

The Easter Community 3: Is Powerful

Acts 16:16-34

May 23, 2004

I encountered some difficulty when trying to name this third sermon in the series about the Easter Community. I chose to call it "The Easter Community is Powerful," but the kind of power I'm talking about is not physical, not power "over", but rather the kind of power that perseveres in adversity, the power that seems to thrive on difficulty. I could just as easily have said the Easter Community is faithful, or joyful, or truly safe. Perhaps at the end of the service you'll tell me what I should have called it!

You may have heard the saying, "If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs you don't understand the situation!" The jailer in our Acts text would probably agree.

Look at the contrast between his prisoners, Paul and Silas and the jailer. If ever there are two people who have a right to be discouraged, downhearted and depressed, it is Paul and Silas. They've come to Macedonia, thinking that God meant them to be there, but things go wrong. Paul and Silas are dragged before the courts, accused of stirring up trouble. They are severely beaten and thrown into prison. You would think that two people who'd had such treatment would be sitting there thinking, "This hasn't gone well. Why has God allowed us to suffer like this? Maybe we didn't understand what God wanted. What's going to happen to us now?" You'd think that they would feel unsafe and fearful. But no, there they are, in prison, in stocks, and, against all reason, they are praying and singing and praising God! They are joyful! I imagine the other prisoners are as astonished and intrigued as we would be. In any case they are all interested, they are all listening.

On the other hand, you would think the jailer has every reason to be content. He is a Roman, citizen of the country that rules the world. He has a responsible job and he seems to do it well. He, unlike, Paul and Silas, is free and has every reason to feel safe and to be confident about his life and his job.

But when a calamity strikes, who is best able to meet it? When the earthquake shakes the prison, who is really safe? Who panics--the man in charge, or the prisoners? You know the answer, the jailer. seeing the open

doors, assuming that all his prisoners have fled, and fearing what his punishment would be for letting them escape, draws his sword and is about to commit suicide. He is saved by Paul and Silas, who call out, “Don’t worry, we’re all here!” (And why are the other prisoners still there? Have Paul and Silas become their leaders? Are the prisoners so interested in them that they didn’t want to leave them?)

Then the jailer, whose life has already been saved, does a strange thing--he comes in trembling, takes Paul and Silas out of their cell and asks, “What must I do to be saved?” Think about the different possible level of meaning of this question. “How can I be saved from my fears? How can I be saved to become like you--to have what you have? Possibly, how can I come to the God you were singing about?” And Paul gives them the answer that covers all the levels of the question, for the jailer, and for us, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.” Ironically, the jailer turns to his prisoners to find the key to true freedom.

What was it about Paul and Silas that made them so powerful, when they apparently had no power, so joyful when there was no reason for joy? How could they feel safe when they were so vulnerable? Have you ever thought about the connection between the words “saved” and “safety?” I would venture to say to you that, because Paul and Silas are saved, they are truly safe. This leads to at least three answers to the question.

First, they are together--they are really together. They are united in heart and mind and purpose. In our Gospel text today Jesus prays that his disciples may be one, as he is one with the Father. His prayer is answered in Paul and Silas. They are, as the song goes, “One in the Spirit, one in the Lord.” The jailer may have acquaintances, he may have people he calls his friends, but he has no one to turn to when he is contemplating suicide--no one to share his distress. When we have a true friend--someone with whom we are truly one, someone who shares our sufferings--adversity is easier to bear; we may even bear it lightly, as Paul and Silas do. Are we opening ourselves to this possibility? How much happier our lives would be if we asked Jesus to make this a reality in our own lives, How joyful life could be if we were all one in the Spirit--if our devotion to our Lord made us one in Him.

Second, they know what is really important and they know the source of their true safety. I don’t believe they could be so joyful in their chains if

they don't know that their spiritual freedom is more important than their physical bondage. Their trust in God and God's ultimate reign helps them put their present problems in perspective. The words Luther's hymn express this well:

**A Mighty Fortress is our God. a bulwark never failing.
Our Helper he amid the flood of mortals ills prevailing.**

(Notice that Luther doesn't say God will do away with floods' he says God helps us amid the flood.) It goes on: Let goods and kindred go. This mortal life also.

**The body they may kill. God's truth abideth still.
His kingdom is forever.**

Remember, Jesus said, "Seek God's kingdom first, and everything else will come.

Paul and Silas are able to sing praises to this God whom they can trust with their lives, who would give them the strength to endure, and who ultimately holds the future. How much happier we would be if we could have the same perspective--if we could put God's kingdom first,, if we could see that what is truly important is not what happens to us in this world, but what our relationship to God is.

Third, and most important is what Paul says to the jailer. "Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved." Believe in Jesus and you won't have to be afraid, you will be changed, transformed, into a joyful, confident person. Believe in the Lord Jesus and your life now and in the future will be secure in the Living God. Later Paul writes a letter in which he says, "I am am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels no principalities, nor powers, nor anything else in all creation, can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." Believe in the Lord Jesus and he will come to you and will never leave you alone again. Notice that this third answer really makes the first two possible: It is belief in the Lord that makes Paul and Silas one. It is belief in the Lord that unites them with their Creator and gives them hope and confidence in God's kingdom and their place in it.

So, here we are, in the midst of our scary, troubled, confusing lives. We do understand the situation, so it's hard for us to keep our heads. We don't feel safe and we don't believe the world is safe. We're afraid for our

solders, We grieve for those who have died. We're heartsick because some of our troops have been cruel to prisoners, We're distressed by the seemingly endless conflict between Israel and Palestine. In our personal lives we struggle with family problems, health issues, personal hurts, difficult decisions, we're looking for work, or our work is difficult. We're too busy and too tired. Where do we go for answers? Where do we go for the power to endure? Where do we go to be safe?

Listen to one man's solution and a pastor's thoughts about it:

The new home was filled with all the wonders that human ingenuity and skill could contrive. There were so many computerized appliances, gadgets and security devises that I could not count them. In addition, I never knew that there might be a need for such. While lying in bed the owner of the house could punch a button and view a dozen television screens revealing every possible approach that an intruder might use to enter his fabulously guarded domicile. With great pride he described what he referred to as his "safe room," the reinforced concrete and steel walls were so thick that only the most modern and sophisticated weaponry might penetrate them. The steel door had four massive bolts on top, bottom and both sides. It had an independent power supply, communication system, oxygen supply, water source and food pantry. In case of storm, earthquake or attack from some possible enemy, he was confident of his safety. I know the world today is not unfamiliar with crime and violence, that the threat of terrorism is real, and that at any moment some madman could create a nuclear holocaust that could devastate the Earth as we know it. But a "safe room?" How safe is such a room if the one who occupies it nurtures anger, prejudice or greed? How safe is it for one who lacks compassion, understanding, a forgiving heart? What might it be like to be secure in such a room with memories of failed opportunities to love one's neighbor, or an awareness that life is more than being safe. And what if a stranger came and said, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock..." Could he get in?

Friends, this morning, Jesus is knocking at our door. Will we open the door to him--for the first time or the hundredth time or the thousandth time? If we let him in, he'll never leave us alone, and we'll be truly safe, truly joyful.

Let us pray: Lead us Lord, lead us in thy righteousness. Make thy way plain before our face. For it is Thou, Lord, Thou Lord only, who makest us dwell in safety. Amen