**SERMON Acts 16:16-34**

**Introduction**

Once again, dear friends we gather under the weight of a week of terrible violence. The travesties in our country just pile up. We don’t have sufficient time to grieve one catastrophe before another is at hand. Last week’s news about Buffalo was so heavy, and I desperately wanted to pivot to something that would feel more like “sanctuary” for us this morning.

But then, on Sunday afternoon Guidepost Solutions, who had been appointed by the Southern Baptist Convention, published their report on the SBC’s decades of sexual abuse allegations.

And then the events of Uvalde, Texas on Tuesday moved the spotlight to another horrific tragedy. We are all gutted. And exhausted. We were not built to process so much suffering and so quickly. On the backdrop of ongoing conflict in Ukraine, increased cases of COVID, not to mention the everyday personal hardships we all experienced. We were not built to live constantly on the hamster wheel of “thoughts and prayers,” “never again,” “we must do something,” only to again bear witness to the grief of communities that face the unimaginable.

It’s been an unbearably hard week.

I want to bring you hope today. I am well aware that is part of my role standing here. I am here to point to the hope for you, a path towards justice and liberation. And there is hope in the ultimate sense. All the things we believe about a loving God are still true, *even if* we struggle to integrate those truths with what we see in this broken world. Our hopes can be true, even as we embody what seems like a permanent posture of lament. The good news is our baptisms hold. God’s promises hold. But this season of war and violence and pandemic…it’s just so heavy.

If you are feeling weighed down this morning, know you are not alone. *Let us pray.*

**Theology**

There are two theological concepts that I couldn’t shake this week, as I wrestled with how to address all that we are witnessing, and how to even begin to find the hope in amidst the suffering. They are the concepts of ‘collective salvation’ and ‘collective sin.’

In general, both ideas speak to our combined responsibility and connected fates in this world. Collective sin is about how we share and contribute to the brokenness that we see all around, and how we must come to terms with our part in the suffering of others. On the other hand, collective salvation, speaks of how our healing and wholeness is integrally connected to the healing and wholeness of others too. These ideas often do not sit well with Western or American individualism. I, too was taught that sin was an individual problem, a failure to do the right thing, to meet God’s perfect standard. I was taught that God’s salvation was individual as well. That one prayed that Jesus might become your personal Lord and Savior.

However, as I was thinking about the collective impact of the many sins of our time, be they racism, misogyny and violence of all kinds, I was reminded of a reflection the Franciscan priest Father Richard Rohr wrote at the end of last month...and it gave me hope. This is what he said:

I’m convinced God is saving history. God is saving humanity. God saves the whole, not merely parts. One great misinterpretation of the Bible is thinking that God saves individuals apart from one another. That can’t be the full meaning of salvation. The real collective message is hidden in plain sight throughout the Bible.

He goes on:

Every proclamation of salvation in the Hebrew Scriptures is collective. In the book of Isaiah, God promises to raise up all the tribes of Jacob, and restore all the survivors of Israel, that “my salvation may reach to the very ends of the earth” (Isaiah 49:6). This is the first outpouring of the notion that God’s message was for the whole—history, society, humanity. All are saved. This usage is so constant throughout the Bible that we stopped noticing it…We’re saved because we’re connected—not because we’re worthy…and [j]ust as salvation is one collective reality, so too is evil. It’s always collective.

In revisiting these concepts, with Richard Rohr, I couldn’t help but read and interpret the Jailer’s question: “What must I do to be saved?” in a new way.

**Scripture**

You see, as Paul and Silas pray and sing hymns in jail, having been unjustly imprisoned following the exorcism of the girl who was enslaved; And an earthquake shakes the foundations of the prison, swinging its doors open. Making

shackles fall to the floor, leaving all the prisoners free to flee…or so the Jailer expected. After all, the prisoners are his responsibility and he has been unable to prevent their escape, why not end it all right here, right now? However, Paul shouts, “Do not harm yourself, we’re all here,” and rather than falling on his sword, he falls before Paul and Silas and cries out, “What must I do to be saved?”

