

UNCHAINED MELODY

ACTS 16:16-34

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

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MAY 8, 2016/7TH SUNDAY OF EASTER

So we've reached the last Sunday of our Easter through Pentecost mini-tour through the book of Acts.

A quick recap:

Week one: resurrection on the move means... **Obedience.** We heard the story of Peter before the Sanhedrin fearlessly proclaiming the good news of Jesus, declaring, "We must obey God and not human beings."

Week two: resurrection on the move means... **Conversion.** Through the story of Saul, we saw how a fire-breathing anti-Christian religious zealot was turned into God's instrument to bring good news to the Gentiles and become the most influential missionary the church has ever known.

Week three: resurrection on the move means... **Life.** In the story of the healing of Tabitha, we were invited into a life free from slavery to the fear of death.

Week four: resurrection on the move means... **Welcome.** The story of Peter and Cornelius showed us that God extends a welcome that transcends ethnic boundaries, and all are welcomed as equals into responses of repentance and new life.

Week five: resurrection on the move means... **Openness.** Through the story of Paul and Lydia, we saw that the gospel moved forward and still moves forward through simple acts of openness to God and each other.

Today, we end with a story of **Liberation**.

I think that all of us have a fascination with liberation stories.

When I was a kid, one of my favourite movies was Walt Disney's cartoon version of Robin Hood. I loved the way that Robin Hood and Little John sided with the poor, stealing from the good for nothing Prince John (voiced by Peter Ustinov) and redistributing wealth to all the harassed and oppressed in Nottingham Forest.

I loved the mischief they got into, the way they humiliated the evil prince, the way Robin's archery skills put the prince's men to shame. I even tolerated the love story with Maid Marian.

But my favourite part of the film was always the jailbreak. Through a combination of clever disguises and strategic archery, Robin and Little John rescue Friar Tuck and all the other poor souls who had been unable to pay Prince John's exorbitant taxes, and escape by the skin of their teeth through a fiery inferno not only with all the prisoners unharmed but with a good chunk of Prince John's gold.

It's a marvelous scene.

When I got older, my film tastes graduated beyond cartoons and one of my favourites was *The Shawshank Redemption*. Many of you know the story of Andy Dufresne (played by Tim Robbins), a banker who is sentenced to life in Shawshank State Penitentiary for the murder of his wife and her lover, despite his claims of innocence, of his befriending of Ellis Boyd Reed (Morgan Freeman), and of his digging his way to freedom through a sewer tunnel.

It's another masterfully told story.

We even see jailbreak stories in the book of Acts.

Twice before, God has orchestrated prison escapes for the apostles. In Acts 4, Peter and John are locked up after healing a lame beggar and preaching a fiery sermon. They are released only because the authorities fear their reputation is growing

In Acts 5:17-20 they are again arrested for performing healings and causing a ruckus. This time, an angel of the Lord releases Peter and the apostles from prison at midnight to resume preaching (much to the irritation of the authorities).

There's a reason I'm drawn to stories like this (and you probably are, too).

We are suckers for stories about people escaping from what imprisons them. We know that captivity is not our natural state—that we were made for freedom.

Well, today's text is about chains. And about freedom.

It is about the song of resurrection leading to the liberation of human beings. Let's look at the story and observe three "liberations." In each case, we will see that the liberation took place on more than one level.

First, we have the liberation of the slave girl.

She is in physical bondage to unscrupulous owners who profited from her "talents." Fortune telling was big business in the Roman world, and people would frequently consult those who could divine the future (i.e., the priestess of Apollo at Delphi).

Like so many before and since, and in so many ways, we have a vulnerable young woman who is being used for profit by men.

She is set free from her captivity to those who would use her as an object rather than treat her as a human being because Paul, through the power of Jesus, sets her free from the evil spirit that was the means through which she was able to tell the future.

Once her spiritual chains are broken, she becomes useless to the men who controlled her and they cast her aside like a piece of garbage, which sets in motion the rest of the events of the story.

We don't know what happened to the girl after this incident—indeed, we don't even know why Paul was reluctant to set her free and only *seemed* to do so because she was annoying him—but we do know that she had been set free, physically and spiritually, in the name and by the power of Jesus.

Then, we have the Philippian jailer.

The men who had lost their profitable slave girl had succeeded in whipping the crowd and the authorities into a frenzy, and Paul and Silas had been beaten and thrown in jail.

The story here takes an unexpected turn. Paul and Silas are singing songs in prison when an earthquake comes and their chains are broken. This is the part of the story where we are ready to celebrate deliverance!

Run for it! we instinctively say. God has vindicated you and set you free!

Meanwhile, the jailer sees what is happening and gets ready to kill himself. Either die by his own sword or that of his master's, he undoubtedly figures.

But there's a twist. The prisoners have not escaped. They're remained. This is no ordinary jailbreak.

Astonished, the jailer asks Paul and Silas, "What must I do to be saved?"

At this point, we tend to begin importing all kinds of assumptions into the story. *He's asking about how to secure salvation, we think. He's asking a religious question. This is the "altar-call" moment when Paul and Silas get to "close the deal!"*

In truth, many scholars think he was asking some variation of the question, *How do I get out of this mess I'm in!*

But Paul and Silas address him at a much deeper level than he is expecting. *Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved.* They proceed to share more with him about the good news of Jesus and what it means.

