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## *Not Your Typical Jailbreak Story*

**A sermon by Canon Cathy Zappa**  
**Easter 7 – Year C**

Our Acts reading today, with this great jailbreak story, seems to be made for the movies, doesn't it? You've got the requisite heroes, Paul and Silas, on their action-packed missionary journey around the Mediterranean. They've stopped off at Philippi, where they have a run in with the law. See, there's a servant girl there with a spirit of divination, which makes her extremely valuable to her owners—and extremely annoying to Paul and Silas, because she keeps calling out after them on their way to the local house of prayer.

So Paul delivers her from this demonic spirit, which also delivers her from her masters' lucrative exploitation of her. Needless to say, this doesn't go over too well with them, so they bring Paul and Silas before the magistrates, who are all too eager to send these outside agitators to prison. The jailer there decides to take it a step farther and throw them in the innermost cell, what we would call the "lockdown unit" today, and bind them in stocks and chains.

Yet, even here, deep in the bowels of the prison, Paul and Silas keep singing. (Perhaps there's a musical number here?) And as if that weren't miracle enough, singing through this dismal situation, there's suddenly a big earthquake, which shakes the prison walls and opens its doors and unfastens prisoners' chains—and sets them free.

Now, if you've spent any time in a prison, you know that every prisoner dreams of this moment when, whether by the workings of the law or divine intervention, they're released from prison—and they can't get out of there fast enough! And you know how everything about prison seems designed to divide—inmate from inmate, inmate from guards, inmate from free citizens—in a way that can easily lead to denying one another's humanity.

And we've all seen plenty of action movies! So we know what's supposed to happen next: in a satisfying reversal of power, our threatened heroes, Silas and Paul, become the vindicated victors, who restore justice, ensuring that the story's bad guys—the jailer and magistrates—receive their just desserts. Then, our heroes walk free, off into the sunset, leaving their captors and this whole experience behind and never looking back.

But that's not what happens here. No, here, Paul and Silas stay. In prison. With the jailer. Because they know what their escape would mean for him; they know that he's more bound than they ever were. So to keep him from harming himself, they risk their own freedom—and even announce that they're still there, which puts them completely at his mercy!

The jailer can't believe what he's hearing, so he calls for lights, and indeed, there are these inmates whom he'd thrown into lockdown and bound in stocks and chains—perhaps more tightly than necessary. And he recognizes that somehow, they'd been free along, and he wants this deeper freedom that they have. Now, this would be a good time to throw some humble pie in his face. But they don't! Instead, they share what they've received, and baptize him and his household; so that they, whom this human system had divided, are one in Christ.

This is much more complicated than the typical jailbreak story. It resists the simple, good-versus-bad story-line, with its satisfying villain-meets-his-demise ending.

And it makes me wonder if we couldn't stand for all of our stories and categories to be a bit more complicated. Indeed, as

Christians, do we really have a choice? Confessing God as the God of all creation necessarily complicates the issues we care about and our relationships with those impacted by them. Believing that God desires the liberation of all people means that we have to pay attention to how our rights, and our freedom, and our positions affect others, though that can be rather inconvenient at times.

This brings me back to a life-changing experience I had a few years ago—an experience that many of you were a part of. A few years ago, a friend of mine named Kelly received her first death warrant, after many years on death row. As I advocated and prayed for her, publicly—and as we prayed for her here—, I began to hear from many others, who challenged me to consider what my words and actions meant for them, too. Some were angry with me; some, especially other prisoners, were grateful; some, including victims of crime, just wanted me to know that they were listening, too, or to tell me what they'd been through. They complicated my position, and in doing so, helped me see a bigger picture, and expanded my compassion—and prayer.

That's not all: while it was tempting to demonize all of those, the guards and administrators, tasked with carrying out this death sentence, I saw how bound they were, too. I saw how many of them really cared for my friend, and other inmates; and I saw the heavy toll that this job took on them. Which is perhaps why I'm so intrigued and touched by Paul and Silas' compassion for their jailer—and why I love that this story doesn't end until he, too, is free.

There's a collect for prisons and correctional institutions on page 826 of our prayer books. Take a look at it! I'm convinced that it is the product of this resistance to dichotomous thinking—and the product of a community learning to pray together. And it shows a more comprehensive way. It goes like this:

*Lord Jesus, for our sake you were condemned as a criminal: Visit our jails and prisons with your pity and judgment. Remember all prisoners, and bring the guilty to repentance and amendment of life according to your will, and give them hope for their future. When any are held unjustly, bring them release; forgive us, and teach us to improve our justice. Remember those who work in these institutions; keep them humane and compassionate; and save them from becoming brutal or callous. And since what we do for those in prison, O Lord, we do for you, constrain us to improve their lot. All this we ask for your mercy's sake. Amen.*

Wow. In this single prayer, we remember Jesus is Lord and a condemned criminal; we pray for God's pity and judgment; we pray for prisoners and for those who work in prisons; we acknowledge that prisoners are held justly and unjustly. We admit our own responsibility, asking God to forgive us, and to teach us to improve our justice.

That is a complicated, and comprehensive, prayer. And it, with our story from Acts, suggests a model for us: when we trust God enough to wrestle with ambiguity and complexity, we may be stretched, by the grace of God, toward a bigger truth—and be compelled to hope for nothing less than freedom that is truly freedom for all.