What is he *actually* asking? Is he talking about where he will spend eternity? Is he concerned with his individual spiritual salvation? How will I escape the consequences of my failure? A commonsense plea of, “How will I ever survive this mess? Might it be possible, that his cry of desperation, reveals that he understood in those immediate aftershocks that his wellbeing was connected to that of his fellow human beings? Is it possible that he realizes in the midst of the rubble, how contingent his own life was? How intertwined he was with those who had authority over him, as well as with those over whom he had authority. Now that the prisoners were free, what must the Jailer do to be free?

Easter People, may we revisit the Jailer’s question through the lens of collective salvation? Until this point the Jailer was complicit in the imprisonment of innocent men, deriving meaning from is profession, and willing to end his own life when he believed that he had failed in that task.

However, within that same hour, we hear of how the formerly imprisoned are in the Jailer’s home, having their wounds clean, and being fed, after baptizing his entire household. You see, although the Jailer’s question may have been about avoiding the consequences of his failure…but if that were the case, why would he have been so quick to end his own life? What Paul’s answer provides for the Jailer, is a cosmic perspective that was lost in the moment of chaos and failure. Paul and Silas are decisively aware of how each individual life is impacted and included in God’s saving action. Because even in this moment where for the Jailer it seems like there is nothing left to live for, God is still acting. God is still breathing life and liberation into situations that bring death. God is taking our individual lives up into the gospel story of collective transformation and redemption.

You see, Easter People deeply believe in the connectedness of all humanity.

Easter People understand that when we see folks imprisoned, naked and hungry, that we ought to be affected by their lack.

Easter People share in the pain of those families in Uvalde, who are grieving today for the loss of their small children, their teachers and loved ones.

Easter People know that their actions and inactions matter.

Easter People believe that our salvation is bound up with another’s. Just as the Jailer was being invited to understood that his wellbeing, his freedom, was connected to the wellbeing of those who were imprisoned under his watch.

**Link**

And so, as Paul and Silas, themselves oppressed and unjustly treated, recognize the genuine distress in the words of the Jailer, they offer rescue, freedom, and salvation that transcends the darkness of the moment: “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household” (16:31). And so as with Cornelius in chapter 10, with Lydia a few verses earlier (verse 15), so with the jailer, their households were baptized with them…and the sign of the water covers all.

Scripture, like Richard Rohr suggests, reveals that just as sin is a collective reality that we all suffer and contribute to together, so to “salvation is collective.” To echo the words of Lilla Watson an indigenous Australian: “If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”

**Application**

As we have examined the lives the season of Easter People who have been transformed by the gospel message, by the hope and wholeness of the resurrection, we see them in a movement > *from* subservience *to* service, *from* work that delimits *to* work that coexists with their delight in God’s way, *from* captivity *to* freedom, *from* brokenness *to* wholeness, *from* exclusive *to* inclusion, *from* individual concern *to* collective joy.

**Conclusion**

We all come to worship today with the pressures of this world weighing on our hearts and minds. This can be a time to clarify our values and motives, and to see once again that we are connected, woven together…this is no more true that when tragedy strikes. On Memorial Day we think a lot about freedom. This weekend as we celebrate the holiday under the dark cloud of the events of the past couple weeks, we might consider not just what we have been freed *from* and what it is we are freed *for*. What might our collective responsibility be in light of the sacrifice of others?

As Easter People, all the freedoms at our disposal are not about our “rights.” Instead, we are freed in order that we might love our neighbor, care for the most vulnerable, live by kingdom values even before the kingdom has come in its fullness, and being willing to lay down our lives rather than raise up our swords. “What must I do to be saved?” Is a question that in light of this week’s events, we might all need to be asking, believing that what saves me –what liberates and brings freedom and peace, joy and wholeness to me– also saves you.