

## THE SURGE OF DANGEROUS RESTLESS POWER

*Acts 16:16-34*

Mostly the world believes all assets are frozen, and things will stay the same as they are. You know: If you're dead, you're dead and things will stay so. And if you're alive, you had better scramble and get it all, because that's all there's going to be. If you're number one, you had better have lots of power, because that's the way to keep it as it is. Everything is arranged, settled, fixed and closed. You cannot cross any of those lines, and we work hard at keeping boundaries secure. With this way of reality, some of us end up in complacency, because it works to our advantage; some of us end up in despair because we had hoped for better, but power operates in this world to close things down and keeps all assets frozen.

Against that view, which is dominant among us, Christians and before that Israel have long sung otherwise. Israel has this very old song, Psalm 97 that Yahweh is a God of odd, dangerous, surging power in the earth which unsettles and revamps and opens and jeopardizes and heals and lifts up. The God pointed to in Scripture is an inscrutable power for life released in the world.

That power breaks down settlements of rich and poor, of dead and alive, of insiders and outsiders, breaks down our categories of security and explanation, and there are endless violations of the full and hungry. There is a kind of dangerous restlessness that lets nothing stay fixed and frozen because God is on the move in more ways than we can understand.

In the Easter season the church reflects on this riddle of power that shatters our complacency. While the world basically uses power to shut things down, to silence possibility, to intimidate newness that threatens, to enslave and entrap people, the Gospel is at work to set us free, to open up life giving possibilities.

Christians are called to notice the dangerous restlessness of God's power that shatters our complacency and overrides our despair. That restlessness from God makes life possible in our deadness, and makes hope possible in our despair, makes healing possible even in the midst of our hurt and our hate and our fear.

People like us are placed in a crisis by Easter, because we also prefer to freeze our assets, but the power surges and we notice.

No wonder that in the ancient Psalms, that with God's odd power, lightning flashes where we think it wouldn't, fire burns away the clouds and darkness, new life becomes possible wherever God is at work. This power is unloosed in the world. We are left dazzled, because we think it would not happen. We are threatened because we did not want to see our tea party upset. We are invited, and in any case, we cannot ignore the new power.

The reading from the book of Acts is about this restless power. Indeed, the whole story of the book of Acts is about this power from God that the world cannot shut down. And Revelation points to the power of God taking the world where he wants it to go. The book of Acts in scene after scene is a hard meeting between the servants of Christ, the church and worldly authorities, because world authorities are regularly baffled by this new power and resentful of it.

In chapter 16, Paul and Silas are on their way to the place of prayer. They met a slave girl who had the spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune telling. While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, "These men are slaves of the most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation." She kept doing this for many days. But Paul very much annoyed, turned to her and said, "I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And it came out that very hour.

The church in its poverty, without resources, was at the same time a carrier of God's power for new life. The story does not explain how this could happen, indeed, it doesn't even indicate curiosity. It is enough to witness to the newness that has been seen, and newness that lets full humanness come, even into a world filled with disability.

Predictably the owners came around this oddity, partly in curiosity,

But mostly upset and resistant, for when they saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the market place before the authorities. They are upset because for them everything was known and explained and now this new power has shattered all their controlling categories. They saw a broken person restored to full humanity, and they knew that this possessed person could not cross the line from that kind of slavery to wholeness. They knew that and so they seized Paul and Silas, because they had taken this slave girl out of their controlling categories. They knew that and dragged them before the authorities.

The reason they were so angry is that the power of the resurrection is unsettling. It shatters all our categories. It announces that this power in Jesus Christ, that our control of reality is no longer adequate or functional. It asserts that newness is possible which we cannot predict or manage according to our vested interests. It insists that the world will not be ordered according to our preferences or in service of our advantage.

Look at what happens in a whole series of events. After being charged with no defense, they are stripped of their clothing, and beaten. And after they are given a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. Following their instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in stocks. They are going to stop this Easter power in Jesus Christ.

So there is Paul and Silas praying and singing hymns at midnight, and the prisoners were listening to them; not shouting obscenities or yelling for them to shut up. And while they are singing the ground begins to shake and all the jail doors are sprung. But none of the prisoners flees.

The warden of the prison however, thinking that everybody has fled, drew his sword thinking to kill himself. But Paul shouted out, "Do not harm yourself for we are all here." The jailer called for lights, and rushing in fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them outside and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

They answered, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household. They spoke the Word of God to him and to all who were in his house. Notice the jailer's response. "At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds, then he and his family were baptized without delay. Then the warden brings them up to the house, feeds them, and his whole family and he rejoiced that he had become a believer in God. His actions are different. The Easter power had moved him towards life.

The church must always give an account of its Easter faith. The authorities ever since Pharaoh in the OT and Herod in the NT have recognized that dangerous power is on the loose which they cannot administer, manage, or control.

The Easter power in Jesus that Paul and Silas lived and preached is a minority opinion in this world. It is a dangerous opinion in the courts of the status quo. It is a powerful possibility in the world, and the world continues to be astonished and annoyed with it.

Easter is not an ancient oddity. Easter is an unsettling way in the world that continues to have economic, political, and human implications. Easter is not a spiritual event, but a surging of life in Jesus Christ that touches all of life. The Easter question for us is not whether you can get your mind around the resurrection of Jesus, because you cannot. Rather the question is whether you can permit in your horizon new healing power, new surging possibility, new gestures to those enslaved, new ways of power in an armed, fearful world, new risk, new life, dancing, singing, praising the power of Jesus beyond all our controlling powers.

In our world, the old ways of greed and hate and fear are about to destroy us. We abuse our neighbor, and we end up in a vicious circle of abuse. We end up lonely and weary, but in control. But now comes a powerful, unimaginable alternative in Jesus Christ.

The book of Acts is written so that assets need not stay frozen. This witness make a simple affirmation, power for life is unloosed. It is a generous offer of an alternative. It is given to you. It is a dangerous chance. You can be on the side of the newness that God is now working in Jesus. All of our frozenness cannot stop this newness of the love of Christ for you and me.

Joy in the Christ Life,

David E Hinck, Pastor FGS