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First English Lutheran Church
Easter 7

- **Acts 16:16-34**
- **John 17:20-26**

In today's Gospel, Jesus prays for the future church, those who will come to believe through the disciple's words and actions. Jesus is praying for this unity for us, here, today. And although I find this image of Jesus praying for us beautiful, I must confess, as I read this, I found myself getting cynical.

I can't begin to imagine any kind of unity in a world where children are murdered at school, Black communities are targeted by white supremacist gunmen, and our elected officials act as if there is nothing they can do about it.

The last two weeks have left me longing to disconnect from everything and everyone. I want to disappear, leave a note that says, "Come find me when the world has figured out how to stop killing each other." I want nothing more than to look away from this, to find something distracting to take the edge off.

And yet I know deep in my bones as a Christian, that the constant state of fear, violence, loss, and trauma we are living in is not normal and that this is not what God wants for us. Our God is a God of new life and hope and wholeness – a God of resurrection and liberation. This is what God has promised us and we as Christians are called to live in the hope of this promised future.

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As I have wrestled with this feeling of wanting to look away and the knowledge that this isn't what God wants, I've had two texts rattling around in my head. They've helped me make some sense of my overwhelmed state.

The first text is from Meta Herrick Carlson, a Lutheran pastor and poet. Her prayer titled "After a Mass Shooting" begins like this:

It has happened again.  
We feign disbelief,  
but if we are being honest,  
we can believe it. We must,  
since this hate is born of us.

Each time our hearts break and feel  
the suffering like a wave, but  
then the passages cauterize,  
closing off so we can live  
with ourselves again.<sup>1</sup>

I find both deep comfort and deep conviction in Carlson's words. I am comforted by the fact that I am not alone in wanting to protect my heart, to cauterize another wound and look away.

And yet, this prayer convicts me that I cannot do that – that none of us can – because to look away is to excuse and perpetuate the hate which leads to such violence.

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<sup>1</sup> Carlson, Meta Herrick. 2020. *Speak It Plain: Words for Worship and Life Together*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press., 35.

I find this same comfort and conviction echoed in a second text, a brief but powerful sentence in the ECLA's Social Statement on Criminal Justice. Reflecting on the role of responsive love as caring for our neighbor, the statement reads:

“God calls Christian people to love  
and seek justice in this world  
even as this world often is  
confused,  
petty,  
sometimes beautiful  
and many times murderous.”<sup>2</sup>

This, dear siblings, is the dual comfort and conviction of our faith. God has promised us healing and wholeness, justice and liberation. God will make all things new and God will not fail us in this promise.

But the world is still fallen and that future seems far off. Yet God has called us into the work to reach this future, to create it the here and now. We who have received this promise of healing and wholeness must share it with our neighbors.

To love and seek justice in this broken, “sometimes beautiful and many times murderous” world is to live in the hope of God's promised future, to know that Death will lose its sting and we will be free of all that binds us.

To love and seek justice in this world means we cannot look away.

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<sup>2</sup> [https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Criminal\\_JusticeSS.pdf](https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Criminal_JusticeSS.pdf), 23.

Because when we live in this promise and come alongside our neighbor, we help to bear their burden.

And when we witness to the pain and suffering of others, we begin to see that the liberation God has promised each of us is bound up in the liberation of that same neighbor. That none of us are truly free until all of us are free.

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Today's reading from the Book of Acts illustrates this approach to liberation and its risks and rewards.

Still in Phillipi, Paul and Silas are on their way to Lydia's place of prayer. Their walk, however, is haunted by the cries of an enslaved girl. Doubly oppressed by her enslavers and the spirit of divination her enslavers use to turn a profit – the girl calls out again and again that Paul and Silas “are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim ... the way of salvation.”

Having followed them for days, Paul reacts to her cries in annoyance and casts the spirit out of her – liberating the girl in one way and denying further profit to her enslavers.

Quickly, Paul and Silas come to understand that when you help to liberate someone, you become a threat to the societal powers which benefit from their oppression. The enslavers realize their source of income has been jeopardized and they drag Paul and Silas before the authorities under accusations of disturbing the city and being Jews – outsiders who stand opposed to all that is good, against all that is Roman.

If these disciples had gone on their way and not cast out the spirit in the enslaved girl, they would have had no trouble in Philippi, but because they dared to align themselves with her suffering and tried to free her, they have become enemies to the Empire and its status quo.

Paul and Silas are tortured and then find themselves chained in the innermost cell of the prison – where with singing and prayer they bind themselves to the other incarcerated souls who hear their cries.

And then the earthquake. The foundations of the prison are shaken and every prisoners' chains are unfastened. God's power liberates not just the disciples, but every person held by the prison's walls and power. Even the jailer.

While the prisoners were held by chains, the jailer was captive to the Roman authorities and the expectations of his job. In the aftermath of the earthquake, the jailer believes the prisoners have fled – that he has failed. Fearing the torture and imprisonment he might face at the hands of the Roman authorities – he moves to take his own life.

But he hears Paul cry out, “Do not harm yourself! We are all here!” And this changes everything for the jailer. He brings the disciples outside, asks how to be saved, and Paul shares the liberating Good News of Jesus with him and his whole household.

In his new freedom, the jailer who mere hours before had power over Paul and Silas, takes on the role of servant by washing their wounds and comes to see them as equals in a shared meal.

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This story reveals a God who ensures the liberation of not just their favored disciples, or the enslaved, or the other prisoners, but every person held captive by the powers of sin and death.

These powers which enslave, exploit, imprison, and torture have no sway when it comes to God's promised future.

Again, Paul and Silas could have easily looked away from the enslaved girl and ignored her situation, but instead they align themselves with her plea and with the plight of the prisoners and with the pain of the jailer.

This is liberation intertwined.

This is struggling together.

This is loving and seeking justice in a world that

“is confused, petty, sometimes beautiful and many times murderous.”

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This story is a glimpse of how we might live today, how we might bear authentic witness to our faith in this broken world.

Dear siblings, I do not know if we will turn on the news again next week to find another community destroyed by gun violence or another disastrous evil. I do not know when our country and our world will start to take seriously the sacredness of every life and make changes to protect and liberate us.

I don't have answer.

But I do know that God is faithful and God has placed in our hearts the ability to do this work just as Paul and Silas did.

We can be in the world and not fall into cynicism or despair.

We can see the suffering of our neighbor and reach out.

We can bear witness to pain and still live in hope.

And this hope – this liberating power of God – can help us keep moving, even and especially when we must carry each other.

Amen.