

## “Resurrection Vision: Set Free in Christ”

*Acts 16:16-34*

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Norman lived alone. He was a gentle, kind man whose wife had died the previous year. When I would arrive to visit him he would always need to turn off the TV. To fill the time, Norman watched looping news reports for much of the day. Our visits usually began in the same way—with his deep sigh and his exclamation about the tragic state of the world. “Things are just so bad,” he would say, shaking his head. “It just gets worse and worse.” Looping news had imprisoned Norman, convincing him that the world was locked in a cycle of irreparable chaos and darkness from which it could never be freed.

I hear a similar tone of reaction to the recent tragic incidents of gun violence on our continent: in Buffalo, people of colour were gunned down as they shopped for milk; in Texas, 19 children and two teachers heartlessly were murdered at school. We seem locked in a loop of inescapable violence. When it strikes, we hear the same outcry from the streets, we hear similar speeches from political leaders and their opponents, we hear the same assurance of “thoughts and prayers,”—and things continue on the same, to the next mass shooting. In a culture so preoccupied with freedom—are we as free as we’d like to think? What do we do with that freedom? We like maximum space to pursue what we want. We are free, but terribly lonely, driven, anxious and afraid. There is freedom and then there’s **freedom**. Today’s passage from Acts tells about people in bondage and those who are truly free. Which are you?

Picking up our story from last week, Paul and Silas are continuing their missionary work as foreigners in the Roman city of Philippi. And as they are going to the place of prayer they are accosted by a mentally unbalanced slave girl who screams at them. Because this slave girl could tell people’s fortunes, she makes money for her owners who hire her out in this kind of dog and pony show of reading palms, telling fortunes. But she took to following Paul and Silas around—shouting things about them—saying that they were slaves of the Most High God.

Here is a picture of enslavement—mental illness, maybe schizophrenia, which holds its victim in bondage. But from her chains she recognizes something in them—the possibility of rescue, healing, salvation; she cries, “These men proclaim to you a way of salvation.” Here is the possibility of freedom.

The Gospels give us these compassionate pictures of Jesus tenderly healing and setting people free. But this is not one of those pictures. Paul is annoyed and has enough of her screaming. It's almost out of annoyance that in the name of Christ he cures her. And she finds the freedom that she has longed for—proving Jesus' resurrection principle that the worst thing is never the last thing—because freedom is coming.

Yet the plot of our freedom story only deepens. The owners of this slave girl are not amused; their money-making option is sunk. They seize Paul and Silas, dragging them before the local authorities. The crowd joins in attacking these foreigners. They are stripped naked, and beaten with rods in an attempt to humiliate and discredit them and their message. The power of Rome comes down on them and they are not only thrown into the innermost darkest prison cell, but their feet are firmly locked in stocks. The liberators have now been imprisoned.

Bloodied, beaten, and locked in shackles—it's quickly looking like the end of this great Gospel Movement. Did you have any of those moments this past week—when you just felt like giving up? When the obstacles just seemed too great? Some of you, I'm sure just love a good challenge and remain undaunted by setbacks and obstacles. Yet the repeated obstacles and disappointments of the pandemic have discouraged even the most resilient in our midst. When we get knocked down—it can be hard to keep getting back up again and again and again—until finally we begin to think it's just no use. It's then that the obstacles take us prisoner and begin to do their worst damage.

I think one of the worst prisons of the pandemic has been the isolation, loneliness and damage to our relationships. God has made us for relationship and community—this is where transformation happens. Yet over the last two years this has broken down as we weren't allowed to meet together. Relationally we have fallen apart and many have now gotten more comfortable being isolated. When asked about the social impact of 9-11 versus the pandemic, John Delony, a Christian Psychologist says that the pandemic has been much worse. Because during the pandemic I was told that my neighbour walking her dog might kill me. That the children at my church might be carrying something that could kill us all. The thing that keeps us whole is relationships. Jesus said that the most important thing is loving God and loving others. But going to church and being in direct relationship with others became the enemy. Delony says it's like overnight becoming allergic to water—the staple for life, the thing we need most. Fractious conflict, in churches, communities and families only imprisoned us further from each other. Leading us to think “I don't think I really know you any more—I don't think I can be your friend anymore.” Even some spouses saying to each other—I don't even know you anymore. The implications of these relational prisons are worse even

than the risk of catching COVID because relationships are the water source of life in our lives. We can't stay in these prisons! Now is the season of courage and bravery. Which is exactly what we see in Paul and Silas—who will not be captive to fear, anxiety and division.

