



## **“We Are All Here”**

Preaching Text: Acts 16:16-34

12 May 2013: 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter  
Mother's Day/Festival of the Christian Home  
FUMC, Arlington, Texas

Today is Mother's Day. For a note about its history I would remind us of the origin of Mother's Day. Observed the second Sunday in May, this day honors all mothers. It began in its present form with a special service in May 1907 at the Methodist Episcopal Church in Grafton, West Virginia. A Methodist laywoman, Anna Jarvis, organized the service, to honor her mother, who had died on May 9, 1905. By 1908 Anna Jarvis advocated that all mothers be honored on the second Sunday in May.

In 1912 the Methodist Episcopal Church recognized the day and raised it to the national agenda. It has some parallels with the old English “Mothering Sunday” that focused on returning home and paying homage to one’s mother. Also it has affinity with Mother’s Day for Peace, introduced in 1872 by Julia Ward Howe as a day dedicated to peace. Ms. Howe wrote the first four stanzas of “The Battle Hymn of the Republic.”

Hear the day’s lesson for the 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter:

16 One day, as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a slave-girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling. 17 While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, “These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.” 18 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.

19 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. 20 When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, “These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews 21 and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe.” 22 The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. 23 After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. 24 Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

25 About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. 26 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. 27 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. 28 But Paul shouted in a loud voice, “Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.”

29 The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. 30 Then he brought them outside and said, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” 31 They answered, “Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.” 32 They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. 33 At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family



were baptized without delay. 34 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 (Acts 16:16-34).

For some families, sadly, Mother's Day and jail go together. One of our staff folks talked about how we can trace the cycle of crime and jail many times through family pedigrees with predictable regularity. The children visit a parent in prison—sometimes on Mother's Day, sometimes on Father's Day—and then the child goes to prison a decade or two later. Sometimes it becomes a way of life. Merle Haggard's "Mamma Tried" lyrics go like this and speak to life:

Dear old Daddy, rest his soul,  
Left my Mom a heavy load;  
She tried so very hard to fill his shoes.  
Working hours without rest,  
Wanted me to have the best.  
She tried to raise me right but I refused.

And I turned twenty-one in prison doing life without parole.  
No-one could steer me right but Mama tried, Mama tried.  
Mama tried to raise me better, but her pleading, I denied.  
That leaves only me to blame 'cos Mama tried.

Plainly the law offers many criminal reasons to toss people into jail, but there are also righteous reasons—for religious or conscience sake. For example, Aung San Suu Kyi (Burma/Myanmar), Benazir Bhutto (Pakistan), Nelson Mandela, Mahatma Gandhi, and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. spent time in prison for reasons of conscience. In our story from Acts, Paul and Silas never intended to go to jail for casting a spirit out of a slave girl, but there is just so much irritation an apostle can take. Luke writes:

... she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, 'These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a 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.'

It seems that the slave girl's owners—having lost their meal ticket—whip the "crowd" into a frenzy. For their trouble, the authorities pitched Paul and Silas into the



hoosegow. Rods and floggings escorted Paul and Silas to lock up. During the night, as Paul and Silas pray and sing hymns to God and as their fellow prisoners listen to them, a violent earthquake shakes the footings of the prison. Instantly the Spirit opens the doors and undoes everyone's chains.

The jailer naturally assumes the prisoners will escape and knows his overseers will recommend death for his failure of duty. He prepares to do himself in by his sword when Paul calls out to him: "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." Providence brings freedom to all those inside. Now, like Acts' previous jail breaks, no prisoner bolts. Instead, they stay put until the jailer wakes from both his physical and spiritual oblivion.

Certainly, to this point in the jailer's life, he has derived all meaning from his job. So, he plans to fall on his sword because of his failure to guard his prisoners. Yet harmony in God does not come from professional fanaticism but from Jesus Christ. Upon learning that the prisoners are still in their cells, he asks: "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" to which Silas and Paul answer, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household."

The incongruity is that those in prison are actually free in Christ, and the jailer, who supposedly has the keys to freedom, is actually the one shackled by his duty. Instructed in the faith, Paul and Silas baptize the jailer and his family and share a meal. At the end of the story, a double washing takes place. The jailer washes the physical wounds of Paul and Silas. And as at Lydia's home in the previous Acts story, "then the jailer and his entire family were baptized without delay." Once again a grateful host offers Paul warm hospitality. They eat together and the "entire household rejoiced that [the jailer] had become a believer in God."

Acts 16 is a weighty chapter in Luke's theological history of the early church. Our narrator has expertly stretched Paul's groundbreaking statement in Galatians 3:28 into a grace-filled and well-designed story. "There is no longer Jew [Paul and Silas]



or Greek [Lydia, the young slave prophet girl, the jailer], there is no longer slave [the young slave prophet girl] or free [Lydia, Paul], there is no longer male [Paul, Silas, the jailer] or female [Lydia, the young slave prophet girl]; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”

I suppose that the greatest Mother’s Day gift we can bestow on our mothers is to recognize that from the earliest days of the church, Mary the mother of Jesus and certain women were an integral and fundamental part of the faith community. Often it is a mother’s diligence and loving care that grafts each of us into the Body of Christ.

This Mother’s Day may we remember the early church’s wisdom which Paul formulated: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). And it is the Holy Spirit that makes this so. The Holy Spirit takes a group of random individuals and crafts, shapes, forms us into the Body of Christ—the household of faith.

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