

“When the Gospel Unbinds You”
Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler
Ascension Sunday, June 3, 2019
Presbyterian Church in Leonia

Luke 24:44-53
Acts 16:16-34

Imagine you were gathered among the disciples, and there before you is the resurrected Jesus. Each time you look at him, you want to pinch yourself. “Can this be real?” you wonder as you gaze again at his pierced hands and feet. You scrape your own feet against the dusty floor, to ground yourself in what you know to be real. You press your thumb into the hollow of your palm, which is calloused from handling fishing nets but it is not scarred. You take a deep breath, in and out, appreciating the fullness of the air and noting that you do not feel the limits of pierced ribs, nor of the weight of your body pulling against desperate lungs.

You saw Jesus endure these things, and yet here he is again in front of you. “How can this be?” Then he goes about the things he always did so well: breaking bread, looking at you as if *really* seeing you, and teaching. Right now he is teaching about the scriptures: the law of Moses, the prophets, the Psalms. You wait for one of his parables that will help yet another confusing passage become clear to you. But this time, it is not just one passage he brings to life. It is like he has turned a light on, and opened your mind. Suddenly, all the words, the stories, the poetry, the prayers: they resonate with deep meaning to you. You feel a calling to become one of the voices in this story as it continues to unfold. You look around at the other disciples, and seeing the awe on their faces you realize that their minds have been opened, too.

You look again to Jesus. All at once you understand his words. You know now that you are bound to him in a way you have never known before. You follow him to Bethany, taking the gentle slope down the Mount of Olives on the road to Jericho. You reach a grove of palm trees, just a hundred yards from the home of Lazarus, Mary and Martha, who had seen you coming and have run out to join you and to behold their dear friend. Lazarus was once dead too, like Jesus, yet Jesus had brought him back to life. And here you all are, wondering what all this will mean for your future, how it will shape your life.

But something is happening. Jesus is lifting his hands. He is saying words of blessing. You let them wash over you, as you feel their power filling you. As Jesus blesses you,

his body begins to rise. He is not bound to this earth. The sky swallows him, as if the heavens are birthing him to another existence that you cannot yet see. You take note of how you are feeling, and as you scan your body you expect to feel once again the things you felt when you watched his crucifixion: Fear. Anger. Deep sadness. Confusion. Doubt. Guilt. But as you take note of what your mind and body and spirit are experiencing, you notice that you feel none of these, not now.

You feel something else.

Joy.

Your lips start to spread as your mouth declares words of praise. Tears stream from your eyes and fall into your smiling mouth as you join one another in worshipping Jesus. He is no longer with you. But what he has blessed you with makes you feel more bound to him than you had ever felt when he was among you.

Now some time has passed since that holy day. Quite some time, and oh! What changes have come since then! You have followed enthusiastically as Jesus had commissioned you, preaching repentance and forgiveness of sins to all nations, starting with Jerusalem. The most incredible conversion you have seen is with Paul, with whom you now travel-- known once as Saul, he used to terrify you. But the scales had fallen literally off his eyes, and now you look to him to help spread the Word and baptize others in Jesus' name. Today, however, you are all tired, and you find some of those old emotions creeping in, especially fear and anger as you feel Rome's power closing in on you.

And here comes a young slave. She keeps shouting out, "These men are the slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation!" Paul is starting to get annoyed by her. It's not that she doesn't speak the truth-- in fact, her words tell it like it is. But for some people, truth coming out of a woman's mouth is hard to hear. Even though Paul deeply appreciates women like Tabitha and Lydia who have helped spread this ministry, even he struggles with what to do with women's voices. You guess he was also shaped by a culture that tries to control women's voices and women's bodies, especially in moments of fear and change. Too bad he never saw with his own eyes how Jesus interacted with women, as you had. You make a mental note to introduce him to Mary and Martha when you get back to Jerusalem-- *if* you ever make it back.

They say the people who annoy you the most are annoying because they bring out the personality traits that frighten you the most. You guess Paul and the slave girl have

more in common than meets the eye: they are both enslaved people; they just have different masters. The slave girl is bound to her Roman master, who uses her to tell fortunes and make money for him. Paul, well he is bound to Jesus Christ. Having a holy master means that others cannot control you, and that is not pleasing the Roman authorities who have been watching your band of disciples.

Whoa! In an explosion of passion, Paul has just ordered the the spirit who caused the slave girl to tell fortunes out of her. This is not going to be good, for her or for you. Her owners are coming after you, and they are mad, mad, mad. Paul has taken away their money-maker. If Paul was trying to silence her so that your evangelism would somehow stay under the Roman radar, he has grossly failed. You wonder what will happen to that poor girl, as you watch her bare feet shuffle along, bound by chains. You pray that she may live to know freedom from her captors. Look, now her owners have brought in a soldier, and they are coming for you, with whips and chains.

Now *your* feet are bound in chains, and as you shuffle your feet against the dusty floor you understand just a little more what this slave girl lives under. Your side and back sting, a physical reminder to what Jesus experienced the day they crucified him. Your heart is racing and you feel fear start to occupy your mind again. How will this end? You wish and even pray that God will call *you* up into the sky, and unbind you from all that is in this earth: the unrighteous rulers. The violence you witness every day. The disrespect for human dignity. You realize that your prayers are no longer silent; your mouth is speaking them out loud and yours are not the only ones-- the women and men held captive with you are praying too. You stop and listen to their words for a moment and let them carry you. You feel a sense of peace return to you. You know you are not in this alone. You start to hum a hymn beneath your friends' prayers. One by one, they begin to join you, until you are all singing loudly hymns of praise. Your fear begins to leave your face and your mouth begins to spread wide, into a smile. There it is again! That whole body sensation you felt when Jesus ascended. You reach into your mind and draw upon the scriptures, which are now grafted into you. You realize that no chains can bind you. No authority can own you. You belong to none other than the Most High God. This realization causes your heart to fill with overflowing.

All of the sudden, there is a clatter. The ground has shaken and the chains have fallen from your wrists and feet. One by one, each prisoner becomes unbound by their chains. Not only that, but the doors to your jail cells creak open. In the light of the lantern outside your dark cell, you see your jailer, with his sword, and he is very distressed. The fear that had just recently marked your face is now threaded onto his. Knowing how bad the Roman authorities treat those who are outside the system, you

know the punishment for this man will be pretty stiff once they find you have been freed under his watch. It occurs to you that he is preparing to use his sword on himself. "Wait!" Paul calls out with urgency. "Do not harm yourself; we're still here."

The jailer brings his lantern into your cell. He falls on his knees as he witnesses what miracle has just happened. He is trembling-- but now, not with fear, but with joy. "What must I do to be saved?" he asks. You start to share with him the secrets to being bound, not to fear; not to Rome. But bound to the Most High God you know in Jesus Christ.

It's odd, this man who was ready to take his life over your freedom, is now just walking out with you, plain as day. There is no fear in his step, even as you pass Roman soldiers. You go to his house, and continue telling him and his family the good news of the gospel. He then brings you to the river, and with tender care this jailer washes your wounds. "Now me," he tells you. And so, you lead him deeper into the river, and holding his back and his head, dip him under the water. Between you and Paul, you baptize him, his daughters, his wife, his parents.

He leads you back into the house. There is bread. He breaks it. There is wine. His wife pours it. A feast is prepared. You scrape your feet against the dusty floor, this time to ground you, because right now you feel so free, so joyful, that you just might float away. But you know there is a reason for you to be here, now, bound to these people, bound to the earth, touching water, touching bread, and touching lives. Thanks be to God.