



Sermon for the Seventh Sunday of Easter, May 29, 2022 (Sunday after the Ascension)

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene The Rev. Dr. David Gortner

[Acts 16:16-34](#)

[Psalm 97](#)

[Revelation 22:12-14,16-17,20-21](#)

[John 17:20-26](#)

Let us pray.

We remember today, O God, the slaughter of the holy innocents of Bethlehem by King Herod. Receive, we pray, into the arms of your mercy all innocent victims; and by your great might frustrate the designs of evil tyrants and establish your rule of justice, love, and peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

What a week it has been... What fresh tragedy has struck us as a nation...

The terrible violence in Texas happened while I was away for this week.

And I was blessed with a wonderful week, beginning with a rich time of in-person connection and time of retreat with fellow priests that I have served as mentor and coach for these past two years.

Rich time of prayer, bringing our sorrows to Jesus, and offering our thanks for each other and for God's movements of grace in our lives. Deep breathing. Letting go. Then, time on the beach enjoying sun and wind and the sound of the surf.

It was there that we first learned the news.

You know how people have flashbulb memories, so powerful they remember exactly where they were and with whom and what they were feeling? Sometimes these kinds of memories are so powerful, they become marker memories for an entire generation. Like when JFK was assassinated. Or when the space shuttle exploded. Or when the twin towers were destroyed.

This feels like that kind of memory, to me. I will always remember the gift of God's peace, torn from us suddenly with the horror of the slaughter of children and their teachers in a school in Uvalde, Texas. These children dead in a classroom targeted by an 18-year-old who took the first chance he could at age 18 to buy an AR-15 and plenty of equipment for a slaughter. These children dead: Makenna, Layla, Maranda, Nevaeh, Jose, Xavier, Tess Rojelio, Ellie, Eliahna, Anabell, Jackie Uziyah, Jace, Maite Jailah, Amerie, Lexi, and Alithia. And their teachers, Irma and Eva. Yes... this is a flashbulb memory.

And yet, it is not the first. And it will not be the last.

We are in prison. We are a human race imprisoned in chains of our own making.

We have made for ourselves a prison of helplessness. We have told ourselves there is nothing we can do about our situation as a nation. We have bound ourselves to become numb and accustomed to deadly

violence by our own citizens that no other nation comes close to rivaling. We are in the chains of our own attachment to self-interest, and to rights without responsibilities.

On this Memorial Day weekend, I find myself asking the question, “Look what we have become – Is this the kind of nation our soldiers died to defend, to save, to build?” When we honor our dead tomorrow, I wonder, are we honoring our dead in our actions?

I wish the founders of our country had had the foresight to write a Bill of Responsibilities. We are all grateful for the Bill of Rights that outlines core freedoms for us as citizens. But we are lacking a similar outline that states for us the responsibilities we are charged to exercise with our freedoms. Because our dedication to irresponsible freedoms has bound us in chains of a false god of selfishness.

Jesus said, “I have come to proclaim release to those in prison, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set the captives free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” Jesus came to bring new life. And Jesus did just that.

And yet, today, we mark the end of celebration of the Great Fifty Days of Easter when our risen Jesus was appearing often to his followers and friends. At the end of this time, Jesus called a large group of his disciples together and led them outside the city, where he reminded them of all that had happened. He said, “Remember. The Messiah must suffer and then rise from the dead. This is the message and path of the Messiah. Now go and preach repentance and forgiveness to all nations, beginning here in this city. And you will receive power as I have promised.” And then, as he blessed them, he left. He ascended.

The Feast of the Ascension used to bother me. I remember in my early 20s when I was working with people who wrestled with and suffered from chronic mental illnesses like schizophrenia and paranoia and extreme bipolar disorder that affected them so much that they were not able live on their own. Folks came to Gould Farm, a place of deep caring and steady, simplified, routine work and life, as a place where in time they could practice and relearn the habits of healthy life together, so that they could eventually move toward more independence. I remember being overwhelmed, at my young age, with the internal anguish experienced by people, and felt the weight of what seemed like a path through valleys of the shadow of death that just didn’t have an end in sight. The church I was attending was Church of the Ascension. I remember staring at that window of Jesus rising into heaven as he offered parting words to his disciples. And I was unsatisfied and frustrated. “Where did you go, Jesus? What have you left us – me – all alone to face the brokenness of this world? What are we supposed to do now?”

Yes, I was able to touch some lives in my time as a young staff member at Gould Farm. And the Farm was a profoundly wonderful place that touched my life. But the experience with so many folks in pain and turmoil left a deep mark on me.

