

A Meditation for May 29/22, 'the 7th Sunday of Easter' – pg. 1

By the Rev. Warren Ball of Mt. Albert United Church

Hello and welcome to my meditation for this week! Today is something of a rarity because I've chosen to use the Epistle reading, a reading from the Acts of the Apostles. You know, when I was at seminary, I came to really admire the literary quality of Luke's writing, and I came to love how exquisitely the Gospel of Luke is written in direct parallel with the Acts of the Apostles – that's not something you can ever get a sense of from Sunday mornings excerpts! However, since then, I've come to use the Acts of the Apostles less and less as I've discovered so many places where the facts that it presents are simply not supported by what historians know. Acts even says things about the Apostle Paul that are directly contradicted by Paul's own letters! So, I end up spending more time talking *about* the text than I do about *how* the text can make a difference for us today! Therefore, one by one, I've discontinued my sermons based on Acts, except for this one, because this reading from Acts raises a metaphor of being imprisoned that's just as applicable for us today as it ever has been. Just think of all the metaphorical prisons in our lives: prisons of fear; prisons of ill health; prisons of doubt! So, today, come, let's get ready for a 'jail-break' as we turn to God in prayer:

God of boundless grace: you call us in this time to drink freely from the well of life, and to share generously the love of your holy being. Bring us Easter's new life now! Amen.

⇒ Hymn suggestion: VU296 'This Is God's Wondrous World'

Today's Scripture reading: *from* Acts 16:16-34 'Paul and Silas in Prison' (NRSV)

One day, as Paul and Silas were going to the place of prayer, they met a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners money by fortune-telling. She cried out, "These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation." 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 the spirit departed.

But when the slave girl's owners saw that their way of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them before the authorities saying, "These men are disturbing our city and advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt." The crowd joined in attacking Paul and Silas, while the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and beaten with rods. After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw Paul and Silas into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell, and fastened their feet in the stocks. About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, while the other prisoners were listening. 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. 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. But Paul shouted in a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." The jailer called for lights and, rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them outside and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" They answered, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your

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household.” Paul and Silas spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. At the same hour of the night, he took them and washed their wounds. Then the jailer and his entire family were baptized without delay. He brought them up into the house and set food before Paul and Silas, as he, and his entire household, rejoiced that they had become believers in God.”

Sermon: 'Jail Break!'

Eternal God: come now into our midst; help us to remove all that we've placed between us and you so that we may see you more clearly, and learn how to follow you more nearly, amen!

If we had 100 people in this room who proportionately represented our global population then, according to Google statistics, we'd have fifty-two women and forty-eight men. Eight of those people would come from Africa, twenty-one from Europe, only fourteen from both North and South America combined, and fifty-seven would be from Asia. Thirty of those people would be Caucasian, seventy would be non-Caucasian. Seventy would be totally illiterate (couldn't read or write), while only one would have a college level education. Six of those people would own 59% of the world's wealth, all of those being North American. Fifty of those people would be suffering from malnutrition. Eighty would live in housing that is inadequate according to United Nations standards. Thirty would have a Christian affiliation while seventy would be non-Christian.

You know, in light of those numbers, we might wonder what the heck ever happened to Christianity. I ask that because, although the 20th Century dawned as The Christian Century (that was a widely-used phrase back then!), it ended with unprecedented scepticism about all organized religion. I ask, what on earth happened to Christianity, because many (or most!) Christian churches, across all denominations, have experienced huge declines in their membership rolls. Many of those churches struggle to stay open. Many more, sad to say, have had to close. Christianity used to claim that it could, and would, solve all the world's problems, yet it has failed miserably in that regard, has it not? Today, we could well ask, has our Easter hope been thrown into jail, just as Paul and Silas were once thrown into jail?

Well, remember what happened in today's readings from The Acts of the Apostles? It all started when Paul gets upset with a slave-girl who is said to have a spirit of divination. Well, she's being used by her owners to make money telling fortunes. That gets Paul annoyed, and he casts the spirit out of that slave-girl. Yet, once she's lost her fortune-telling abilities, the slave girl's owners stood to lose money! So it is that Paul and Silas are arrested, beaten and thrown into a dark, slimy, smelly prison cell – that's where Christianity ends up shortly after it's brought to Philippi. Kind of bleak, isn't it? It's like the story in a rural newspaper that read, "Four-seat airplane crashes in township cemetery, rescue efforts continue around the clock, so far, 854 bodies have been recovered." Bleak indeed!

