

“Believe and Be Free”
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St. Luke Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
VII Easter – 1 & 2 June 2019
Acts 16:16-34

I have selected from St. Luke’s one person, whose identity will be revealed this afternoon at 3:00 via email. I have also hired an actor to follow that person around for the next several days, starting at 8:00 tomorrow morning. She has your address, a recent photo, and your license plate numbers, and anywhere you go in public – to work, shopping, to see a play or a baseball game – she will be there, periodically shouting, “[This man or woman is a slave] of the Most High God, who proclaims to you a way of salvation.” For the rest of the congregation, I invite you to place a \$5 wager on how many days, hours, and minutes it will take for the chosen parishioner to obtain a restraining order on that actor, and whoever gets closest will win the betting pool, and yes, a tithe of 10% will be expected.

Of course, we all know that’s just a joke, or is it? You’ll find out this afternoon. But for Paul and Silas, it was a very real and disruptive nuisance. You might think that they’d appreciate the free publicity. They’d come to Philippi, inspired by a vision, to do exactly what that woman was talking about, to “proclaim a way of salvation,” and she was obviously a well-respected source of supernatural information, because she “brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling.” What better way to add credence to their story about Jesus and his power to save?

After many days, though, Paul, “very much annoyed,” couldn’t take it anymore and cast out the spirit, presumably a demonic one, which had given this slave girl the power to see the future. It was probably more than mere annoyance that motivated Paul. After all, who wants an endorsement from your competitor, from the enemy? Something like that can tarnish your brand

and undermine your legitimacy. And beyond that, this slave girl was possessed twice-over: a piece of property to the men who exploited her unusual abilities; and someone compelled by a supernatural entity to do things she'd probably rather not do. Perhaps Paul felt that, at the very least, he could free her from one of those masters, which is both compassionate and an effective way to show the power of God over evil.

Then all hell broke loose. Her greedy masters were furious. Paul had just pulled their gravy train straight off the tracks. If one of us had a high profit, low overhead venture that also gave us a measure of fame, and if that moneymaker didn't seem to be harming anyone, and then some stranger showed up and stopped it cold, I imagine each and every one of us would be a little bit testy.

So they grabbed Paul and Silas, brought them before the magistrate, and accused them of creating civic disturbance by introducing new and unlawful customs and ideas to the community. Few people like change, especially when that change makes them think or poses a threat to something they value, and a big crowd joined in, because it feels good to be part of a mob, powerful enough to publicly humiliate people who don't agree with you, who don't fit in.

The magistrate gladly obliged the mob and gave Paul and Silas a "severe flogging," "beaten with rods," and chained them down in prison. Who knows what might happen in the morning? It looked bleak. They probably hurt so bad that sleep wasn't an option, so they sang and prayed and praised God, "and the prisoners were listening to them." Even in a dark dungeon, they witnessed to God's grace to their fellow inmates, offering hope to those in despair.

It seems like God was listening, too, because as they sang, an earthquake hit, 5.7 on the Richter scale, strong enough to break that prison and set the inmates free. The jailer woke up, saw the cell doors open, and assumed the worst. Who wouldn't run given the chance? It was all

over for him, or so he thought. The townsfolk would write letters and sign petitions and attend civic meetings, complaining about his incompetence, complaining about his mishandling of what would be called “The Great Escape.”

He’d be out of a job before the day was done, and he felt ashamed, because he blamed himself, too. The jailer had failed at his most basic duty. Building-busting earthquakes are no excuse. So he drew his sword to fall on it, as any self-respecting jailer would’ve done in those days, and right when he was ready to take the plunge, “Paul shouted in a loud voice, ‘Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.’”

Why they stayed is anybody’s guess, but in that instant, right as the jailer was about to skewer himself, a man was saved from his self-loathing; he was saved from his fear of what others might think or say or do. A new and unthinkable option arose. Perhaps what these strangers said was true. Maybe they’d been wrongfully accused, and the change they brought – so threatening and disruptive – was necessary: necessary to stop the madness, to stop the cruelty, the thoughtlessness, the jealousy, the greed, and the lies. Who knows what was going through that guy’s head?

