

Sermon  
By The Rev. Dr. William Carl Thomas  
The Seventh Sunday of Easter: The Sunday after the Ascension  
May 29, 2022  
St. Thomas Episcopal Church, Oriental North Carolina

**A sermon that finds the courage to know the difference in the wisdom of a modern day prayer that invites release from the jail of inaction in the face of an earthquake as well as the impact of rapidly fired bullets.**

O Lord our strength and our redeemer. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, for God invites us to live and love like Jesus, so that in the power of the Holy Spirit, help others to do the same.

I'm confident that you pay attention to something that is out of the ordinary. You've noticed that I'm preaching on this Seventh Sunday of Easter: The Sunday after the Ascension, May 29, 2022 from behind a pulpit with a text. As you apprehend just why I have taken such an out-of-character approach to this serving as your guest preacher, let me remind you of my breath prayer: "I have nothing to prove, only God's Holy Invitations to offer." While my focus appears to narrow to a tragic, timely, and preventable issue, as I move through the Holy Invitation from God offered to the fear-filled jail into today's passage from Acts, my hope is to stay vulnerable to God's Holy Invitations in the manner I showed last week with my arms open and my vision expanded.

An abuse of power by the owner's of the now worthless slave girl who practiced divination as Acts 16 relates, placed the Apostle Paul and Silas in the Philippi jail. A midnight earthquake, doors opened, chains unfastened, and a jailer who is about to draw his sword to kill himself, thinking the prisoners would naturally flee. Then the powerless, in the loud voice of Paul, reveal the power of the grace of Jesus as he came to die on the cross. Paul offers God's Holy Invitation: "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." The jailer asks "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" They answered, "Believe in the Lord Jesus." Or, in my translation of the word believe, "Set your heart on Jesus." The jailer's response was to change his life. We see a glimpse of this change by how he comes to treat his former prisoners with dignity and loving care.

Along with the jailer, we, too, set our hearts on Jesus and have been baptized. And, if we are really honest, we know that the jailer is as much a prisoner of the powerful as those placed in jail.

Indifference can make us oblivious to our jail. Addiction can hold us bound in the jail of unhealthy behaviors. Fear of the unknown or the other, can make us seek the safety of a jail built with the blocks of a narrow viewpoint that keep us from seeing just how fragile the foundation is that holds these blocks in place.

This is my second Sunday with you where we lament during our worship people who have died when subjected to rapidly fired bullets by two different 18 year-olds, 10 in Buffalo New York on May 14<sup>th</sup>, 21 in Ulvalde Texas just ten days later, as well as those who suffer directly in the aftermath, family, friends, first responders, law enforcement, health care workers, forensic technicians, and those who suffer indirectly, people such as you and me.

My son [Adam's words to his congregation in Mystic CT](#) written last Wednesday remind me just how long his generation and those who follow, the ones with school age children, have lived in the jail we lament today: "I was a high school sophomore in April 1999 when gunmen massacred 13 people at Columbine. In the decades following that, our society keeps saying the words "since" and "again" and "another" when those words should never have needed to be employed after that."

The jail I construct to survive the onslaught of information and images has many compartments. I have an active imagination and prefer to see my three second grade age grandchildren in a happy place. However, I know that schools now practice active shooter drills which are far more serious than the nuclear bomb drills that called for hiding under our desks when I was their age. Compartmentalization can make it easier to accept that there are things that cannot change.

A few years ago I served at a church as the interim rector. I was presented with a number of colored cards to keep in my prayerbook. The ushers had similar cards. The cards were to be used to quietly alert myself or the ushers. You can use your imagination as to why when I tell you that, for a time, the church doors were locked, ten minutes after worship began. Adaptation can make it easier to accept that there are things that cannot change.

Remember, I have nothing to prove, only God's Holy Invitations to offer. It's not my place to assume that those who want to offer thoughts and prayers are insincere when confronted by the reality of the jail that holds us hostage to the powerful lure of inaction. God invited Paul and Silas to find the power that transformed the cross from an instrument of death to one of life to be present in their response to being jailed. While these words by Reinhold Neibuhr would not be written until almost 2000 years later, Paul and Silas lived a version of the Serenity Prayer: *God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference.*

Paul and Silas had the courage to recognize what they could change. Their faithfulness by singing hymns, while bound and fastened in jail, changed the confines of their jail. Paul and Silas lived these words from the Prophet Isaiah: *The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners.* These are the same words of fulfilled promise made by Jesus at the synagogue when he was rejected by those who knew him in Nazareth.

Paul and Silas were granted the wisdom that connected them to the words of the Prophet Isaiah and the actions of Jesus. They had the courage to change the things they could and brought Good News to the captive jailer.

How much courage does it take to be open to God's Holy Invitation to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners? Who is God inviting you to call, write, text, or email to change the way rapidly fired bullets keep God's kingdom from being on earth as it is in heaven. Is it possible that now is the time to have the courage and wisdom to name the things that can change?

All these words I offer in the Name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.