

(6th Sunday of Easter)

Rev. Scott Marrese-Wheeler
May 6, 2018

Acts 16:16-40

One of the classes I have really enjoyed subbing in at McFarland High School is their Film Theory course. In this English class they explore how movies communicate a story through images, symbolism, lighting, and language.

Over the semester, they watch a classic films, one being Cool Hand Luke, starring Paul Newman. The story centers-around a small, prison located in the rural south. The prisoners are part of a "chain gang" made to work under harsh conditions along the roads. Newman's character becomes the hero to the other prisoners for his stories, his bravado, and for his many creative attempts to escape. It is also full of Christological imagery, symbolism and language.

Cool Hand Luke and prison escapes came to mind this week when I read the story of Paul and Silas in prison. It made me think of some of the of the greatest prison escapes.

Like Cool Hand Luke, "**Shawshank Redemption**" is filled with lots of Christian symbolism. In it, the main character, Andy Dufrese, who is wrongly convicted of murder, over 20 years, slowly chisels his way through the thick concrete cell wall, hiding his effort behind a poster of Rachel Welch, finally busting a sewer pipe, and then crawling several hundred yards through human filth to freedom. In what some theologians, me included, consider one of the best "baptism" scenes in a Hollywood movie, he stands up in a creek, rain pouring down on him, and lifts his face to heaven with just enough light shining down to imply a holy blessing.

Of course, these are just movies blessed with a Hollywood ending. Real life is different, and sometimes more exciting.

In 1934, John Dillinger carved a fake wooden gun, covered it with black with shoe polish and used it to escape from the "unescapable" Lake County Jail in Crown Point, Indiana. To top it off, he stole the sheriff's brand new Ford V-8 as his escape vehicle!

Then there is the famous escape from Alcatraz "The Rock". On June 11, 1962, three prisoners vanished. Using a spoon strengthened by a dime, they dug through the concrete walls, then used a homemade drill fashioned from parts of a vacuum cleaner to bust through a pipe, they managed to gain their freedom from another inescapable prison!

Not to be out done, God also aids in some famous Biblical prison escapes. The Book of Acts written by, if you will, the cool hand of Luke, records several famous ones.

In Chapter 5, the high priest of the Temple in Jerusalem has the Apostles arrested. But an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out, and told them to share the message with others. Then in Chapter 12, Peter is arrested and jailed by King Herod who has just killed James, the brother of John. Peter is locked up in jail, his arms and legs shackled. Heavily guarded, an angel of the Lord appears, freeing him from the shackles. With the guards asleep on either side of him, Peter escapes!

Now, in Chapter 16, as we heard, Paul and Silas are arrested after charges are brought against them by the owners of the young woman (human trafficking?). By orders of the magistrates, they are stripped naked, severely beaten with a rod, and then thrown in jail. The jailer is under strict orders to guard them carefully, so he puts them in the innermost cell and puts them in stocks. Inescapable, right!

Cool Handed Luke tells us that around midnight, when it seems the darkest outside and in their situation as well, Paul and Silas start singing and praising God. Suddenly, there is a violent earthquake that shakes the very foundation of the prison, breaking down the walls, throwing open the doors and unbinding all the prisoners, freeing them to escape!

But there is a twist in this story. None of the prisoners, including Paul and Silas choose to escape. Much to the surprise of the jailer, all the prisoners remained right where the jailer had left them!

Moments before, the jailer had rushed in, fearing the worst, which is to say, fearing for his own life if the prisoners had escaped. And then in a Hollywood type ending, it is the jailer who is really saved. God be praised, and God is!

All this leads to the question, who was really imprisoned? Paul and Silas or the jailer?

While you are pondering that question, let me share with you some shocking statistics about prisons today.

In our nation today, there are billions of dollars to be by building more and more prisons. According to a 2010 Congressional Research Service report: "the number of state and federal adult correctional facilities rose from 1,277 in 1990 to 1,821 in 2005, a 43% increase." That's an increase of 544 new (state and federal) prisons." That is on average about one new prison every 10 days.

According to a 2018 report, "The American criminal justice system holds almost 2.3 million people in 1,719 state prisons, 102 federal prisons, 1,852 juvenile correctional facilities, 3,163 local jails, and 80 Indian Country jails as well as in military prisons, immigration detention facilities, civil commitment centers, state psychiatric hospitals, and prisons in the U.S. territories."

There are all kinds of physical prisons, but we also build prison walls emotionally and spiritually, locking ourselves up, torturing ourselves for what we feel we done to ourselves or our loved ones.

Fredrick Buechner says: "The inner state we end up with is a castle-like affair of deep, inner wall and outer walls, surrounded by a moat, which we erect originally to be a fortress to keep the enemy out but which turns into a prison where we become the jailer and thus our own enemy."

He adds: "It is a wretched and lonely place. You can't be what you want to be there or do what you want to do. People can't see through all that masonry to who you truly are, and half the time you're not sure you can see who you truly are yourself, you've been walled up so long."

If we are honest, we all do this to ourselves and to others. We don't know how to escape from these types of prisons?

In his book, *Just Mercy: Story of Justice and Redemption*, Bryan Stevenson says: "We are all implicated when we allow other people to be mistreated (or we mistreat ourselves). An absence of compassion can corrupt the decency of a community, a state, a nation. Fear and anger can make us vindictive and abusive, unjust and unfair, until we

all suffer from the absence of mercy and we condemn ourselves as much as we victimize others. The closer we get to mass incarceration and extreme levels of punishment, the more I believe it's necessary to recognize that we all need mercy, we all need justice, and-perhaps-we all need some measure of unmerited grace."

The jailer in our Acts story experienced this gift of unmerited grace. It was his salvation. I think we all long for a similar experience that will spring us from these prisons we have built for ourselves.

Maybe we are waiting for an earth-shattering, life-changing event that will violently shake us free? Maybe we are waiting for an angel of the Lord to unchain us, showing us the escape route? Maybe we want a savior to burst through the walls we have erected around our hearts and lives, to spring us to freedom?

Perhaps? But what if the greatest escape that saves us is simply the honest confession to ourselves, a friend, a stranger or God, is simply - "Help me"!

Buechner says: **"It's not always easy to say them--you have your pride after all, and you're not sure there's anybody you trust enough to say them to--but they're always worth saying... Help me. They open a door through the walls, that's all. At least hope is possible again."**

Two little, yet powerful words "Help me" that can be as powerful as an earthquake that just might free you from the prisons we all have built in our lives.