But in that critical instant between life and death, we know what he did. He sought salvation and found it, took the prisoners to his home, cleaned their wounds, and then they cleansed his by baptizing him and the entire household. Now he’d be in more trouble than before, because he chose to join these troublemakers with their new ideas and their disruptive call to change, but “his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.”

From beginning to end, this whole story is about freedom. Paul liberated the slave girl from the demonic spirit that controlled her. God’s earthquake broke the very foundation of the system that foolishly tried to restrain Silas and Paul in their mission to spread the good news of

Jesus Christ. Paul and the other prisoners, simply by staying put, saved the jailer from himself, and then through baptism, freed him and his entire household to serve a higher purpose. Baptism freed them for a life of meaning and joy and excitement in this world, and for life everlasting in the next.

Their story is our story. Each of us, at some point in our lives, perhaps in this very moment, feel enslaved to forces beyond our control, forces that exploit us; that squeeze us for all we're worth. Maybe it's a toxic workplace or a dysfunctional or even abusive relationship or something deep down inside that tells us we're not good enough, will never be good enough, that we don't deserve love or mercy, and the peace that comes with them. In the midst of these things, Paul encourages us to "Believe on the Lord Jesus."

Now we need to pause for a moment to talk the word "belief," because it's become a difficult word to parse in our culture. To a certain extent, people have always chosen what to believe, but increasingly, people believe whatever they want, whatever agrees with what they already think. You can invent convenient facts with no basis in reality and ignore the real ones you don't like, and if people call you out on it, who cares?

The word "belief" in religion has become equally problematic, falsely associated with blind adherence to dogmas and doctrines that feel so restrictive and antiquated, and some of them are, but not all of them. That misunderstanding of belief is part of what leads so many people to say, "I'm spiritual, but not religious."

To "Believe on the Lord Jesus" means to take a risk and give trust on credit, hoping that you won't get swindled, but not really caring if you do, because the sheer potential of sharing a relationship with Jesus is greater than any other experience you could possibly have. To believe, in its truest sense, means making a choice, a commitment, and then keeping that commitment.

Sometimes it means getting a vision and acting on it by going on a journey, like Paul and Silas did by going to Philippi. Sometimes, it means staying put when you'd rather run, like the prisoners, and sometimes, it means making people mad and taking a beating, because they don't like what you believe, because practicing your belief causes change.

When you take that beating – the unfair criticism, the mean ostracism, the threats made against you and the lies told about you – sing along with Paul and Silas the praises of God. It will drive the people who are hurting you crazy, and some people will be listening. You never know who might be transformed, whose life you might save through your integrity and clarity of purpose. “Believe on the Lord Jesus.”

When it seems like all is lost and that there's no way out, when you feel like a 100% genuine, certified failure, as the jailer did; when you feel like a waste of space with no hope of renewal, “Believe on the Lord Jesus.” He'll set you free, but be warned that he might use an earthquake to do it, to shake you up and wake you up and challenge your assumptions, just like that jailer who made his decision before he even checked the cells to see if anybody was still there.

We feel so empty sometimes, overwhelmed. It's dreadful, but the Lord Jesus can and will fill us up and disperse our dread and bring us joy. Don't expect that to happen overnight. Jesus isn't Amazon. The jailer's sudden conversion is a rarity. Healing is a process. And don't expect that your belief will guarantee a smooth road for the rest of your life. Quite the contrary. Just look at Paul and Silas.

But hear this. You are not a “nobody.” You are not nothing, not to God. And whatever wrong you might have done, whatever right you neglected to do, you are forgiven, and belief means to accept that humbly, without regard for the people who try so desperately to tear you

down and rip you up. Compared to God, the people who want to hurt you, who want to whip you; compared to God, those people are so weak, it's immeasurable how weak they truly are.

God has selected, God has chosen, not one person from St. Luke's, but all persons everywhere, and your identity is being revealed in this act of worship. God has sent the Holy Spirit to follow you around, and if that feels creepy, too bad. The Spirit also leads us onward, and good luck getting that restraining order, because God's not going to leave you alone. You can ignore the facts, shut Jesus out of your life as best you can. You can pretend to practice the faith, or not even bother with pretending. But Jesus is waiting in the dark dungeon we've shackled him in, a prison of our own making that cannot contain him, calling out "I'm still here," when we feel desperate and forsaken.

"Believe on the Lord Jesus," and you shall be free. Amen.