Wounded, bleeding, and shackled in their cell, Paul and Silas are not languishing, they are free. As our focus statement said today: *If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.* At midnight, Paul and Silas are praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners are listening to them. They are not immobilized by the torture, fear, pain and imprisonment. They are free.

Then dramatically—as if a visible illustration of this—the earth heaves, the prison shakes, the doors fly open and everyone's chains fly off. The jailer wakes and when he sees the open door, he is horrified knowing what is in store for a jailer who allows his prisoners to escape and he prepares to kill himself. "Don't do it," Paul shouts, "we're all here, just singing. We're not going anywhere." And the jailer asks, what must I do to be saved? The jailer asks those prisoners how he can find freedom like theirs.

So what is the source of this freedom we see in Paul and Silas who recognize a different lordship than Rome's ruthless brutality? Rather than allowing the "way the world is now" to rule over them and imprison them—they proclaim Jesus as Lord and look to the way that the world will be when Jesus is fully reigning as Lord. Jesus' resurrection victory over sin and death has taught them that the worst thing is never the last thing. And that working to spread and enlarge Jesus' reign is also acknowledgement of his lordship.

Paul and Silas acknowledge the question the jailer has asked and the heart-deep question which lies under it: "Believe in the LORD Jesus and you will be saved." This is the classic summary of what the good news, the Gospel, is all about. Do we still believe it? It isn't about getting in touch with one's inner spiritual self. It isn't about committing oneself to a life of worship, prayer and good works. It isn't even about believing in some particular theory of how God deals with our sins in the death of Jesus. Rather it is about recognizing, acknowledging and hailing Jesus Christ as Lord. The phrase "Jesus is Lord" is what, from the earliest times, people would say when they came for baptism—as the jailer and his household promptly did. Because Jesus is Lord we need not be imprisoned by fear and anxiety. The world and our lives are not locked in irreparable chaos and darkness. Jesus is Lord and Freedom is coming!

God's messengers are not protected or spared from the sufferings that will come—but because Jesus is Lord they know that the worst thing is never the last thing. Vindication

will always come—because Jesus is strongest. Let us not be bound by the worries and darkness of this world. In Christ we are free and empowered to spread the influence of Christ's reign.

*Meet Sister Antonia Brenner whose life was redefined because Jesus is Lord. Born Mary Clark in Los Angeles in 1926. She grew up in Beverly Hills in the lap of luxury. Her neighbours were the movie stars of the 1930s and 40s. She married out of High School, but that didn't last. She was divorced. She remarried, had eight children and was divorced again. Then she discovered Christ and made him Lord of her life. She began to serve the poor through her local church. She went on a mission trip to Tijuana, Mexico and visited La Mesa Prison—a prison designed for 2000 that instead had 7000 inmates. When a man went to prison there, so did his wife and children. At first she would go and take supplies to them. Many people would have been overwhelmed by the darkness and despair of this place, but not Sister Antonia—she knew that Jesus was Lord. Soon she felt called to do more; she asked the prison's superintendent if she could move into a ten foot by ten foot prison cell. And when he agreed—even though the church wouldn't take her as a nun because she was divorced twice—she went back to Beverly Hills, sold her house and belongings, and spent the next 35 years living in a 10 by 10 prison cell ministering to these forgotten people. To an outsider it looked like she herself was a prisoner—but because Jesus is Lord, in that prison she found true freedom. Inmates told how unafraid Mother Antonia once walked into the middle of a prison riot while bullets flew and tear gas filled the air. When the inmates saw her all fighting ceased. For if the Son makes you free—you will be free indeed.*