

Acts 16:16-34 • Psalm 97 • Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21 • John 17:20-26 • Easter 7  
• Year C • May 16, 2010 • St. Thomas, Hanover, New Hampshire

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

As we lift our voices again today to celebrate that Christ is risen, we have additional lenses through which to examine what we mean and to add to the richness of what we mean. Especially in the weeks of the Easter season, we remember that Christ rose from the dead, leaving an empty tomb. There was a vacuum for a bit as the disciples got their bearings, moving beyond the emptiness, discovering the presence of the risen Lord. During these last few weeks, we also have been getting our bearings, reflecting upon the reality of our *own* hope in the resurrection.

This past Thursday was Ascension Day, and on that day we remember that Christ was lifted up to heaven to sit at God's right hand and there to intercede for us. Our scripture readings from Revelation all through the Easter season have helped us envision Christ as ascended to the throne, with all the accompanying imagery of royalty, majesty and awe. We now live in those liminal days, transition days between Christ's ascension and the coming of the Holy Spirit. As Episcopalians, we tend particularly to honor the mystery and majesty of God, and our liturgy and symbolism raise us to "join with angels and archangels." The danger of these days is that we are apt to get comfortable gazing up into heaven, not actually responding to the gift of salvation, not actually doing anything about it.

It is always good to read scripture as listeners, listeners for questions more than for answers—and today the climactic question is "What must I do to be saved?" First, it's

useful to acknowledge any discomfort that the question stirs up for us. Admittedly, the term “saved” comes potentially with a lot of baggage. The term has been ill-used, over-used and misunderstood by many who loudly proclaim themselves to be *the* true Christians. If we can, let us set aside our uneasiness and remember that no one owns salvation. Jesus died for all.

The story from Acts this morning that raises the central question is like a string of three pearls, *and* like a musical crescendo—three different yet connected incidents, each of which points forward to the final question about being saved. The story illustrates salvation in three different ways: moving from slavery to freedom, from being bound to being released, from being lost to being saved. The slave-girl was bound by some kind of ill-spirit *and* by her owners in their pursuit of profit. Empowered even by *this* ill-spirit, the girl recognized Paul and Silas as messengers of God and wouldn’t stop following them and crying out about them for all to hear.

We learn that Paul did not heal the slave-girl because she needed to be healed. His motivation was that she distressed him; he was “very much annoyed.” For whatever reason, Paul did not reach out to her in compassion, but in frustration. The point is, he did act on her behalf and she was saved, freed from the ill-spirit that she harbored within herself. And Paul and Silas got in trouble with her owners because of it.

After being beaten, they were put in prison and physically bound. It is not surprising that they did not sleep. In the night, when all our cares seem to loom largest, Paul and Silas prayed and sang hymns to God, calming and comforting themselves and the other prisoners as well. A violent earthquake became the context for their liberation.

It is difficult to read this passage with its connection of praying, singing and earthquake and not be reminded of news reports from Haiti. Prayer and singing remain a faith-filled response to physical suffering, comforting by pulling Christ's presence close and inspiring others who also become drawn into his presence.

Paul and Silas's physical prison was broken open, leading to their subsequent release. But the story of their physical salvation pales quickly as the author tells the jailer's story. He woke to fear and despair, believing that all was lost. But the tables turn as Paul and Silas surprise him with the opportunity for his own salvation. He responds to the unseen source of their internal light with the question of the day: "What must I do to be saved?"

The work of salvation has already been accomplished by Christ, but as with any gift, we must choose to receive it. What must we do to be saved? The answer that Paul gave was to believe, "believe in Jesus as Lord and you will be saved." The jailer's belief shifted from loss to hope. He shifted from guard to caregiver. And in the community of his household, Paul and Silas, they shared in praise and rejoicing.

We share our believing with one another every time we gather when we say "We believe..." and recite the creed together. Every time we say it, we insert ourselves again in the line of believers, disciples, those for whom Jesus prayed and prays for still. He envisioned a long line of followers who would "share in a deeply profound relationship with God. His is the prayer that will bring past followers and future believers together before the throne of God" as one body. His is the Spirit that binds us together in love. By

saying “We believe...” we rehearse and practice, supporting one another in community, until that day when we reach the fullness of belief and our ultimate salvation.

It was about this community, this oneness, this body that John wrote in the Gospel that was read today—in fact, he wrote about you and me. Jesus prayed not only for his twelve disciples but he said also “on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one.” [John 17:20] “Sometimes, it seems the church may never be one. There are doctrinal differences, conflicting understandings of salvation, and many other differences and disagreements—all of which can tear the church apart. Still, Jesus’ words in John are a strong testament, a sure promise that God’s church is bigger than any of us, and that the love of God can bridge all differences.”

We believe that in Christ, pain can be turned to joy. We believe that suffering does not need to lead to despair. We believe that we are saved through the same power that raised Jesus from the grave. “The resurrection of Jesus means that there is always a future for us—a future of fullness of life” and of freedom in the joy of his presence. St. Augustine observed that “Jesus departed from our sight that we might return to our heart, and there find him. For he departed and behold, he is here.”

Amen.