

“Believe on the Lord”

Acts: 16: 16-34

No, that is not a typo. It really should say, “Believe on the Lord”. Because that is exactly what Paul tells the jailer as a response to the jailer’s question, “What must I do to be saved, to be rescued?” Paul tells him to believe on the Lord.

Sure, this strange “on” could very well be attributed to a monk who was sloppy in his translating work hundreds of years ago but it could also be that “on” is exactly what Paul meant when he told the jailer to “Believe on the Lord.”

Grammatically speaking, it does make more sense to say “Believe in the Lord” and that is why some versions of the Bible have made the change. But I invite to think about what does it really mean for us as people of faith to believe on the Lord.

The word “on” sort of positions us. It is not that “in” sense of the word that can be used to create distance or be used to validate something as real. We say we believe in...fairy tales. We believe in Santa Claus. We believe in...I’ll let you fill in the blanks. When we say we believe in something we validate its existence.

However, just because we believe that it is real doesn't mean that it is the center of our being.

But the word "on" changes things. We believe on God. It supplies weight to our beliefs. It shows an attachment to something beyond ourselves. The word "on" indicates a position in our beliefs, almost like it shouts to the world that we have centered our whole being on God.

As people of faith, it is not just that we believe in God. We also believe on God. We have centered ourselves on God. We have positioned our very core being right slab dab in the middle of God's grace and God's love.

I like to think that this is exactly what Paul meant when he said to the jailer that in order to be saved, to be rescued, to be set free, we as people of faith need to believe on the Lord. It is not simply enough for us to validate that God is real. We are called to tell and more importantly show the world that we have centered our whole lives on God. We are called to tell and more importantly show the world that we have positioned ourselves right in the middle of God's love and God's grace. We are called to tell and more importantly show the world through our words and our actions that our lives have been transformed, all because we have encountered the Risen Lord.

As people of faith, By believing on God, we are proclaiming to this world that anything is possible and nothing, nothing it can send our way can ever keep us chained down or locked up, afraid and insecure.

This is exactly what our text is sharing with us today. In our Scripture today, we hear about so many people who are figuratively and literally chained down or locked up by systems in this world. In our text today, we hear about so many people who are not free, all because they are blocked in by barriers and walls built by this world, brick by brick.

We know the obvious ones, the slave girl, Paul and Silas but we also need to realize that the slave girl's masters, the crowd and the jailer are not free as well. They are chained down and in need of rescuing as well.

The slave girl's masters are trapped by their greed. They cannot imagine any life that is not based on enslaving someone. They saw no worth or value in this young girl except what money she could bring in for them. And then after she is set free by Paul, their anger and hate chains them down even more. There is no hope for new life or grace for her masters. They are too trapped within a world of greed, fear and might.

And as for the crowd, well, we've all seen how mob mentality can enslave people. Group dynamics and emotion take over and logic, compassion and

understanding goes right out the window. All the slave girl's previous masters have to do is play on the crowd's fear of the others and the chains of hate are tighten even more. Not once did someone stand up in this crowd and say what a minute? What are we doing? Why are persecuting these men? The crowd simply allowed themselves to become even more trapped and chained down within a world of fear, greed, and might.

And last but not least, we have the jailer. He is chained down simply because he is part of the power system at hand. He is caught up in the Roman Empire's expectations and its demand for order, even if it means giving up his own life. The jailer is chained down in a system that requires him to give up his life, and not for some worthy cause but simply because he supposedly failed at his job. The jailer is probably chained down the most out of all the characters in our text by his figurative prison built brick by brick through greed, fear and might.

And the sad fact of the matter is that nothing of their world can set them free. And the same holds true for us as well because unfortunately, their world is our world. Our world is run by greed, fear and might and brick by brick, we build prisons, we build walls, we build barriers that separate and divided and keep people locked in and locked out.

And unfortunately nothing made of this world has the power to set us free. Nothing made of this world has the power to loosen our chains. Our world is enslaved by fear, greed, and hatred.

Just Think about it. It's funny what can chain us down in our lives. It's funny what we give power to that allows the darkness to start to overtake us and drown out the light. We can become chain down through our own self-imposed assumptions about ourselves. We can become chain down when we fail to meet other's expectations. We can even become chain down simply because we allow ourselves to lose our voice, to lose our identity, when we lose our connection to what centers us and empowers us. And it is not just us that can become chained down. Through our words and our actions, we can chain others down as well.

