

7 Easter
Christ and Grace
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Acts 16:16-34, John 17:20-26
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In scripture, an earthquake was believed to be a divine manifestation. Though we now know the geological explanations for earthquakes, if we have ever experienced even a small one, we are likely to have been impressed by it. I remember being at home in August of 2011 when a 5.8 magnitude quake began to shake the house. I dropped everything I was doing, and ran outside, not even taking time to put on my shoes. As I stood barefoot in the grass I could feel the earth moving and I knew it was an earthquake. In fascination I watched the azalea bushes dancing in the flower border – I have never seen leaves vibrate quite like that before. The rattling noise inside my house turned to strange silence outside. I felt the trembling in every part of my body. And in those seconds nothing else mattered, all else was forgotten. The earthquake had my complete attention, freeing me from any other thing that was binding me that day. The whole earth was worshipping God in a holy dance.

In the 21st century we know so much more about earthquakes than did the first Apostles. We know where the fault lines are across the country; we know that California's infamous San Andreas Fault is a massive quake just waiting to happen. So while my experience of an earthquake mesmerized me, I am all too aware that earthquakes can do great damage. In addition to earthquakes, other weather-related events can also cause damage. In the month of May there were a record number of tornados and hurricane season began yesterday.

Today's passage from the Acts of the Apostles continues the story from last week as Paul and Silas shared the Gospel in Philippi. Each day as they went to the place of prayer down by the river, they were annoyed by a fortune-telling woman until Paul's temper got the better of him and he ordered the spirit of divination to come out of her. This set in motion a chain of events that landed Paul and Silas in prison, falsely accused and with no hope of freedom. There they were, in the innermost cell, their feet fastened in the stocks. They had been beaten, bruised and battered. It was midnight. It could not get any worse.

Life goes like that, doesn't it? We are managing just fine then suddenly something shakes our foundation, and suddenly our lives seem to be falling apart. All our best intentions are beaten out of us; all our sincere efforts are chained and imprisoned. Earthquakes, tornados, hurricanes, or yet another mass shooting, this time in Virginia Beach, hit too close to home.

Perhaps it's not an exterior disaster but an interior one that brings tremors. We can be chained and imprisoned by our past, or held captive in a dysfunctional family system where there is an earthquake happening almost every day. The powers that be hold us captive, it's midnight, and it seems hopeless.

When we find ourselves in shackles like this - and if we haven't yet, we will – how do we react? Because when we are suffering, when our world is falling apart, the rest of the world is watching us. When we have been wronged, or when our life is in rubble, do we think about all the ways we will get even? Escape? Call down God's judgment on our false accusers? Do we let our wounded pride or shaken emotions get the best of us?

Politics, the church, our employers, our own families, horrific events of violence, even the destructive weather patterns will bring challenges that can overwhelm us. Whether the shackles binding us are cause for pain and suffering, or outright anger, Paul and Silas give us a model of behavior. Jesus, in praying for his disciples and for us, teaches us how we are to respond. The way to respond is with love. Love of God and love for one another.

How many of us, if unjustly accused and imprisoned, would bad mouth, sulk, or plot revenge? Not Paul and Silas. At midnight, at their darkest hour, they prayed and sang, offering their love to God. As they worshiped, an earthquake shook the foundations, opened the doors of the prison, and unfastened the chains. And their first response? Not escape but love and compassion for their jailer!

When people are praising God, when they are living the gospel and showing love for others, it does not go unnoticed. Is it easy to pray and sing hymns in the middle of our personal earthquakes? By no means! Throughout life our foundations will be shaken by people or events that will bind and imprison us for no just cause. It is the manner in which we react that determines how God's saving grace will be revealed.

We have a choice. We can give others the keys to lock us in prison. We can give them the shackles to bind our feet. Or we can refuse to be bound, and instead we can respond with love, praying and singing, even in the midst of life's earthquakes, tornados, shootings and personal pain. And we can reach out to help those around us in the aftermath of their disasters.

No matter what situations in our lives hold us captive, we worship the most high God who frees us from captivity. We *know* this story – we have heard it in the freedom of the Hebrew slaves from Pharaoh in Egypt; in the return of the Jews from exile in Babylon; in the many healings and demons cast out by Jesus; and most of all in the resurrection from the dead of our Lord Jesus Christ.

This story that we know so well becomes ours to tell. The story is told every time we react with love to the ways life imprisons and chains us. Our actions become the gospel in the lives of those around us. This is what Jesus prayed for his disciples and for us, “The glory that you have given me I have given them, *so that* they may be one, as we are 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.”

When the world looks at the Church, does it see unity or disunity? Does the world see us arguing and in conflict, or does the world see us loving one another, despite our differences? To live in this world filled with conflict, anger, injustice, and suffering, we must abide in God's love, together.

The earthquakes will come – real or metaphorical. Even as we feel the earth moving under our bare feet, or our very lives trembling, we can know that God is very present with us, and that the love of God, is ultimately more powerful than anything else.

Amen.