

Summerland United Church
April 7th
Second Sunday in Easter
Resurrection Stories: *Freed*

Welcome & Land Acknowledgement

Threshold *We may be imprisoned by many things. Jesus' declaration that he had come to "set the prisoner free" can be interpreted for all of us, whether or not we've ever experienced being behind literal prison bars. This day, we will hear Resurrection Stories that move from chains to freedom. We will reflect on how we can each step into freedom from whatever binds us. They were on the road to Emmaus...*

Opening Prayer

Reader/s: We travel so many roads, so many journeys in this life, sometimes traveling towards, sometimes away from, a life of freedom.

Leader: Jesus came and fell into step with them, but they did not recognize him...

Reader/s: We are sometimes so overwhelmed with the struggles of this world that we can't see the Companion that walks alongside us.

Leader: Jesus asked them what they were talking about...

Reader/s: We have recited our stories of pain so often that we can't imagine there are other ways to interpret events, to get past the regret.

Leader: They explained the horror of the recent past, about their friend who was crucified and their disappointment at dreams of liberation dashed...

Reader/s: We so often think we've hit the end of the road, the finale of the story, with nothing left to say.

Leader: Then Jesus began to tell the story as a bigger picture...

Reader/s: We sometimes perceive only the parts that feel insurmountable without zooming out to notice the larger narrative of hope.

Leader: They invited Jesus to dinner after such a long walk...

Reader/s: We actually know how to reach for help, even when we don't realize we need it.

Leader: Jesus took the bread, blessed, broke and gave it to them...

Reader/s: We are capable of having our eyes opened to the presence of Love in our midst.

Leader: Jesus vanished from the room as quickly as he had appeared on the road but they were left with the awe and wonder of having their hearts transformed...

All: We open to the possibility that nothing is closed,

***that our hearts can be opened anytime, anywhere,
and resurrection from death-dealing forces is possible.***

*Leader: This is a Word of Hope for the people who long for it.
All: Thanks be to the Living Word.*

– based on Luke 24:13-32

Scripture: A Story of Freedom: Acts 16:16-34

One day as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a female slave who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling. While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, “These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation.” She kept doing this for many days. But Paul, very much annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, “I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.” And it came out that very hour.

But when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the authorities. When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, “These men, these Jews, are disturbing our city and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us, being Romans, to adopt or observe.” The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was an earthquake so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken, and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone’s chains were unfastened. When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped. But Paul shouted in a loud voice, “Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.” The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them outside and said, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” They answered, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.” They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. He brought them up into the house and set food before them, and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.

Reflection: Freed

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How many of you are familiar with the term “Girls Girl”? Any one? It’s a term I’ve seen a little bit more on social media of late, and if you haven’t heard it, you probably know the meaning of it. It means a girl (or Woman) who always has another woman’s back. They don’t tear other women down behind their backs and don’t see other women as competition for jobs or husbands. I don’t want to turn this into a sermon on women’s studies, necessarily, but the reality is that our society can and does inadvertently and overtly encourage women to push down other women, rather than lift them up.

And I try hard to be a ‘girls girl’ or in other words, not a jerk. And because I’m a girls girl I cannot in good conscience allow the generally accepted commentary on this slave girl in Acts to stand. In reading the commentaries on this passage this week, the happy feminist in me got increasingly frustrated and then furious about how the fate of the slave girl in Acts 16 is left unknown, and that most theologians view Pauls act of freeing her from the ‘spirit of prophecy’ as one of triumph and the greatest gift this girl could have been given.

This is where I quietly mutter, most of these theologians were and are men, and move on. So this slave girl, yes. Slavery is abhorrent, the fact that it was her owners that gained financially from her work is as equally abhorrent. Yet, Paul, by freeing her of the spirit likely did not do her any favours.

Suddenly her livelihood was stripped from her. Being a slave with a talent, likely afforded her a decent(ish) life, she was probably treated better than other slaves, because she was her owners cash cow.

And what happens to cows after the milk dries up? She was still property, but now property with no value.

And what really gets my inner feminist theologian raging is – she was telling the truth. She followed Paul and Silas around saying *“These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation.”* She was not wrong. In some translations the words used are servant, rather than slave – but in the 1st century when this was written they mean the same thing.

The slave girl is actually echoing Matthew 23:11 ¹¹ Whoever serves you like a servant is the greatest among you. In Pauls letter to the Romans – the city is currently in – he introduces himself as *Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God.*

She's saying exactly what Paul says about himself, he just doesn't like the way she's saying it. In other stories about exorcism in the bible, we read that the people possessed by spirits or demons are suffering. Their lives are made much worse by what ails them. Not the case with the slave girl – she's doing pretty well for herself.

