

Why are you looking up?
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Acts 1:6-11

So when they had come together, they asked him, ‘Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?’ He replied, ‘It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.’ When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up towards heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.’

Acts 16:16-34

One day, as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a slave-girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling. While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, ‘These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.’ She kept doing this for many days. But Paul, very much annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, ‘I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.’ And it came out that very hour.

But when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the market-place before the authorities. When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, ‘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.’ The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone’s chains were unfastened. When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped. But Paul shouted in a loud voice, ‘Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.’ The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them outside and said, ‘Sirs, what must I do to be saved?’ They answered, ‘Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.’ They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. He brought them up into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.

During my second year of seminary, I took a weird worship class focusing particularly on church architecture and art. I looked at a lot of paintings of the Mary and the annunciation that semester, and toured a lot of Boston churches and cathedrals, listening to my professor sniping about things like “Well, as you can see from these very plain walls, hiding behind this inexplicable line of houseplants, this is a Lutheran church.” And, “This, obviously, is an Episcopalian attempt at a cathedral.” One member of the class had an affinity for things meant to draw the eye upward. A tall and ornate pulpit, a chandelier, a painting on the ceiling, an opening in the tower that let light in through the roof. “Ah. Look up!” he would invite. “That is glorious.”

On one of our tours, we walked up a dozen steps to the front double doors, passing thirty folks caught in food insecurity gathering off to the side near a different door for a meal. We were buzzed in, and as I stepped inside, I heard the church staff person hold back a young man who had been waiting on the steps. “If you’re here for the meal, the basement entrance is on the side,” she told him.

We were shown around the quiet, clean, and empty worship space, invited to discuss the new accessible pulpit and moveable chairs, and shown out to the now bare front steps. Everyone waiting for the meal had gone down into the basement.

Someone later remarked that it had felt like while we saw a lovely *building* that day, the *church* had been downstairs in the basement where neighbors were eating lunch together. And while I certainly agree that the people Jesus loved had been relegated to a buried room in the building, saying that the upstairs wasn’t the church allowed us to escape an uncomfortable reality. Namely, that the church has looked up and away from the hard truths of the world and buried its prophets for a long, long time.

Last week, Michele preached about Paul as he sat down by the water with Lydia, worshipped God in the open air, and welcomed new people into the fold from an unexpected place.

If last week was about baptism, this week is about imprisonment and liberation. Paul and Silas are walking by the river, praying, and meeting people when a new voice punctuates the air. A young enslaved girl with an uncanny ability to tell the truth begins to follow them. “These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation” she shouts as she trails behind them. For many days, she does this until Paul, finding it profoundly annoying, loses his cool, turns, and quiets whatever gave her this ability to tell the truth.

Her owners, seeing an opportunity for profit lost, become angry. They rile up the city and the authorities. Paul and Silas are beaten, handed over to the prison, and after he heeds explicit instructions to make sure they couldn’t escape, are thrown into the innermost cell by the jailer.

It looks bad. Really bad. Locked away in the very middle of the jail, weary, bruised, and feet closed in the stocks, there was no way these two men were going to escape.

Until the impossible happens. An earthquake shakes the foundations of the jail and every door flies open, every chain wrenches free, and the men worship God. They are liberated.

The jailer, having felt the earthquake and heard iron doors swing open, assumes that his charges have rushed out on his watch. He is an agent of the empire, but also bound by it in horrifying ways. So fearful that he will be killed by his bosses for allowing the men to go free, the jailer draws his sword to kill himself before they can do it. But then from the chaos comes a shout: “Wait!” says Paul. “Do not harm yourself! For we are all here.”

The guard drops his sword and runs to see for himself evidence of these men free to leave but still there - their life saving him from death. He is liberated. All three men walk to the his home. He cares for them, tending their wounds, and then decides to convert, and like Lydia last week, carries his whole household into faith and freedom.

It’s a lovely place to leave Paul and Silas before we find them on a new adventure next week. Luke wraps this story up so neatly for us. Save for one thing.

This is a story of three imprisonments: an enslaved girl, Paul and Silas, and a jailer.

This is a story of three imprisonments, but by the end, we forget there are three. Paul and Silas, and the jailer are free, but the girl who spoke what was true is still a slave and we have no idea where she’s gone.

This morning, though we are tangled in a story in the middle of Acts, we also celebrate the Ascension, the day Jesus left the earth to reign in heaven.

For the whole of Eastertide, the disciples have searched for resurrection in a crucified world, walked and ate and talked with the risen Jesus, but today, right in the center of the street, mid-conversation about what they have to do when the Holy Spirit comes, Jesus is wrapped up in a cloud and beamed up into the sky. And in a panic, the disciples freeze and look up. Jesus is gone. And suddenly the earth feels empty. Mysterious men on the side of the road ask the disciples, “Why are you looking up?”

