

Freedom for Captives

In the name of him who is, and who was, and who is yet to come, dear friends in Christ: Early in his ministry, after he had begun to acquire some fame as a preacher and worker of miracles, Jesus returned to his hometown of Nazareth. There he was invited to preach in the synagogue. He chose as his text a very Messianic passage from the prophet Isaiah, which he read: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” Having completed the reading, he rolled up the scroll and handed it back to the attendant. Then he sat down to preach. His sermon was very short. He said, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your ears.” In other words, what I just read: that’s me. I’ve come to do all that.

As you may recall, his message was not well received by the hometown crowd. They refused to believe that the man who had grown up and lived among them could possibly be the promised Savior. To them he was just Jesus, the guy who lived a few doors down the street and who worked as a carpenter. His claim so offended them that they attempted to kill him. They failed. But then Jesus left there and set about doing the very things he said he had come to do. He proclaimed the good news. He gave sight to the blind. And he began to free people from all kinds of oppression and prisons: those held in bondage to demons, to crippling conditions, to deadly diseases, and more. He set the captives free.

And that is the theme that ties all three of today’s Scripture readings together. In the first, we have Apostles showing up daily in the temple. There they proclaim the good news about Jesus Christ, his death for sin and his resurrection. They confirm the truth of their message by performing healing miracles that free people from a wide variety of afflictions – just as Jesus had done. For these high crimes of doing good, the high priest and the party of the Sadducees have the Apostles arrested and confined in the public prison. But they can’t be held. The Lord sends an angel to set them free. He tells the Apostles to go right back to the temple and continue their work of proclaiming the freedom of the Gospel.

In the second reading from the Revelation of Christ to St. John, the now elderly Apostle who is in exile on the Island of Patmos is given a vision of the risen Lord Jesus whom he serves. It’s a glorious vision filled with all kinds of biblical imagery the unpacking of which would be worthy of a sermon of its own; but what I want to focus on is what Jesus says at the very last. He says, “I have the keys to death and Hades”. They are the two prisons every human has reason to fear the most: the prison of the grave and the prison of everlasting condemnation in hellfire. Jesus has the keys to set the captives free.

And that brings us to Gospel lesson, which though read last, chronologically takes place first. It’s the evening of that first Easter Sunday. The disciples of Jesus are gathered together behind locked doors. They are in a prison of sorts: a prison of fear, confusion, and guilt. They are fearful because of their enemies. They saw what happened to Jesus the Friday before. They know how much his enemies hated him. And Jesus had told them that if they hate me, they’re going to hate you too. They are confused because at this point they know that Jesus has risen from the dead. They have the report of the women who found the tomb empty and who were told by angels that Jesus is alive. And they have four eyewitnesses who this day have seen Jesus in the flesh: Mary Magdalene, Peter, and the two Emmaus disciples. The trouble is that they don’t yet know what his resurrection means for them. And they feel a

tremendous burden of guilt. The night of his arrest they all swore up and down that they would stick with Jesus no matter what happened. But at the first sign of trouble every one of them fled, abandoning him – which brings us back to fear again: fear of how Jesus might punish them for their cowardice.

It's in this threefold prison that Jesus suddenly appears. He immediately begins to set the captives free; first by declaring his peace to them. It tells them, "You've got nothing to fear from me." Then he shows them his wounds: the nail marks in his hands and the scar where the spear pierced his side. These are the visible marks of his passion. They show that he himself bore the penalty of their sins on the cross. They are in that sense the foundation of the peace that he declares to them – which he does a second time. And all at once their prison doors swing wide open. The fear, confusion, and guilt are gone. They are overwhelmed with joy.

And then the risen Lord Jesus does something truly remarkable. He who holds the keys to death and hell hands them over to his disciples. He breathes on them the Spirit and says, "As the Father sent me, even so I am sending you. If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven; if you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld." This is authority to declare in Christ's name the forgiveness of sins to the repentant, as well as the obligation to bind the sins of the impenitent and unbelieving. It's the power of God to set captives free.

All of the disciples experience the freedom and receive this authority—except one: the one who wasn't there. It's often explained that Thomas' refusal to believe that Jesus was raised from the dead has to do with his scientific skepticism, but that doesn't make a lot of sense. He had seen Jesus do many powerful miracles to include raising people from the dead. And now he has a whole roomful of people he knows and trusts tell him that they have seen Jesus alive. More than that, he can see the change in them: they've been set free; but he hasn't.

I've noticed that in the resurrection appearances of Jesus, he tends to reveal himself to those who are prepared for it. Like with the Emmaus disciples, he spends an afternoon expounding the Scriptures to them, showing how the Christ had to suffer, die, and rise on the third day. It's only after they believe all that happened that Jesus shows himself to them. Certainly the disciples gathered in the locked room were ready to see Jesus and be set free. And Jesus could have appeared to them at a time when Thomas was present. That he chose to appear when Thomas wasn't with them tells me that he wasn't yet ready to see Jesus.

Why not? I suspect it's because he didn't feel the oppression of the prison of guilt like the others did. Unbelief is a symptom of sin, not of a scientific mind. In order to be set free of the guilt of sin, you have to first know and experience the guilt. And boy would he have. Put yourself in his sandals. The others all say that Jesus appeared to them. It's not something they would lie or joke about. And again, he can see the change in them. Clearly something remarkable has happened to them. He's forced to ask, "Why would Jesus appear to them and not to me?" And asked that way, the answer would come back at once: you're not worthy. A lifetime of sins would come parading through his mind, each one presenting itself as a just cause for Jesus to reject him. Seven long days he's left to stew in that vile soup. It must have felt like the bonds of hell.

Mercifully, Jesus didn't leave him there. He came to set the captives free – and so he did. He continues to do so today. Through the proclamation of his saving sacrifice on the cross and the power of his resurrection to declare sins forgiven in his name, he has entrusted to his Church the keys to death and hell. May we therefore use them as he intends first to keep ourselves in his saving truth and the freedom of the Gospel, and to use them to free others who

are as yet captives to guilt and fear so that by believing, they too may have life in Jesus' name. And to him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!