

Homily Easter 7C
May 8, 2016
Grace, River Forest

Acts 16:16-34
Psalm 97
Revelation 22: 12-14, 16-17, 20-21
John 17:20-26

Washing Our Robes

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

In Jesus' name. Amen

When I saw the readings for today, especially the one in Acts, I kept wishing for an easier text, something perhaps like the beheading of John the Baptist. I have always loved the Acts text that comes right before today's, the one read last Sunday -- where Paul has a vision of a man calling him to come over to Macedonia, modern-day Greece. What Paul finds in the city of Philippi, however, is a group of women at a place of prayer. Paul tells them the story of Jesus, and Lydia, a wealthy business woman, a dealer in purple cloth, "opens her heart." She and her household are baptized -- becoming the first Christian converts in Europe.

But this week's story has begun growing on me. It would make a great action movie. A fortune teller, shouting down the streets. A mob, out of control. A prison story, not quite like the TV show, "Orange Is the New Black," but with the potential for a possible jail break.

Scene one begins as Paul and Silas are again “going to a place of prayer” in Philippi. A fortune teller, a slave girl, starts following Paul and his companion, crying out, “These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation!” Yes, what she says is true, but she keeps shouting it, with no let up, day after day after day, hour after hour after hour. Finally, Paul has had it. He couldn’t really share what God has done for all people in Christ with her shouting all the time, so – in the name of Jesus Christ – Paul orders “the spirit” of prophetic utterance within the girl, “to come out.” And it does. Even as Jesus cast out demons and unclean spirits, Paul, in Jesus’ name, heals the girl of the spirit which possessed her.

Scene 2. This healing, this casting out of an unclean spirit, does not exactly have a happy ending for all concerned. Hardly. The slave girl’s owners were incensed. The girl had been “a cash cow” for them, earning them a pretty penny, to live off of, as she went around telling fortunes. Now the girl was no good to them, their income source gone. They did not take it lying down. They dragged Paul and Silas into the marketplace and brought them before the magistrates with a three-fold complaint: (1) “They’re disturbing the peace of our city.” Doesn’t that remind you a bit of the charges against civil rights “sit-ins” and marches in the 60s, or some of the Black Lives Matter demonstrations today? (2) “They’re Jews,”

outsiders. And (3), the slave-owners let out all the stops; they play the “Roman card.” “These men are pushing new religious customs unlawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe.” In Roman colonies, like Philippi, Roman citizens were to worship only the emperor. Paul, actually a Roman citizen himself, and his companion Silas are beaten black-and-blue by a mob, stripped and flogged, and put into prison, in a maximum security cell, and, for good measure, chained to the wall.

Scene 3. It’s “about midnight,” and instead of bemoaning their fate, “Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns,” and other prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly, an earthquake – rupturing the foundations of the prison, opening cell doors, breaking prisoners’ chains. And the jailer – assuming all the prisoners had escaped, was ready to fall upon his sword. “Don’t! We’re all here,” Paul shouts. Realizing that something bigger than anything he had ever experienced before was happening here, the jailer fell down before Paul and Silas and asked, “What must I do to be saved?” They answered, “Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.”

And the final scene, before the curtain drops, in the jailer’s home. Paul and Silas tell the good news of Jesus to everyone in the house. What exactly they said, of course, we can’t be sure. But I wouldn’t be surprised if Paul spoke of Jesus’ first

sermon in his home synagogue of Nazareth, where his text was from the prophet Isaiah: “The spirit of the Lord is upon me, to bring release to the captives.” To bring release to the captives – to a slave girl, captive to an alien spirit within her, and captive to her “owners” who exploited her for their own gain; to the captives – like Paul and Silas, in jail; to the jailer, captive, in bondage to fear, that his prisoners had escaped. Or maybe Paul spoke only about Jesus’ death on the cross and his rising again, to save us – free us from sin and death and whatever else shackles us. Whatever Paul said, the jailer and everyone in his household believed and were baptized.

One of the commentaries I read this week suggested that the 16th chapter of Acts puts flesh on Paul’s proclamation in Galatians 3:28. “There is,” Paul wrote, “no longer Jew [Paul and Silas] or Greek [Lydia, the fortune teller, the jailer]; there is no longer slave [the fortune teller] or free [Lydia, Paul]; no longer male [Paul, Silas, the jailer] or female [Lydia, the fortune teller]; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” (Paul W. Walaskay, *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 2*, p. 527)

Which leads us to how these stories might connect to us and our lives today. In today’s Gospel, Jesus – on the night he was betrayed, prayed for his disciples and for those who would believe in him “through their word.” That means Jesus was praying for a lot of people down through the centuries, all the

way to and for us today. And what is Jesus' prayer for us? Two things, really: "that we might all be one," as Jesus and the Father are one. And that God's own love in Jesus Christ might be "in us."

It was a disparate group to which Paul in the 16th chapter of Acts made Christ's name "known": a first-century fashionista like Lydia; a nameless slave girl on the opposite end of the social spectrum; a jailer, shackled by his duties and by fear. To whom are we called to make Christ's "name known" today? Those who remain exploited in our age: Child laborers in many Asian countries? Young girls trapped in sex trafficking? Black and Hispanic males given harsher sentences in jail than their white counterparts, because of the color of their skin? Jailers, guards, in our justice system, who often serve under harsh and difficult conditions? And others who we often ignore or overlook?

Jesus prayed for his disciples and us, "That we may all be one," and "that [God's own love] might be in us." With whom does Jesus call us to be "one" in the body of Christ today? With our fellow believers at Harmony Church? Absolutely. But who else?

In today's readings there is a lot of washing going on. The jailer, after midnight, in his own home, washes Paul and Silas' wounds, followed by Paul in baptism washing away the sins and shackles of the jailer and his family. Tending

and washing wounds, such an intimate act. You mothers here have lots of experience at that, and not just when your kids' "wounds" are skinned knees.

Whose wounds are waiting to be washed by this church today?

In Revelation we're told, "Blessed are those who wash their robes." What exactly does that mean for us today, to wash our robes? Well, one thing, for sure: It means to "wash our robes in the blood of the Lamb," the one who loved us and saved us, and made us God's own. But I think there is something more to it as well. We do our laundry when our clothes get dirty and stained from being out and about, engaged in activity, in the wear and tear of the world, and when we're getting ready to go out again together into the world, "as one." We who have been, like the jailer, saved by faith, are also saved *for* faith and for our witness to the world. So we "stretch" ourselves, as much as we're able, in our Faith Promises today and in our giving of money and time and talent, so that each of us individually, and together as "one" in Grace church, with our "robes washed clean" by the blood of the Lamb, can be out and about again in this fragile world God loves so very much, washing wounds and making the love of God in Christ Jesus known.

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