And then Paul, annoyed by how she was proclaiming gospel truth, annoyed because, maybe she wasn't proclaiming it in the form he understood – takes everything away from her.

He doesn't stop and talk to her, find out more about her, or take the time to see that potential for her to become a member of this new church, rather he dismisses her and others her and shames her.

Centuries later we're supposed to read this part of the story and see how Paul 'freed her from torment and freed her from slavery' most commentators believe that, no longer having use to her owners, she would have been freed. That's not how slavery worked.

And so I resist suggesting that this is a story of freeing the slave girl, rather I think where we can find freedom is by realizing that in this particular case – Paul screwed up. Paul made a mistake. He was not at his best self, let the human emotions of irritation and annoyance rule his decisions and the result was really terrible.

How is that freedom? It's freedom because it can remind us that we too are fallible humans, who are not always our best selves either, liable to make snap judgements when we're frustrated, tired, annoyed, or Hangry. And it's at these points that we need to remember this story and pause, breathe and look at the person annoying us and maybe try to see their perspective.

Here in Summerland we have a Ministerial. We are a monthly gathering of a few of the ministers and pastors in town. The Lutherans, Baptists, Alliance, and Pentecostal churches, along with me from the United Church get together and chat about our work and other topics. We have wildly different theological viewpoints, we celebrate and worship extremely differently. To the point where we might see their ways of worship and think – wow that's kinda crazy. And if I was to act as Paul does in this story – I would rudely dismiss 'their crazy way of proclaiming the gospel'.

But I don't, and no one else in the ministerial does either because we recognize the freedom in worshiping and proclaiming the gospel as we are called to express it, means respecting and accepting that there are other ways too.

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What we do agree on is that each one of us want to do good for our town. We want to do what we can to make our town a better place to live for everyone. Doesn't matter if they come to one church or another, or any church at all. If we can make this place better for those living here we want to see if we can do it.

How different might this story of the slave girl be, if Paul and Silas had that in mind when they met the girl? How much better would all their lives have been had Paul recognized that she was proclaiming the gospel, yes is a foreign and unknown way, but proclaiming the gospel nonetheless?

It seems to me that the second part of the story might suggest Paul did realize this, did understand that freedom is complicated. They pray and an earthquake breaks the walls of the prison. Paul, Silas and the others are now free. They could run away – but their freedom would result in the punishment of others. The jailer, so afraid of retribution at failing to do his job, wanted to take his own life, rather than face it. So, one must imagine it would be very harsh retribution indeed.

But Paul and the others, don't run away. They realized that their freedom wouldn't really be freedom if it caused the suffering of another, so they stay and they 'save' the jailer, from job retribution, even if it means remaining imprisoned. This selfless act give the jailer pause, and makes him want to understand this gospel of Jesus more.

And so we see Paul act selfishly with the slave girl, providing a false freedom – one where not everyone gains equally. And then we see Paul act selflessly with the jailer providing a more authentic freedom, where everyone gains, not necessarily equally, but authentically.

Now, my task is to relate this story back to our theme of resurrection stories – and it's supposed to be the 'new life' the slave girl and the jailer 'unlock' because of the freeing nature of the gospel.

But that's not what I see. I see two things. 1. I see a new life in Paul – a realization that how he behaved in the first part of the story was a mistake, so he acted differently in the second. He learned and grew and that's new life right there.

And the 2. Is this. As many of you know I'm completing my final year at Seminary and that I had a large research project as my final thesis. I did a study on the experience of introvert clergy leading worship and one of my participants discussed what they wanted

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out of worship was freedom – the freedom to just worship in ways that were comfortable.

They recognized that some of the ways worship services were conducted was not always comfortable for some members – in this case introverted members – however this idea of freedom resonates with this story – because of the way the slave girl was proclaiming the gospel. Paul wasn't comfortable with it, so he shut it down.

But in doing so he denied her way of worship, her freedom to express her understanding of God in a way that worked for her. There was so much potential in that encounter, lost because Paul could only see one way of doing things.

So, the freedom for us, the freedom I would like us to take forward is the understanding that when we come into contact with the ways others worship, we pause for a moment and we don't call it crazy. It might not work for us, but it does for others and dismissing it as Paul does with the slave girl imprisons us in prejudice and denies the freedom of others.

So as we move to our hymn, lets think about the Grace of God, inviting us to authentic freedom where we listen to understand and recognize proclaiming the gospel takes many forms.

We Sing: VU 266 Amazing Grace