Thanks be to God, the story doesn’t end with Jesus ascending and leaving his disciples looking upward. The story of the power of Jesus’ resurrection and the life-changing ways of God’s good news carries on through Luke’s second book that we have been hearing, the Book of Acts. That wonderful book, the Acts of the Holy Spirit, and the Acts of the Apostles Who Are Along for the Ride. When the Holy Spirit comes upon the disciples, they open themselves to following the lead of this rushing wind and these flames of fire that come upon them. And they discover that the Holy Spirit is flowing and burning throughout the whole world – she goes before them and is already at work stirring and awakening hearts and minds long before they arrive to

tell the story. It does not mean that they live lives free of trouble or responsibility. No, they find themselves going through fiery times of trouble. And they find themselves called into challenging places they would not choose on their own, as they embrace responsibility to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit.

Paul and Silas are following the leading of the Holy Spirit. They follow a vision Paul had of someone calling out to them, "Come over to Macedonia and help us!" So they enter the region and find new friends, including Lydia who supports their ministry and opens her home as a place of meeting for followers of Jesus. Then they enter Macedonia. There, they are followed – and hounded endlessly – by a slave-girl who keeps at their heels shouting to everyone around them, "Hey, everyone! These are God's servants, here to tell you about a way to salvation." Now, maybe at first this is a little oddly charming, curious, whimsical. But as time goes on, day after day, well, you can understand how Paul and Silas found it completely annoying. It becomes a barrier to reaching people. It's like having a relentless voice shouting in our heads or dominating every group where we gather. Paul senses that this slave-girl is not choosing to act this way on her own but is being driven internally – and her owners had used her constant "mind-reading" speech as a way to make money by promoting her as a fortune-teller. Her owners are making money off of her own internal captivity. Paul sees that something is not right, and he calls out to that driving spirit within her and commands it to release her and to leave.

This leaves Paul and Silas on the wrong side of her owners. She is no longer enslaved within herself – and so her profit-making value to her owners is gone.

The slave-owners grab Paul and Silas and bring them before local judges with a claim that they were disrupting the right and good ways of the Roman people.

Good Gospel work disturbs the forces and habits of this world.

So, Paul and Silas end up whipped and forced into prison.

But the key difference here is that they were never imprisoned in their minds and hearts. They had given themselves to Christ and to the Holy Spirit. So, even in prison, they do what they did each night in every other place – they pray, and they sing praises to God. Without shame. Without apology. And, without force – without the in-your-face relentless forced speech of the slave-girl. They enter the free space of their hearts and minds, together with one another, in the presence of Christ who is with them even in that prison. And the other prisoners are listening. As they listen, something shakes loose. Something completely shakes loose. An earthquake breaks their bonds. The prisoners are set free, the captives' chains are broken, the doors are flung wide open!

The very nature of the jail itself is changed completely. And the only one truly left in prison at this point is the warden, the jailkeeper. He is still bound by the enslaving scripts of his duty, and by the message that he must be in control. Here he is, facing his worst nightmare – out of control of his own prisoners. But none have left. So he is shaken to the core, as his beliefs about his world are shattered and a new world appears to him. He asks Paul and Silas, "I want to be saved – what is the path?"

And what do Paul and Silas say?

“Believe.” As we have heard before, as I have shared with you and as our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry has said, “believe” meaning “give yourself to this, embrace this and take it in.” Entrust yourself.

Friends, there are pathways out of our situation as a nation. It takes courage to face the lies we have bound ourselves with. It takes openness to imagining what the Holy Spirit opens for us as a vision of a different world. It takes intentional steps to move with love, to invite people into the truth, to help others let go of the chains that bind them. There is a vision in scripture of the people beating their swords into plowshares, their weapons into tools to grow food and tend the earth.

So, a single jailkeeper and his household are changed – and we see the change step by step as he washes Paul’s and Silas’s wounds, as he invites them into his own home (by the way, violating their own sentence of imprisonment!) and feeding them.

So it can happen. Person by person. Letter by letter to our civic and state and national leaders. Conversation by conversation. Each encounter, in each place we find ourselves – even in prisons and marketplaces we enter because we have been following the leading of the Holy Spirit.

It turns out that the ascension was not just Jesus exiting the scene. It was Jesus being taken into the full embrace of God, as fully human and fully divine. God has taken humanness into God’s very being – forever.

And this embrace awaits us. Yes, it awaits us ultimately at our death, and at that “Great Gettin’-Up Day” of the final resurrection. But it awaits us even now – at every Now of our days. We meet the possibility of that embrace at every turn. And we face the invitation of that embrace in this moment, in our nation. Friends, can we throw ourselves headlong into that embrace, facing whatever may come?