

SERMON FOR SUNDAY, MAY 16, 2010

Seventh Sunday of Easter

Scriptures: Psalm 97; John 17:20-26; Acts 16:16-34; Rev. 22:12-21

The Prison Doors Will Open

Hearing once again the story of Paul and Silas in jail, and how the prison doors opened and their chains fell off, makes me think of those over the years whom I have visited in places with bars on the windows and doors. I have sat in jail cells with prisoners, and I have sat in visiting rooms with those who are imprisoned in a different way in mental hospitals because they are a threat to themselves or someone else. In Illinois I watched a friend who had just been admitted to a mental ward having her belongings searched for weapons of any kind. Her hobby was sewing, embroidery, needlepoint and the like; and in her bag was a pair of large scissors. The woman doing the searching brought out the scissors and held them up in triumph as if she had just stopped a terrorist plot, while my friend cried because she had brought them with her as part of her sewing kit. She knew that she would be able to pass the time better if she had something to keep her hands busy. Nevertheless, scissors were not allowed. A prison is a prison.

Almost monthly I get a letter from a man who is in a prison in Detroit, a man we as a church have helped in the past. Even though he is in a terrible place, because of his faith in Jesus Christ he is able to see beyond the prison doors. This week he wrote and sent a picture he drew with a verse from the Bible. He tells me that he has been studying John, chapter 14, and wrote his own paraphrase of the first four verses. The NIV translation which is what our pew Bible uses reads: 1 "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. 2 In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. 3 And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am." This is how my prisoner friend wrote those words: "Gone to see Dad. We're fixin' up a place for you. Be back soon to pick you up. Love, Jesus."

On the front of our bulletin today we have the words from Revelation which assure us of Jesus' return to this earth. "Yes, I am coming soon," said Jesus. It is interesting to me that the Lectionary has the story of Paul and Silas in jail and this passage from Revelation 22 together. Yet, there is something compelling about studying them at the same time.

We used the story of Paul and Silas in prison for one of our Bible School lessons a couple of years ago. What I love about the story is that the character

of Paul and also of Silas is so apparent in what they do. Imagine going through what they went through. They had driven an evil spirit out of a young slave girl thus destroying income for her owners who dragged Paul and Silas to the Roman authorities. They said that the two were Jews stirring up trouble. They did not call them Christians because at that time Christianity was considered a Jewish sect. The Romans tolerated the Jews as long as they did not try to promote their religion or stir up trouble. The owners of the poor slave girl incited the crowd to violence against Paul and Silas. They were taken away by the Roman authorities who stripped them of their clothes and flogged them severely. There were Jewish rules for flogging. No one could be given the lashes of the whip more than 40 times. But the Romans had no such humane restriction, and many of those who were flogged died. Their backs would be laid open time and again as the whip with its many leather thongs went through skin, muscle and blood vessels. The tissue would hang off their backs and the open sores would bleed and sting. After the two were flogged they were literally thrown into the inner cell of a Roman prison, and if that were not enough their feet were fastened in iron bracelets called stocks so that they could not move freely. A special guard was given strict instructions to watch them carefully.

I try to put myself in their place. What would I do? What would you do? We have been in difficult situations— all of us have. I don't know about you, but I know that I have never been in a situation like Paul and Silas'— ever! It makes me think of the picture in the book *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*. The terrible Grinch has stolen all the presents and food and decorations from the little town of Whoville, and he is standing on the top of Mount Crumpet awaiting with glee to see how the Who's are going to react. "Pooh-pooh to the Whos!" he was grinchily humming. "They're finding out now that no Christmas is coming! They're just waking up, I know just what they'll do. Their mouths will hang open a minute or two, then the Whos down in Whoville will all cry, "Boo Hoo."

The Grinch thinks he knows the Who's because he thinks that they must be like him, mean-hearted and self-centered. But they aren't! They know the true meaning of Christmas and they are not put off because all their worldly things have been taken away from them. They can still sing and celebrate because they have each other and it is Christmas. Every time I read that story to a grandchild or see the cartoon version on TV, I ask myself, "Can I do without all the stuff of the world? Can I rejoice in the goodness of God even if I were to have nothing? How dependent am I on things, and how dependent am I on God to provide all I need?"

Paul and Silas had been wrongly accused, humiliated, and wounded in a terrible way. They had nothing, nothing but fear and trembling you and I might

think. But that is not how those two mighty men of God thought. They did not sit around crying and feeling sorry for themselves. Even though, they must have been suffering from physical pain, their spirits rejoiced. They sang hymns and prayed out loud for all to hear that they were testifying to someone who could help them overcome even the worst circumstances. They testified to the saving power of Jesus Christ. As they prayed and sang in strong and faithful voices, their words drifted throughout the whole prison and the prisoners listened. What must they have thought? They too were in the place of hopelessness and suffering. What made those men sing, they must have wondered. How can they pray to their God who had allowed them to suffer the agony of Roman flogging? They had heard the sound of the leather thongs of the whip as it struck the backs of the new prisoners. It was a wonder that the two were even alive, let alone able to sing and pray! Who was this Jesus, they must have been thinking. Who is this one who is able to give comfort to those enclosed behind prison doors?