As people of faith, In our lives, we can so easily become chained down and sometimes have the misfortune to chain down others that we need constant reminders that we need something more, something not of this world to believe in, to believe on so that when the chains of fear, greed, hate, start to tighten and try to hold us down, we have the strengthen to say no! To say to this world that we are centered and ground in our God's love and grace and that nothing this world does can bring us down or overtake the light.

We need to believe on God to remind ourselves that we are not powerless in the face of darkness. We are not powerless in spite of our chains and prisons.

We need to remember this always because suddenly this bit of knowledge gives superhuman strength. Not because we have been made invincible and certainly not because now we have the ability to leap buildings in a single bound or stop bullets with our hands.

Through our belief on God, which centers us, we now have the power to release our chains and to let go of what locks us down because we know this power comes from the fact we are loved more than we could ever imagine. We know this power comes from the fact that we are named and claimed as one of God's one. We know this power as people of faith comes from the fact that God has the last word. We know that this power comes from God.

This is what sets us free. This is what loosens our chains. This is what breaks down the bars that keep us confined.

It is not our power. It is God's power. And it is God's power that strengthens us because now we understand that God's life transforming and the life giving love and grace of God have set us free.

Now, in any situation, regardless of how dark the night may be, we as people of faith can have hope because we know that the chains that tried captured us, that

tried to tie us down are nowhere near as strong or as powerful as the ties that bind us together as the Body of Christ, that bind us together as children of God.

We have been set free through the power of God's love and grace. These things don't transform us superhuman. They simply help us to become more secure in our belief, more centered in God's very being.

I will tell you that as a parent, I am charting new territory: the land of Disney princesses and super heroes. Hannah, one day, will come home from school and all she can talk about is Superman, Batman or Spider man and then the next day, all she can talk about is Ariel or Rapunzel. She has her Super Girl dress and cape and she has her princess sparkly dress for whatever mood she may be in that day.

And as I experience these characters with her, I realize that I have forgotten how as children we were all fascinated with the idea of rescuing someone, with the idea of saving the day. Whether it is a knight in shining armor or a super hero swinging in at the last minute, as children we all liked the idea of rescue, the idea of saving the day.

And I guess, now that I am thinking about it, our fascination with rescue never really goes away. It just gets transformed into a desire or a want for someone to come in, fix everything and make it right, whether that be our lives, our families,

our jobs, whatever. We all still expect someone to come in and fix all our problems.

And this expectation is not limited to just our worldly stuff. We also place this expectation on God as well. We expect God to use God's power to fix everything and make it right. That's one of the main reasons we say we believe in God. God is supposed to fix things for us.

But ultimately that is not how belief works. And that is not how God's power works in our lives either.

As people of faith as we grow in our relationship with God, as we become more centered on God, as we become more attached in our beliefs, we realize that the true power of God's grace and God's love comes from the very basic knowledge that no matter what happens we will always be God's Beloved, we know that God is constantly working in this world to break the bonds of hate and hurt and to bring healing and wholeness to God's creation. We know that no matter what, God's love will overcome whatever the world throws our way.

That's how our belief on God sets us free. That's how our belief on God loosens our chains. That is how our belief on God gives hope to face tomorrow. In the end, regardless of what tries to chain us down, we know God is in control.

I shared this past week a quote from Alice Walker on the Theology Tuesday and I want to share it with everyone again because I honestly think this captures what Paul was saying to the jailer in his response to when the jailer asked what did he have to do to be saved, to be rescued? Walker says that “the most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don’t have any.” And I would go as far as saying that we could even say that the most common way people are chained down by this world is because they think they deserve it.

As children of God, we know that is not true. As children of God, we don’t deserve to allow others or ourselves to chain us down. As children of God, we know that no matter what this world may do to try to hold us down or imprison us, we can be set free.

Simply by centering ourselves on God, secure in God’s love and grace and strong in our knowledge that God will always have the last word.

This world, try as it may, to chain us down will never succeed because we know that belief in our God will set us free. Through this belief in our God and in our God, we have hope in the Lord. We have the strength to face whatever comes along our way. We have the ability to experience joy in the midst of pain because ultimately we know that is our belief in God, our belief in God that has rescued us and helped us become the person God created us to be.

We have been set free, and now as disciples of Christ who have experienced the life-giving power of the risen Lord, it is our turn to break the chains that hold others down as well. We realize that nothing made of this world is powerful enough to do this but...but we know as ones who have experienced the power, the majesty and the might of the risen Christ, we know that God love and God's grace certainly is.

May we always believe on the Lord, sharing the good news of the power of God's love and God's grace as we join the struggle to set this world free. Amen.