

Alleluiah! Christ is Risen! Christ is Risen indeed! Alleluiah!

These past few weeks since Easter,
we've been reading each Sunday about Easter People,
about how, after the resurrection, the first followers of Christ
responded and lived and served and acted.
And it is so easy to see them as heroes and victors,
as mighty winners and courageous leaders
triumphing over doubt and death and sin.

And this week's lead characters—Paul and his missionary friend, Silas—
seem no different.

After committing an act of exorcism,
they're hauled before the magistrate for opposing the Roman Empire.
They are stripped and flogged and thrown into the deepest, darkest part of
prison.

In the middle of the night, while they are singing hymns and praying,
there's an earthquake,
and all the doors bust open
and everyone's chains break loose.
Including, of course, Paul and Silas'.

It's a great story of resurrection and victory.
Their chains, literally and figuratively, break.
Paul and Silas survive imprisonment and earthquake
and go free.
New life—or moving forward in life—awaits them.
They can continue to share the Good News of God's love.
Paul and Silas, as our Easter People theme-of-the-week says,
are freed for love.
It's another heroic Easter People story.

The thing is,
that's *not* the *whole* story.
Paul and Silas are not the only people in this episode.
There are two other people in their midst,
two supporting characters whom I want to consider today.

I want to explore how the Good News of Easter works—or doesn't work—for them;
how they are freed—or not freed—for love.

The first person is the slave girl,
who has a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money
by fortune-telling.

To be more specific, she is possessed by the prophetic spirit
of the Roman god Apollo.

Apollo is perhaps the most culturally important, politically dominant god
at that time.

Which means that this slave girl is entirely possessed and dominated
by the Roman culture and Roman politics under which she lives.

She would have seen herself to be whatever Roman culture and politics
told her she was,

and they told her that she was nothing.

Not a person to be loved, but an object to be exploited.

Not a peer who contributes, but a slave who is owned and controlled.

The powers-that-be would have told her

that she was only what she could do;

that she was literally only worth her fortune-telling,

and she didn't even benefit from that skill.

And Paul, our typical hero in the Book of Acts, finds her . . .
annoying.

Her skill is seeing and speaking the truth,
and she sees and speaks it about Paul and Silas.

For days she follows them around, crying out,

"These men are slaves of the Most High God,
who proclaim to you a way of salvation."

And her speech is correct.

But it's also annoying to Paul, who,

in an act that shows how God can even bend our annoyance
into service,

turns and casts out the spirit.

It's an act of liberation, it seems.

She is freed of her divining and dominating spirit.

But for what?
 She is hardly freed for love,
 because it's NOT because of his love or regard for her
 that Paul casts out her spirit;
 it's because of his annoyance.
 And she is hardly freed in order to share God's love,
 because she goes back to angry owners
 whose money-making mechanism is now broken.
 The slave girl is not invited to join Paul and Silas;
 she is not told about confessing and believing in Christ;
 she is not anointed with the Holy Spirit
 nor baptized
 nor brought into anyone's household.
 She is hardly free,
 perhaps not even free at all.
 She simply goes home,
 and we don't get to know the end of her Easter People story.

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The slave girl's counterpart in this episode
 fares slightly better.
 The second supporting character in the drama is the jailer,
 in charge of guarding the prisoners.
 When the midnight earthquake comes
 and shakes the prison's foundation
 and unshackles all the prisoners,
 he wakes up in a panic.
 Not unlike the slave girl, the jailer too believes that his worth is his job,
 so when his job goes bad, or goes away, or when he fails,
 he becomes nothing.
 With this conclusion, he draws his sword to attempt suicide.

Yet unlike far too many suicide victims,
 he does not complete it.
 Paul intervenes and shouts in a loud voice,
 "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here."
 The prisoners are unshackled but have not escaped.

The jailor, Paul, and Silas shine a light in the darkness and speak with him,
speaking the word of the Lord to him.

Then the jailor, their captor, becomes their caretaker.
Paul and Silas baptize him and his entire family
and the story ends with everyone eating and rejoicing.

This jailor, unlike the slave girl,
does get to hear the good news of God's love, hope, and resurrection
for him.

But he still hits the depths of despair.
We see him hit the bottom
of a depression and self-doubt that perhaps linger
every day just below his functional surface.
He gets to hear that his worth is not his work,
but he's hardly a hero for the faith.

Neither the jailor or especially not the slave girl
seem to be the Easter People we've come to expect.

They do no brave feats;
they give no generous gifts;
one doesn't even get the chance
to hear about resurrection.

Instead, the lives of the slave girl and jailor contain tragedy and trauma;
the culture and politics of their time having forced and coerced
them into less-than states of being and thinking.

They wear their weakness and their pain on their sleeves,
their mental illness, exploitation, and the stigma of it all
recorded forever in Paul's travelogue.

Indeed these two are not the Easter People we've come to expect,
but I do believe that the girl and the jailer are Easter People.

As complex, complicated, and even tragic as their lives are,
God ensures they have some interaction with the healing power
of God's love,
even if incomplete.

Despite their dwelling in the societal underworld,
the resurrection of Christ runs loose in the whole world,
touching their lives, even if peripherally.

Their stories, as unwritten and unfinished as they are,
show the important reality that Christ's resurrection
and the Good News of Easter
finds even those in undone situations.

And the girl and jailor being Easter People
is good news for us, my friends,
because we too live influenced if not possessed by a dominant culture
that tells us we are no good if we are not [whatever] enough,
and falsely proclaims that our value is only what we can produce,
and perpetuates the lie that people's worth is their work.

That girl and jailor are Easter People
is good news for those among us
who are possessed by anxiety or addiction or abuse,
who live with depression and despair creeping just below the surface of each
day.

That there are these two unheroic, unsung Easter People
with unfinished stories
are written into the record of the resurrection
and important to God
means that,
despite all that is unfinished and unsung and seemingly unworthy about us,
we too are still Easter People.
Our lives are important to God
and essential to the story and witness of Christ's resurrection.

Because through the slave girl and the jailor,
God is not only assuring us of our beloved-ness.
God is also asking us to notice all the people who typically get left out,
who never get to hear the Good News that yes, God loves them too.
With the jailor, we see a great example in Paul and Silas stopping to talk
when they could have run away;
intervening when they certainly could have stood by.
We see how an invitation to inclusion and words of God's love
truly change a life.

But the slave girl never gets an invitation to God's love,
and that lack invites *US* to issue it.

To take notice of the "slave girls" in our lives,
annoying people who just go home at the end of the day,
people whom we don't think much about . . . but whom we could.
The slave girl invites us to think about the people in our offices
pay-grades below us;
the teachers in our schools years behind their experienced peers,
the children in our lives who do not hear
or do not hear enough
words of unconditional love.

The slave girl's lack-of-invitation invites us
to notice and to get to know the "annoying" and disregarded people
around us,
and learn their struggles and share their pain.
To witness to the fact that God loves them too;
that Christ's resurrection also involves and affects them;
that they are,
like we are,
Easter People
freed for love.

AMEN.