
The Freedom of the Risen Christ

[Click here for the podcast](#)

The Reverend Canon Beth Knowlton
The Cathedral of St. Philip
Easter 7, 8:45 am
Acts 16: 16-34

As a child, I loved going to school. It was a place of new adventures and fast friendships. I found the structure and the order appealing. It was a place where the rules were clear. If you followed them, you could be successful.

It had rituals, which I appreciated. I loved buying a new lunchbox every fall and meeting my new teacher. I loved being on the safety patrol at the corner in front of my house and looked forward to our annual end of the year trip. I relished decorating a Kleenex box each February to hold my valentines and took dance lessons in the afternoons.

Like most kids, I had the usual troubles. Fights with friends. Getting picked for the soccer team dead last. Being asked by my teacher for the twentieth time to stop chatting with my neighbor. There were good days and there were bad days. But overall, I loved it. It was a safe place that followed the rules of the universe.

All of these positive feelings were affirmed and magnified when it came to the school library. It felt like a special wonderland. I loved checking out new books and story time. I even liked the smell of the place. I liked the way the tables were arranged and the rugs where we could sit on the floor. The smile of the librarian was something to be counted on.

I never imagined it would become a place of false accusation and unwarranted punishment.

One afternoon I was summoned to the library by my third grade teacher and the librarian. I immediately noted their very serious expressions. With no hint of her customary welcome the librarian asked me to sit down. The two of them sat across from me and the faux-wood Formica table stretched ominously between us. I couldn't for the life of me understand why I was here.

The librarian looked at me and said she had something very important to discuss with me. She said it was important I tell them the truth. She then said I probably knew why they had called me in. (Still no clue). Then, the librarian pulled out a book I had recently checked out. She asked me why I had defaced school property. Noting my blank stare, she showed me several pages in the book that had inspiring lines like "Beth is great" or "Beth is the best" scrawled in pencil.

I was shocked. I told them I had no idea how those phrases had gotten there, but that I had not done it. I sat back and waited for their relieved looks. I assumed my claim would be accepted without question.

But instead, the teacher, my beloved teacher, took up where the librarian had left off. She said, "Now Beth, we know you were the last one to check out the book." She then presented exhibit A, my name on the checkout card. Then she said, "Why would anyone else write, 'Beth is great' but you?"

This teacher and librarian apparently were not wise to the ways of children. I tried to explain, that one, I was not actually stupid. That if I was going to destroy school property, I might come up with something a bit more novel and less incriminating than proclaiming my own greatness. I also mentioned that if they were able to see my name on the checkout card, clearly someone else could have done the same thing.

It was obvious to me that someone had written my name in the book with the hope that I would get in trouble. But those in authority, these women I had trusted clearly did not believe me. To my great indignation I was told that I would not be allowed to check out books for a while. They also expressed their deep disappointment that I would not admit my fault.

I was shocked and disturbed both by the accusation and the punishment. I couldn't imagine that my teachers didn't believe me when I was telling the truth. I was enraged and I burst into tears as I left the library.

At some point, I must have eventually recovered. But school never felt quite the same. The garden had yielded some snakes.

But for Paul and Silas, false accusations and miscarriages of justice seem to be par for the course in the early church. In our lesson today they have moved their ministry to Europe and they are empowered to tell the good to all who will listen. Whether it is wealthy woman who deals in purple cloth, or someone they bump into on their way to worship, they stand at the ready. They have their good days and their bad days. Sometimes they are received, other times they are not. But they appear to not be buffeted by the shifting winds of their reception. They do not react with indignation if things do not go their way.

Today's reading from Acts is particularly dramatic. They come across a woman who is basically a fortune teller. She is enslaved by masters who are using her talents to make a quick buck. She is apparently anything but subtle as she shouts out to all who will hear about the ministry of Paul and Silas. In fact, while she is telling the truth about their following the most high God, she is clearly annoying our faithful ministers. She continues to harass them for days, and finally in a fit of pique Paul commands a demon to come out of her.

Well, whether we think Paul should have been more pastoral in his approach or not, he has clearly healed this woman. I'd hope their might be some celebration by the woman or her community. But instead her masters are furious that their source of income has disappeared. So, they decide to falsely accuse these trouble makers.

They bring them before the authorities and launch their accusation. They say "These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe." And the crowd doesn't defend them. They join in the attack and they are stripped of their clothing, beaten with rods and thrown into prison.

It is hard to imagine how we might each react to such unfair treatment. You can practically hear Paul calling out to a friend to contact his lawyer as he is hauled away. You imagine Silas is going to contact his friends in the press and get his side of the story out as fast as possible. You can see them rallying their troops to fight this injustice and restore their good names. You can hear them assuring their followers that this will not stand.

But this is not what they do. They continue doing what they were doing before the beating. They continue to share the good news wherever they are. The fact that they are in prison seems to not affect them. They sing hymns and pray with the hopes that those who are in the prison might come to learn the power of the resurrected Jesus.

They continue even when an act that can be interpreted as their ultimate vindication happens. An earthquake frees their shackles and opens the door---and they stay put.

They stay put so they can reach an unlikely ministry target, their own jailer. Knowing he would be held responsible for their escape, they protect him by staying in their cells. He is so overwhelmed by these two, that he falls to the ground and asks them how he can be saved. He senses that they have access to a freedom that he desperately wants and needs.

It is as if the false accusation and even the punishment have no bearing on them. They have a freedom in Christ that has

nothing to do with their physical location, their reception by the locals, or even miraculous events that confirm their innocence.

Earlier this week we celebrated the Feast of the Ascension. After many post-resurrection appearances, Jesus prepares to leave his disciples again. In that leave-taking, he promises them the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Advocate. It was this spirit, the spirit of the Risen that Christ that again and again sustained the apostles in their ministry. It is the same spirit we see glimpses of even now. We know we are in its presence whenever we witness a freedom that is beyond the powers and principalities of this world.

This past February, Nelson Mandela of South Africa had a dinner party. He was celebrating the 20th anniversary of his release from prison. Having spent twenty seven years in prison under apartheid, he now gathered to celebrate twenty years of freedom. But when you listen to him, freedom appears to be anything but limited to a physical location. The party included some leaders from the anti-apartheid movement, friends, and family. But there was one guest that was a bit surprising. Nelson Mandela invited one of his former jailers to dinner, Christo Brand. He too was invited to raise a glass in celebration and Mandela counts him as a friend. In his memoirs, Mandela wrote of this friendship that it "reinforced my belief in the essential humanity of even those who had kept me behind bars."

As Christians we are called to places that are uncomfortable. They challenge us to live in a place of freedom that is not constituted by our outward circumstances. It calls us to let go of our own concerns for our reputations, and release any bitterness that might prevent us from sharing the good news. This is not easy. It is tempting to defend ourselves and rebel against anything that might impugn our good name.

But care for our reputations at all costs can imprison us as much as any jail cell. It can cut us off from a ministry to those who may need us most. This is not something we can do on our own steam. It is something that can only come from God. And so we pray, "Come, holy spirit, Come."

Amen

Comments? Contact Beth Knowlton at: BKnowlton@stphilipscathedral.org