrate impressive resilience, singing and praying in their jail cell. So unusual is this behavior, that we read that the other prisoners were stunned into silence, and sat listening to them. And now God intervenes through a natural act—an earthquake takes place and breaks apart the prison. Such earthquakes were not uncommon in Macedonia, but the timing here certainly suggests divine intervention. Besides which, the cell doors break open and the chains come unfastened. Literally, the prisoners are freed. The jailer, whose own life is forfeit if he loses a prisoner, decides to take his own life before the Roman authorities can get to him. Paul prevents him from this suicidal act and assures him the prisoners are, in fact, still present and accounted for. The jailer senses that something much bigger than himself, *even* bigger than the Roman empire, is happening here. *He* becomes a new creation that very night, converting to the Christian faith, along with his entire household. And the result of his being made new is the creation of something else *within* him: compassion. We read, "at that same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds." This new behavior stands in stark contrast to the greed of the slave girl's owners, the violence of the authorities, and the jailer's own earlier indifference to their wounds. As a new creation, something new is created within him, compassion—compassion should always be a hallmark of those who follow Jesus.

Now, as I said earlier, a lot has happened in this day for a lot of people within this lesson. I mean, Paul and Silas pack more action and drama into 24 hours than many of us will experience over years and years. This day of theirs is so unique, that it may be hard for us to put ourselves in the place of Paul and Silas. I mean, how many demons will you be exorcising today? How many beatings have you ever endured for your faith? How often have you sat, singing and praying, in a cell where you have been wrongfully imprisoned because of religious prejudice? This story is removed from us in history and in geography, and some aspects of it are simply foreign to us. But other facets of this story are surprisingly contemporary, aren't they? The captivity and exploitation of a vulnerable young girl in our lesson for the sake of profit--- what about the obscene sex trafficking of both young women and men around the world, for the sake of greed? Exploitation of the vulnerable to appease people's most base instincts and greed still abounds. What about the ideological prejudice that perpetuated the injustice of Paul's imprisonment? Plenty of prejudice to still go around, around the world and within our own country, where a disproportionate number of minority persons end up in prison. What about the violence? The daily news is full of it. The tragic shooting in Virginia Beach on Friday is another sad reminder of how violence continues. What about natural disasters, like earthquakes, famines, or—May snowstorms and long-delayed springs or even more awful, the tornadoes ravaging parts of our country? All these things are still present. So, maybe this story does still resonate with us, after all.

Here's an interesting way for us to try and enter into this story 2000 years later. Which character would you be, if you were a part of the story? To whom do you most relate? Of course, we might immediately assume, or at least wish, that we'd be Paul and Silas---faithful, courageous, living out our faith in the face of danger and being a part of the world and its people being made new. And maybe that's right. Or maybe that's a little off the mark? Might we at least imagine ourselves briefly in the shoes or more likely sandals of the slave girl? Are we exploited or victimized by others, or have we succumbed to some dark forces without or within us that lead us into dark places? What about the sandals of the slave *owners*? There's

an unappealing thought! Do we exploit others for our own greed, our own benefit? Is the bottom line always a financial line for us? Certainly we are a part of a society that exploits sex, youth, beauty, desire in every imaginable way. Or maybe we'd fit into the sandals of the jailer? Just trying to get by, do our job quietly, not get into trouble, ignore the needy or hurting around us for the sake of peace and security? I'd think that many a middle class American might resemble that remark! Complacency and indifference to suffering are a hallmark of our times. Or maybe we best fit into the sandals of the other prisoners--- essentially clueless spectators who wonder what's going on? It might be honest and wise of us to recognize some of ourselves in several or even all of the characters of this story. It's not just a hero that lives within us, is it? Couldn't it also be that within us there is also a captive victim, or a victimizer, or a too complacent soul, or even a clueless spectator? It's a broken world, and we are broken, too. And as this story recognizes, there are different kinds of brokenness, as symbolized by the different images of captivity, of slavery, of bondage. The chains that imprison us may take different forms. There are literal chains in this story and literal prison cells. There are also chains of evil, of greed, of violence, of victimization, of fear. Don't we know from our own experience that we can be captive to any number of things? Things like anxiety, or an addiction, an illness? Chains and enslavement take different forms, and so does the power of resurrection. The freedom that breaks those chains in our lesson is also in some cases a physical event, in others a spiritual or psychological event. Chains fall off, but there are also exorcisms and conversion. We, too, experience the freedom of the Gospel, of the resurrection, in a whole variety of ways, both concrete and spiritual. We may experience healing of an illness, recovery from an addiction, the release of a fear that has gripped us, the freedom of discovering God's purpose for our lives. Like the people in our lesson, we are broken, we are enslaved; but also like those people, we are made new by the power of God.

As the Easter season ends this Sunday, we have this story to bookend the resurrection of the beginning of the season, as this is also a story of resurrection, of being made new. It's

a story where love wins and spring does finally come and God makes a way for second chances, yes? The slave girl is freed, Paul and Silas are freed, the jailor and his family convert to faith. And this is *our* story. However many of those sandals from the story fit pretty well, this *is* our story. And God continues to be the bringer of resurrection, of second chances. God continues to make all things new, even us. That's a promise of God; believe it. "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation" Paul wrote in 2nd Corinthians---you *are* a new creation; believe it! And God continues to look to free us from chains that bind, whatever form they may take. "My chains are gone; I've been set free," our sermon song proclaims. Our Risen Christ is a breaker of chains and a bringer of freedom and new creation. Amen.