And the Philippian jailer *is* saved. He is set free. Free from his captivity to unjust systems that oppress and persecute others, from the fear and guilt of his complicity in the treatment of Paul and Silas.

But even more importantly, he is liberated from spiritual bondage through the gift of salvation. He is baptized—he and his whole family.

He bandages the wounds of his former prisoners. He is enabled to reach across boundaries that would have previously been un-crossable.

He becomes part of a story of healing, forgiveness, and restoration.

Finally, we have the liberation of Paul and Silas.

On a surface level, their physical chains are broken in the Philippian jail. It's a scene worthy of a Hollywood movie! Their innocence has been vindicated, the guilt and corruption of their captors exposed. Freedom gloriously beckons!

But their reaction to this points to a deeper liberation, one that goes to the very heart of what it means to be children of the resurrection.

They are set free, but for what? Not to glory in their freedom or to horde it selfishly, but to live as witnesses to what true freedom in Christ looks like.

Their chains were broken long before they found themselves chained to the wall in that prison cell.

They had been set free to live as if there was a new king, a new reality that was truer and deeper and more powerful even than the kings and systems and rulers that had abused and mistreated them (and would continue to do so, for the rest of their lives!).

They had been set free to live and speak as Jesus lived and spoke.

Set free to praise God in the midst of suffering.

Set free to respond in "unnatural" ways to hardship and injustice because they had seen their Teacher and Master do the same.

In today's gospel reading from John 17, Jesus prays that his followers will be one:

I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me...

I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them."

And now, Jesus' prayer is answered.

Paul and Silas now live this love out in their response to the Philippian jailer.

They show that Christ *is* within them—that they and he are one—in the song they sing, the witness they embody, the hope they proclaim.

I entitled my sermon today “Unchained Melody” not because I have a particular affinity for cheesy romantic songs from the 1950’s or bad romance movies from the early 1990’s (*Ghost*, anyone?!).

I chose it because I think those two words capture a vital truth of what it means to live as “resurrection people.”

We’ve seen in each of the characters in the story today that the good news of the gospel means liberation: socially, economically, relationally, and spiritually.

We are meant to carry this story forward. As Christians we are participants in a song of liberation.

This is a song that Christians have been singing for some time.

From grand historical achievements like the Anti-slavery movement...

... to the fight against poverty and disease...

... to those working for peace and justice in the midst of systems of inhumanity and oppression (I have seen this firsthand in MCC trips to Colombia and Palestine)...

... to those fighting on the frontlines of the sexual slavery and human trafficking movements that profit off the bodies of vulnerable (much like the girl in today’s story)...

...to missionary efforts that seek to honour indigenous culture and offer the good news of Jesus as a gift...

... to the global spread of literacy...

... to the rise of movements like Alcoholics Anonymous...

... to the origins of Mothers Day, which originally began not as one more shrine to Hallmark consumerism, but to honour a Christian woman named Ann Reeves Jarvis who laboured for peace and shared humanity during the American civil war...

... to the sponsoring of refugees fleeing the horrors of war...

...to ordinary efforts from ordinary people seeking through the power of the Holy Spirit to walk away from our chains—whatever they look like—and to help others do the same, through faith and prayer and friendship and counseling and support...

... to countless other examples.

Christians, at their best, have always been about liberation. This is the song that we sing. This is how we, like Paul and Silas, demonstrate that we are the answer to Jesus' prayer in John 17:

I in them and they in me...

I want to close with a well-known quote from former CBC journalist Brian Stewart, who is currently the Distinguished Senior Fellow with the Munk School of Global Affairs at the University of Toronto. These words come from an oft-quoted address at a Knox College convocation in 2004:

For many years I've been struck by the rather blithe notion, spread in many circles including the media, and taken up by a rather large section of our younger population that organized, mainstream Christianity has been reduced to a musty, dimly lit backwater of contemporary life, a fading force. Well, I'm here to tell you from what I've seen from my "ring-side seat" at events over decades that there is nothing that is further from the truth. That notion is a serious distortion of reality. I've found there is no movement, or force, closer to the raw truth of war, famines, crises, **and the vast human predicament**, than organized Christianity in action. And there is no alliance more determined and dogged in action than church workers, ordained and lay members, when mobilized for a common good.

It is these Christians who are right "On the Front Lines" of committed humanity today, and when I want to find that front, I follow their trail. It is a vast front stretching from the most impoverished reaches of the developing world to the hectic struggle to preserve caring values in our own towns and cities. I have never been able to reach these front lines without finding Christian volunteers already in the thick of it, mobilizing congregations that care, and being a faithful witness to truth, the primary light in the darkness and so often, the only light.

Now this is something the media and government officials rarely acknowledge... [F]ront line efforts of Christianity do not usually produce headlines, and unfortunately this feeds the myth that the Church just follows along, to do its modest bit. **Let me repeat, I've never reached a war zone, or famine group or crisis anywhere where some Church organization was not there long before me ... sturdy, remarkable souls usually too kind to ask "what took you so long."**¹

This quote tells me that we've been singing well.

Liberation is a song that Christians need to keep singing, in the face of global crises and catastrophes and in our ordinary relationships with our neighbours.

We are the ones who get to proclaim release from captivity, freedom in Christ, hope and new life, repentance and salvation.

We are the ones who get to live into this song of wholeness, healing, and hope.

May God help us to continue singing this song of liberation that the world so desperately needs to hear.

Amen.



¹ <http://www.christianity.ca/page.aspx?pid=11235>