

“We’re Still Here!”  
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Psalms 97:1-9  
Acts 16:16-34

This past week has had many levels of *hard*. Many degrees of awfulness. I avoided the news altogether on Tuesday after I saw the first headline about a school shooting. On its own, but after Buffalo especially, it was just too much for me to wrap my head around. I like to think of myself as someone who can go to the hard places with other people. And many times, I can, and have, and I do. I like to see myself as someone who can look at the honesty of the world’s pain and be one of the healers. And many times, I am. But as I saw my friends and colleagues on social media give poetic and prophetic declarations, and already organizing vigils and actions in the wake of what happened in Uvalde, Texas, all I could feel was emptiness. Grief and anger hollowed me out, and I felt useless.

You may have noticed that I didn’t even get the Thursday e-blast out until Friday. That’s because my energy was low and slow; do any of you feel like that? I wanted to pivot from the liturgy I had already prepared for the bulletin this Sunday, to rework it to include what has happened in our words for one another and for God. But it took about 3 days of walking among the tombs before I could even do that.

The thing that finally brought me out of my *disorientation* with the world and the task of meaning-making was Thursday afternoon, when I stepped in as a parent volunteer for my daughter’s fourth-grade Field Day event. To stand alongside a class of 4th graders, this week in particular, felt sacramental. I noticed like never before how beautiful these children’s faces are, and how precious their lives. When normally I would probably have been talking with parents in the shade, I instead played frisbee with Quinny and Jada, jumped rope with Emil and Eu-ahn, exchanged smiles with Hannah, delighted in seeing 2 of our church kids, Mexon and Maesyn, listened to Graham describe how he could have really excelled if tennis was a field day event, and I noticed how Lilla stuck around to clean up the equipment at the end of the activities. I thanked the fourth grade teachers for the formative work they do with our children, creating spaces of safety and trust where our kids can grow. Together we passed out ice-pops to the kids at the end of the afternoon: a communion sealed in sticky fingers and faces. Afterward the spirited children displayed how their Flav-O-Ice had turned into fire, as they proudly presented tongues of flame, in bright red, orange, purple, and neon blue. In a whoosh, I realized the Spirit was upon these children. I relished the moment when Kai, walking back with herds of her peers, voluntarily slipped her hand into mine as we walked down Fort Lee Road back to the school.

“We are still here,” I thought, surrounded by fourth graders. *And that has got to mean something.*

There is that moment after something happens when we are on shaky ground. We wonder if maybe, this trauma should make us value life *less*. Because it hurts too much to care. Because it is *\*risky\** to expect too much out of the country, out of the world, out of our lives. Because we feel like failures when the same damn thing happens again and again— yesterday I swapped out my winter clothes with my summer clothes, and always take this opportunity to weed out clothes I haven't worn in more than a year, and donate them. I had a few pieces of orange clothing. These pieces do not spark joy; Marie Kondo would urge me to get rid of them. But like the corner of my closet with black dresses I reserve for funerals, I have my few pieces of orange clothing to wear as protest for gun violence— orange was chosen by the gun safety movement because it is the color hunters wear to protect themselves and others. Honestly, I would love to get rid of my orange clothes, and it makes me feel like a failure each time they are needed again. Sometimes, I feel like I just need to readjust my expectations.

*But we are still here.*

Those words came after an earthquake, so violent that the foundations were shaken. Paul and Silas had been imprisoned for releasing a spirit from a slave girl— which took away her fortune telling powers, a huge money-maker for her captors. They were imprisoned not because they had preached the word about Jesus, but because they had upset the flow of wealth in the city. The earthquake's rumbles caused a breaking of chains for Paul and Silas, as well as all the other captives. Doors to the prison cells were thrown open. But for the jailer, who had slept through the earthquake, what was more earth-shattering was to awaken and discover the freedom of those whom he was supposed to keep captive. Immediately he jumped to several conclusions: He had failed at his task. His career was over. He assumed that the captives' freedom meant his loss of life; knowing the brutal ways of the Roman empire, he assumed his *life* was over too. He drew his sword. I heard Nadia Bolz-Weber speak about this moment recently. Her take on it is that the jailer heard the voice of The Accuser— in biblical terms, this is the voice of *Ha-Satan*, Satan. You may know it better as the voice in your head, the voice that tries to tell you that you are a failure; you are better off gone; nothing you do is right. Even though the things The Accuser says are lies, it can be hard to not let the voice of The Accuser shake your ground and shape your story.