Do you remember, though, what happens next to Paul and Silas? At midnight, in the very darkest hour of their dark situation, they're doing something that's totally bizarre: they are

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praying and singing hymns of praise to God! Now isn't that incredible? Given everything that had happened to them, how do you suppose Paul and Silas could have managed to praise God at a time like that? Isn't it true that we tend to think of worship as something that costs us? It costs us time to come here. It costs us money when we make our offering. However, imagine worship as something that actually gives – worship can give energy; worship can give direction and hope!

That when the scene in that prison cell gets even wilder, for an earthquake strikes that jailhouse like a giant fist. Now if earthquakes can snap our modern, steel-clad buildings like matchsticks, what do you suppose they did to buildings in the ancient world? Those thin walls of mud and straw would have buckled, the heavy wooden doors would have fallen from their crude timber frames, and the coarse iron chains that bound the prisoners would have fallen from their brackets. In one earth-bending moment, Paul and Silas are freed – they can just walk away! Indeed, that's precisely what their Roman guard assumes they had done for, in good Roman tradition, he was going to kill himself rather than face the shame of having lost his prisoners!

But Paul and Silas didn't run away. No, life in God's Spirit isn't simply about following our own wishes. No, real freedom isn't about doing what we please as much as it's about enabling the work of love. God's freedom is not a 'happily-ever-after magic' that whitewashes everything in our lives. Remember the post-Easter Jesus – his body still bore the marks of Good Friday! No, spirituality isn't a feel-good placebo, but it is about moving towards fullness, no matter who we are, or what we've done; no matter what we're able (or not able!) to do. When we move towards fullness of life, that's when we'll find 'jail breaks' all around us. Jailbreaks where we can break out from under whatever is causing us fear. Jailbreaks where we can break through whatever seems to be holding us back. Jailbreaks where we can break into a whole new sense of peace, the peace that passes all understanding!

Look, let's use our imaginations and go on a journey! Let's close our eyes and imagine, let's imagine that we're standing in an open field on a stormy summer day. There are huge black clouds over our heads. Oh, my; this is scary! There's hail and rain and lightning all around – this storm is all that we can see! Now let's imagine rising up to about 10,000 feet. (Are you with me?). Up here, the dark thunder clouds are still around us, but they're not all that we can see. Look, there's a patch of beautiful blue just over there, on our horizon! Now's let go up to about 50,000 feet above the earth. Now we can see that, although very dark and intense, that storm that we were in the midst of is really quite localized down below and, not too far away, the sun is shining, shining magnificently! Now let's go up to about 100,000 above the earth. Now we're on the verge of outer space, now we're able to see the grand sweep of continents and the rounded contour of Mother Earth. From up here, we can actually see that the sun's rays are embracing the entire earth, even the small part where we started!

Well, so, too, the light from God's Easter miracle is always shining on us, whether we see it or not. So, too, we may choose to turn from that light, but it's still there, embracing each and

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every one of us just as surely as light from the sun caresses the earth even though it can't always be seen. Look, the earth can't help but turn on its axis every 24 hours. Well, a life that's lived in God's love can't help but experience a whole series of jail breaks. Jail breaks that are fed by prayer and efforts to learn more and yet more about such things as the Bible, church history, and theology (our understanding of God). Jail breaks that go hand in glove with active membership in a Christian community, because that's where we most easily find opportunities to experience God's love. Jail breaks that set us free – free from ourselves, and free for God! Amen? Oh, yes; amen!

Come, let us turn back to God now in prayer; come, let us pray: Eternal God, your grace surrounds all creation, transforming everything that it touches. Your power bestows life and conquers death. Your love includes all generations and embraces all peoples. We open our hearts, minds and spirits to you now!

You bless us with gifts that we have yet to discover, and vision that we have yet to use – oh, how we thank you, Source of Love, for all that you bring us, all that you offer. We thank you for your Spirit that turns our faith into a practical way of life! Yet how easily we forget you and our spiritual heritage, how easily we allow ourselves to be imprisoned by material things, fear, and hopelessness! So, touch us now, God, with your Easter miracle, break down the doors of all our prison cells, free us from ourselves for the work of your love!

We pray now for all who are facing difficulty this day and we pray, too, for all the places where there's difficulty. We especially pray once again for the people of Ukraine, that peace come and that justice may be brought to bear! In the silence of the next moments, O God, receive the deep burdens that our spirits bear today: *moment of silence*.

All that I have named with my words, all that lies yet too deep for words to touch, we bring to you, God, as we take those words that Jesus once taught us and sing the traditional version of Christ's Prayer (VU960):

Our Father, who art in heaven hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil for thine is the Kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever and ever, amen.

⇒ Hymn suggestion: VU 586 ‘We Shall Go Out with Hope of Resurrection’

Go now, and live out the jail break that God has in store for you! In the name of God's liberation, amen.