Right now in my message I could try to give examples of other kinds of prisons people can find themselves in, perhaps the prison of illness or poverty or abuse. But I think you all can figure it out for yourself. You know the prisons, your own and those of others. The question is, how do we react to those prisons, and how do we live as Christians no matter what the circumstances? I am reminded of the words of Paul in that wonderful fourth chapter of the book of Philippians: "I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. 12 I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. 13 I can do everything through him who gives me strength." Think of those words. Paul wrote them to the church in Philippi to give them hope while he was in prison! For Paul outward circumstances were nothing compared to the One who dwelt in his heart and directed his life, Jesus the Risen Lord. Paul believed that Jesus would come again, it could be soon. No one knew then, and we still do not know when that will be. Paul was ready, always ready to meet the Lord.

In Philippians 1:21, Paul wrote: "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain." He lived his life in service to the Lord and his work was to tell others that Jesus died and rose again to save them from their sins if they would only believe in him. And if he had to die while he was doing that, so be it. He was ready because in death there would be an even closer bond with Jesus Christ. Paul even pictured himself as being poured out in sacrifice to God like a drink offering.

What happened that night in the Roman prison where Paul and Silas were singing and praying? “Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everybody’s chains came loose.” It was surely an act of God. But the poor jailer! “The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. 28 But Paul shouted, “Don’t harm yourself! We are all here!” If the prisoners had escaped the guard would be killed for letting them go. But Paul and the others remained where they were and the jailer was astonished. “The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. 30 He then brought them out and asked, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”

He had seen three miracles that night. The first was the fact that prisoners could sing and pray even being badly wounded and in prison. The second was the earthquake which seemed to affect nothing but the prison. And the third miracle was that prisoners who could escape chose to stay even though the prison doors were open and all the chains had come loose. The jailer wanted what Paul and Silas had, faith that stood up, even to what the Romans could dish out. He wanted to know how he could be saved, and Paul said to him, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and be saved.” The jailer listened as the two apostles talked about Jesus and the good news of salvation from God. Then he took them to his home and his whole household heard the story. He washed Paul and Silas’ wounds, and then the whole family believed and was baptized. And then there was a celebration and a meal together because they were all so filled with the joy of the Lord.

Friends, there is a lot more to Paul’s story than what we have thought about this morning, just as there is a lot more to your story. Are you able to rise above your circumstances because of Christ who lives in you giving you the strength you need? Are you able even to sing and pray? Without the spirit of Jesus Christ within you, it is like trying to get a kite off the ground when there is no wind.

Going back to the story of the Grinch. He could not understand why the Who’s were singing on that Christmas morning when all the precious things had been taken away from them. “And the Grinch, with his Grinch-feet ice cold in the snow, stood puzzling and puzzling, how could it be so? It came without ribbons. It came without tags. It came without packages, boxes or bags. And he puzzled and puzzled ‘till his puzzler was sore. Then the Grinch thought of something he hadn’t before. What if Christmas, he thought, doesn’t come from a store. What if Christmas, perhaps, means a little bit more. ” I ask you this morning if perhaps Life itself means a little bit more, more than being in prison

even— more than hospitalization, or unpaid bills, or a lack of human affection, more than the every day rat race, or even the prospect of early death. Perhaps life is as Paul so aptly put it. “To live **is Christ** and to die is gain.”

I have told you many times that I use the Lectionary so that I am sure to cover all the main passages of the Bible within a three year cycle. It is good discipline for a pastor and keeps her or him from always preaching on their favorite topic leaving much valuable material unexplored. But I do have a gripe with the Lectionary. They very often leave out one or two verses. For instance, they may give you chapter five of some book, and say verses 1-6, and 9-12. Right away I really want to know what is in those left out verses— 7 & 8. It is as if those who figured out the Lectionary groupings somehow needed to protect us from the tough teachings of the Bible, particularly those that deal with the justice of God. That very thing happened this week in the passage from Revelation. Verse 15 was supposed to be skipped over. Notice, I did not skip over it. It reads, “Outside (the city gates) are the dogs, those who practice magic arts, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters and everyone who loves and practices falsehood.” The dogs were not animals, but sinful men and women who had rejected Christ. Verses 18 & 19 were also left out. They read: “I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book. And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.”

The truth is that God does not gloss over what is real and certain. Those who reject Jesus will be left out, they will not know the glories of the place which Jesus has gone to prepare; or as my prisoner friend puts it – “fixin’ up a place for you.” God is so merciful. He is willing to accept all who come to him through Jesus His Son. It is not too late until the hand of death comes, and since we do not know the day or hour of our death, the time to get right with Jesus is always right now! He is the one who makes the blind to see, the lame to walk. He gives food to the hungry in spirit, opens prison doors, and offers the living water to all who ask. In the words from Revelation:

“ ‘I, Jesus, have sent my angel to give you this testimony for the churches. I am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star.’ The Spirit and the bride say, “**Come!**” And let him who hears say, “**Come!**” Whoever is thirsty, let him **come**; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life.”

“He who testifies to these things says, “Yes, I am coming soon.”
“Amen. Come Lord Jesus.”

