

7 Easter – Year C – May 16, 2010
Acts 16:16 -34; Psalm 97; Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21; John 17:20-26
Susan E. Wilmot

Anyone who knows me will tell you that I'm not much of a gardener, although I really do enjoy houseplants. However, it is not likely that I would ever graduate beyond page one of *Houseplants for Dummies*. For example, I'm currently growing my Christmas amaryllis. Yes, sadly, I did leave it in the box for so long that it had actually started to sprout pale, but determined leaves before I finally planted it properly. I felt guilty for days – it only took five minutes to get it potted. The wrapper says it's guaranteed to bloom. By the grace of God, even a few months late in the planting, it's looking good. The one thing about houseplants I do know is that they need to be regularly watered and at some point generally need to be re-potted in order to continue growing. Nonetheless, re-potting is stressful on the plants and the roots require some time to become reestablished before growth begins again.

There are many reasons why you and I may have experienced the same kind of stress in being uprooted and put into a new environment. Sometimes by choice when we are moving to pursue a new career, moving closer to the grandchildren, or just coming back to our summer homes. When the uprooting is not by choice, it is even more stressful: moving out of economic necessity, or because the house now seems too big without our spouse or partner. There are also other events in our lives that may feel like we are being re-potted against our will: illness, depression, or an emotional or spiritual crisis to name a few. I'm sure you can think of other situations that lead to the same frightening experiences involved in radical change. Where do we find our salvation at times like this?

Today's reading from the Acts of the Apostles offers us two related stories from the apostle Paul and his companion's perspective. On Wednesday evening, we looked at Paul's meeting with Lydia and her conversion to the Way, as the first recorded convert in Europe. Paul and Silas are now back in Philippi, heading out to the place of prayer again. This time they meet an unnamed slave girl who has a spirit of divination. Her owners exploit her gift as a good source of income. These two women could not be more different. We know from last week's reading that Lydia is a wealthy businesswoman and head of her own household. The woman in today's reading is at the opposite end of the socio-economic spectrum – nameless property, exploited because she is possessed by a spirit that speaks through her. The spirit of divination is also the name of a serpent that was said to have guarded the oracle at Delphi, and which was said to have been slain by the Greek god Apollo. She is named only as a slave. In turn, as she follows Paul and Silas, she names them as slaves: "Slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation." What can she do to be saved?

At the other end of the story, we find the jailer, who carries the keys to the prison, but is more of a prisoner than Paul and Silas will ever be, despite appearances. After the earthquake, the jailer believes that all his charges have escaped and is about to commit suicide. He knows that the Romans will put him to death for failing in his duties, even if the real reason that the prisoners could escape was completely beyond his control. Many of us have found significance in our lives through our professional identities, and much of that comes with the baggage of stress. Perhaps one of the hardest lessons occurs when our physical health begins to reflect the evidence of our stress. And how often is the prison of stress self-imposed? Is it only after experiencing an ulcer, a heart attack, high blood pressure, or any of the other physical symptoms of stress, do we realize that no job is worth dying for; that no job is worth our becoming a prisoner to duty. Another side of this slavery is seen in our relationships, no doubt reflected in the staggering divorce rates. But also in moments lost, moments that money cannot buy, like a home run at the little league game, the starring role in school pageant, gluey fingers at Vacation Bible School, or a romantic dinner for two. There is also a cost in our relationship with God, when we are apparently trying to serve at least two masters. The old proverb is true: "No one says on their death bed, 'I really wish I'd spent more time at work.'" The jailer has been freed.

Two interwoven episodes in the mission of Paul and Silas, and how they share their God-given gifts in the Lord's service. Two stories of enslavement and liberation. Paul and Silas who begin our story named as slaves of the Most High God, end up in prison, but are so full of the life-giving, freedom-bearing Holy Spirit that their prayers and singing bring down all the walls of the prison. There is freedom through the laws of state or nation, and then there is FREEDOM. Viktor Frankl once wrote, "We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from [us] but one thing: the last of the human freedoms -- to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances." Paul and Silas boldly live their freedom in Christ. From contemplating suicide, the jailer suddenly seems to receive a clear insight into what is really at stake. He falls down before Paul and Silas and says, "What must I do to be saved?" He is about to experience *the* Gardner's hand lifting him firmly from one dimension to a whole new realm of existence. Or, rather, to a whole new vision and experience of real life and freedom.

The slave girl finally irritates Paul to the point where he orders the spirit to come out of her in Jesus' name. She too is now set free. Not from her worldly owners perhaps. We are not told what becomes of her after she can no longer offer a source of income. But she is freed from spiritual oppression. Having followed and listened to Paul and Silas preach and teach the Gospel of Jesus Christ – she is now free to accept the truth of their message. To paraphrase the Gospel of John, when we know the truth, the truth sets us free, and when Jesus sets us free, we are free indeed. These stories proclaim our liberation in Christ, but I think there is more. Our salvation, our freedom in Christ is just a beginning. We are constantly in the process of spiritual transformation through the power of the Holy Spirit. When a plant is re-potted, it is just the beginning of a new phase in its life, a new phase of growth.

The liberation of the slave girl gives *her* the opportunity to become a servant of the Most High God. While she is possessed, she is essentially pot-bound, with no room for growth, and no chance to become the person God intends her to be. Do any of us identify with the slave girl? Has anything in our lives taken control of us, especially something that may be pushing us further away from God? Sometimes we have to seek and accept help to free ourselves from worldly entanglements in order to know true freedom in Christ, and in order to continue to grow. Frightening shifts in our circumstances may also be God's wake up call, God's hand creating a new way for us to grow into His goodness. Living in that just-transplanted state means that it can feel like circumstances are killing us, when all the time God is strengthening our roots, and preparing us for even greater freedom and expansive growth.

The liberation of the jailer is more like a willing movement towards growth. Yet if we look closely, it involves letting go of a self-made prison, and making a new commitment. The jailer gives up the prison of duty that has kept him in chains for so long. Make no mistake, old habits die hard. When we are willing to offer ourselves in faith for re-potting, God strengthens our new roots in Him, and lets some of those old roots that bind us to the world die away. Dying to self, in order to trust in God and Christ takes a great deal of courage. Look what Paul and Silas did when the earthquake freed their earthly chains. What would you or I have done? Stay or run? Did they think only of themselves and take this freak opportunity to run away? No. Knowing what would happen to the jailer, and with confident faith in Christ, they put the life of the jailer ahead of their own needs. By putting their love of God first, they are able to love their neighbors as themselves. Freedom and growth go hand in hand. How is God breaking our bonds today? How are we being called to grow? How are we living our salvation?

Amen.