But Paul and Silas followed a different voice and a different story, a story of salvation. "Do not harm yourself. We are still here!" they urged. For the jailer, these were life-saving words. They were still here. Their presence helped bring him to a place where he could see that he was not as captive to Rome as he'd assumed; he did not have to be held captive to the purposes of empire he was guarding. Like Paul, he wanted to be held captive to Jesus instead. And so, he brought Paul and Silas to his home, and cleansed their wounds, and was baptized, along with his family.

No doubt you have been through some kind of earthquakes recently. Some, we have shared, endured, together. Mass violence. A pandemic. Some may be more unique experiences of loss or suffering. You look around, and others seem to be free. But you are still held captive.

I see in today's scriptures some advice for our release.

First, look around and notice, as Paul and Silas reminded the jailer, *we are still here*. Those words have some power. We have survived the earthquakes. I'm not saying that to make you feel guilty— we do know that, tragically, some have not survived. But I want to say that because of what we have seen lost, what we have seen of life's fragility, what we have seen of the cross, that also makes us witnesses to how powerful, how beautiful, and meaningful life is. We are **obligated** not to make waste of this amazing gift.

*We are still here*. And that means, we honor our freedom, by helping others be free too. Our story in Acts began with Paul and Silas freeing a slave from the spirit that allowed her captors to profit off of her. I am sorry the biblical writers never say what happens to the slave girl. I wish that her story was not forgotten. Bringing freedom to the captives, and upsetting the flow of wealth, is bound to stir up trouble. But, as the late civil rights leader and US Representative John Lewis would call it, this is *good trouble*. We can stir up some good trouble by calling out the false idols of this country— and I say this not directed toward people of other religions; I respect their faith, and in the Bible God was not worried about people of other religions worshiping their gods; the God of Israel was concerned when the people who were in covenant with Yahweh were turning to false gods. In this country, it is often Christians who have chosen worship of guns rather than worship of God. Psalm 97 states, "Worshippers of images are put to shame, those who make their boast in worthless idols; all gods bow down before him." In America, though 90% of our country is in favor of more common-sense laws that provide protection from gun violence, certain special interest groups have elevated gun fetishism above the will of the people, above the power of the state, and even above the worship of God. Upsetting the flow of wealth from gun manufacturers will cause trouble, but this is good trouble, and it needs to be our business if we are to keep our children, our neighbors, our families, and even the strangers that our faith demands that we we make space in our hearts for—safe from gun violence.

*We are still here*. But we do remember, and make witness. This Memorial Day, like all the rest, we remember those who have sacrificed their lives fighting for this country. We pray for a world where differences can be solved with peace and justice, rather than with violence, especially considering this year what is happening in Ukraine, but also in places we hear less about. We remember those who lost their lives to gun violence. We say their names. I am taking them one by one. I can only read a story one at a time, one child, one teacher, because each day I read one, and about the lives that were shared through that one child or one teacher, I can't read any more. The tears are too much. But one by one, no matter how many days or weeks it takes me, I will read through them and remember them.

*We are still here*. And so, we wash wounds. After the jailer realized that Paul and the others were still with him, he took them into his home and washed their wounds from the earthquake and chains. What are you doing these days, to care for your wounds or those of others? For me, I took my work a little more slowly last week. I went to bed a little earlier. I took some time

to talk to someone about my feelings. When I felt a little better, I made time to spend with a close friend who has recently experienced a tragic loss. If I'm going to be real here, I will also say that I indulged in a little online shopping.

After their wounds were washed, Paul and Silas turned to the jailer and his family, who wanted to be baptized. Baptism represents a death to what was, and new life to what is promised in God. To become as beautiful, and to make the world as beautiful, as God imagined it. How do we live into that? Sometimes, it feels like an impossible hope. But the Christian faith asks that we constantly re-orient our feet, and our world, toward new life, and teach that hope and faith to our children. The poet Maggie Smith wrote a poem called "Good Bones," which speaks to that re-orientation. It ends with these lines:

Life is short and the world  
is at least half terrible, and for every kind  
stranger, there is one who would break you,  
though I keep this from my children. I am trying  
to sell them the world. Any decent realtor,  
walking you through a real shithole, chirps on  
about good bones: This place could be beautiful,  
right? You could make this place beautiful.

Jesus has allowed us to glimpse how beautiful the world could be. He starts with showing us how beautiful we are to each other.

We are still here. Beautiful, beloved people of God. *Let's make that matter.*