It is I think, meant as a very practical question for the disciples: “Why are you looking up? He’ll come back, but also he just gave you work to do...” It was a practical question, but after two thousand years of churches meeting in clean sanctuaries upstairs from basement meals, of elevated pulpits and stained glass repair, of climbing social hierarchies to find allies with power at the expense of the vulnerable, I think it’s a pretty good figurative question for us too.

It is the question that rings in my ears as I watch this story of liberations unfold in Philippi. Why are you looking up?

A girl who can tell the truth follows Paul and Silas, telling everyone as she goes that they serve the Most High God - which is true, and that they have a way to salvation - which is, I think you will agree, the whole point of the book of Acts. She does this, proclaims what is true, but she is not called a prophet.

In other stories like this, a person is healed from a demonic spirit, and is invited to be well and live and go on their way. But she is not. Paul does not ask her name, does not ask her story, does not look on her with compassion or even with pity. When Paul finally turns to address her, he looks at her with annoyance. The spirit isn't called demonic. It's just a spirit. The casting out is not called a healing. It just leaves her. She is not forgiven or sent on her way.

She is annoying and silenced. Luke gives her none of the standard traits of a person who is healed, or even a person who is rebuked. A slave at the hand of her masters and a mechanism by the pen of our author, she is present because of her literary and financial usefulness and for no other reason; after she serves her purpose, she is as quickly buried as she is manifested.

Luke leaves her behind, and charges toward the triumphant conclusion of this story that a jailer and his family are converted to the faith. We are meant to forget her. As Luke draws our attention up away from the riverside worship service where slaves roam into the household of a government employee, he covers over the truth that the girl is still a slave, and now is a slave whose only valuable trait to the people who still own her body has been taken away.

I want to stand in the jailer's house and shout at Luke, Paul, and Silas, *"What were you thinking? She is vulnerable and prophetic; the two things Jesus would have loved. And you celebrate the jailer instead? Why are you looking up?"*

But they forget her and ask us to ask well. Because again, the church has looked up and away from the hard truths of the world and buried its prophets for a long, long time.

There is good news today in scripture for those of you who need to find it there. Paul and Silas are liberated. A jailer and his household are liberated. The Church became what it became in large part because its leaders knew how to do this - how to look up, how to look up to the top of power structures. How to ally themselves with people who held prison keys and who had money from selling purple cloth. And thanks be to God because purple cloth merchants and government prison guards, people with power and status, need liberation too. Don't we?

But the good news today and often is haunted by a buried body, by girl still shackled. There is not good news in the story for the girl left enslaved and more vulnerable after her encounter with a church leader. Her absence from the liberation movement does not give us good news. It gives us demands.

Her absence demands that we remember that when we look up and only up, we lose track of the people Jesus loves. Her absence demands that we remember that if we look up and only up, we will be more attentive to the conversion of the jailer than the continued abuse of the slave, more enthralled by power we build by meeting with city officials than with neighborhood matriarchs.

She demands that we listen to the prophets among us, and the prophets under us, all those the church exiled and reviled, all those the world as it is cast as an annoyance, or uncomfortable, or heretical, or illegal, or radical.

She demands that we stretch our necks, sore from looking up all the time, and notice what was sent underground.

And as she demands all of this, she remains a prophet, a sister for you here and bodies through the centuries who have haunted the church after it buried you, a sister for you who won't go away until you are free, a sister for you who the church will come to see as its leaders in God's work of building the kingdom on earth.

My favorite sculpture artist is a woman named Doris Salcedo who lives and works in Bogota, Colombia. About as different as one could possibly get from the cathedrals and art I saw in my worship class, Salcedo creates with ordinary materials - furniture, rose petals, needles - that mourn the victims of political violence in her country. In 2007, she was invited to have an installation in Turbine Hall of the Tate Modern in London. The hall is enormous - over 35,000 square feet on the ground and 85 feet from the floor to the glass ceiling. Many renowned and innovative artists have brought their work into this hall since it opened twenty years ago, but Salcedo did something truly wild with her installation. She convinced the curators of the Tate to let her crack open the floor of the hall. She wanted to disrupt the room, to draw attention to the reality that in Europe's democratic society, where everyone was supposed to be equal and have a voice, not everyone was welcomed or allowed inside, that many seeking refuge there faced unimaginable violence once they arrived.

The floor was split with a crack 548 feet long until the next year, when a new exhibit was slated to begin. The curators were faced with a conundrum. Sculptures had hung from the ceiling or walls, had been set on the floor, but Salcedo had struck hers into the floor itself. They tried to fill in the wounded site with concrete, but even after trying to restore it to a level and undisrupted surface, evidence of her work remained visible.

The sculpture that showed the pain of being cast out and hated will always be in the floor of this glorious hall, under the feet of spectators as they look up. It is there, covered over, buried, nearly erased, forgotten, but no matter how much the floor is polished and repaired, the sculpture is always there telling the truth.

If only you look down.