

Easter 7, Year C  
June 2, 2019  
The Rev. Dr. Dena Cleaver-Bartholomew

Socrates once said, **“Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle.”** From simple frustrations, to ongoing challenges, to devastating circumstances, each of us knows what it is like to do our best when life is difficult. Some days we do better than others. Lately it seems that the stress level in our culture has risen several notches, rather like global warming in the emotional sense. Anger and frustration erupts in everyday rudeness, nasty posts on social media, protests that turn ugly or violent, and a steady escalation in the number of mass shootings, including Friday’s incident in a municipal building in Virginia Beach in which a recently fired employee returned quite well armed and steadily moved through the building using his key card and a 45 caliber gun with a silencer to kill as many of his former coworkers as he could.

Paul seems to have been having one of those normal frustrating days when he encountered a young woman who had **“a spirit of divination.”** Like the many spirits Jesus exorcised, who had no difficulty identifying him as the Son of God, this young woman’s spirit knew who Paul and his companions were: **“These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.”** She had, as we say, good

identification skills. If you like advertising in the manner of local car dealer Billy Fuccillo, where loud and *HUGE* are the standards, she was probably pretty effective. But the text tells us Paul “...was very much annoyed.” He turned and ordered the demon out of her, and out it went. Ah, silence! That, however, was not the end of the story. It was the beginning. Paul’s choice led to unforeseen consequences, for he had ruined an excellent source of income for the young woman’s owners and they were not pleased. Paul’s moment of peevishness cost him and his companions a beating and a trip to the deepest, darkest cell of the jail where they had their feet fastened in the stocks.

Paul, who had to this point proven himself very human, transcended his crankiness. Paul and his companions chose a distinctly faithful response to their new circumstances and were still up at midnight, praying and singing hymns. This behavior was unusual enough to have caught the attention of the other prisoners, who were listening to them. Suddenly there was a violent earthquake, the doors of the jail were opened, and the chains of the prisoners were loosed. What would the normal prisoner’s reaction to such a miracle be? Simple: run. That is why the jailer, upon realizing the situation, prepared to kill himself. He was responsible for each and every prisoner. If they had all escaped he had the choice of either killing himself

or waiting to be executed for failing to contain those in his charge. That is why Paul called out to him. Normal expectations did not seem to apply in this story. The jailer knew something was radically different about these praying, hymn singing, miracle inducing, life sparing men. So he asked the pivotal question: **“What must I do to be saved?”**

The answer, like the question, seems simple: **“Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.”** But what does it mean to believe in Jesus? People often hear Paul’s response as if it were an intellectual kind of assent, like believing that  $2 + 2 = 4$ , or that gravity exists. Maybe it’s more like believing in economic theory, or the divine right of kings, or the Second Amendment. What seems to gain less attention is the next sentence: **“They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house.”** That means that Paul and his companions spent time talking to the jailer and his household about the Good News of Jesus Christ. Given that there was no New Testament at that time, it is likely they spoke out of their own experience. Certainly Paul had a dramatic conversion experience from which to speak. What convinced Paul to believe in Jesus was not an intellectual proposition. None of the disciples were persuaded to follow Jesus by a concept. That might work for a few people, but not for most. What convinces most people to believe in Jesus is either their own

personal experience of God, or others sharing the story of their personal experience of God. Coming to believe in the Lord Jesus is more like opening both your mind and your heart to the possibility that Jesus is God *and* that Jesus either could—or already does—love you. Believing that Jesus is God Incarnate is something one might be able to grasp as a logical proposition. But believing that Jesus loves each and every one of us is not necessarily logical or provable, which is why it may be so hard for many people to accept—but it is true. The jailer and his household were convinced by what they heard and were baptized immediately. He then invited Paul and his companions to their home where they shared food and rejoiced.

The question for us is how we might be more like Paul and his companions. How do we engage in behavior that is unexpected in a good, God centered kind of way, like praying and singing hymns in a bad situation? Did you know that those imprisoned during the Civil Rights Movement frequently took this text as their model for how to behave while in prison? If nothing else, it made their captors think twice. What about not making life worse for the jailer, though they easily could have run? Instead, they chose to stay and do the right thing. By making that choice the jailer asked the big question, “**What must I do to be saved?**” How could our choices in the way that we treat people open up the door for them to ask that

same question? Few people today might phrase it that way. They might ask instead why you go to church; or why you're a Christian; or if it isn't true that all Christians are hypocrites because that's what they see on the news or have experienced with other people. Paul and his companions were able to talk about their faith and their experience; they were able to invite the jailer and his family to join them.

In our reading last week Paul shared the story of Jesus with a group of Gentile women, converting Lydia and her family. This week it's a jailer and his family. The point is that you never know who is paying attention; or who might be open to asking questions; or who might come to believe in Jesus because of *you*. Episcopalians tend to be shy about this kind of thing. Yet in the Gospel Jesus prays **“on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word....”** You don't have to be loud, or aggressive, or saintly. You just need to be you. If someone were to ask you why you are a Christian, how would you respond? If they asked why you go to Christ Church, what would you say? The Vestry began to practice this simple kind of storytelling at the Newcomers Event, responding to these simple questions: **How did you come to Christ Church? Why do you stay? How are you involved here?** I don't want Christ Church to be the best kept secret in town—and thankfully after the Lenten Fish Fries it's not. This is

an amazing place, alive with the Holy Spirit and filled with wonderful people. How are people going to know that if someone doesn't tell them, or invite them to come and see? How could they believe that Jesus is present, not only in this building, but in the people who gather here? How could someone believe it is possible that they too could be loved as we experience love? Maybe this kind of evangelism, which is actually a practice of invitation, isn't usual for Episcopalians, but why be limited by that? I'll take the Spirit filled over the expected anytime. Who knows when God might give you the opportunity to change someone's world?

Amen