

“Prison Earth Day” (22Apr18)  
Acts 16:19-34

Earth Day and a prison Bible reading, with an edge of economic impact. It begs the question of how we assign the roles. Where are we in this story? And where is Earth?

I want to start with clarifying what I believe is not the answer, and hope to pry you free from this faulty faith. For too long, too many loud voices have asserted a view that metaphorically Earth would be the prison in this story, and God’s salvation would be to spring us free, unleash from this mortal coil, to escape the bonds of the flesh and soil, to make an eternal getaway and fly away to the sky. Over and over I’ll remind you: that is not Scripture’s story. We are not imprisoned on this planet or in our bodies or with this life.

Yes, there may be much we lament—maybe even feeling like too much—from natural disasters to a slow spring for greening growth, from wars and corruption to prison to cranky relationships, sore muscles to diseases, death or small blemishes. We’d like to be free of those.

But God isn’t trying to get us away from here. God is trying to fulfill life here. On earth...as it is in heaven. It is GOOD, God sees over and over, daily in the creation story in the first chapter of our Bible. That goodness wasn’t because it was special paradise so different from now. It’s because God delights in what God has made, including this world, and including you.

God so loves this good world that God longed to be with you, couldn’t bear to be separate, and so came rushing into our arms as Jesus, to love us not only when things are in the cheery honeymoon of life, but through all the hurt and sorrow and difficulty.

And God was so in love, so in favor, so enamored of life on this Earth that God not only was born here, to live here, but raised from death as well. In this Easter season, we celebrate continuity of the new creation. After crucifixion, God certainly could’ve said, “Pfft! I’m outta here! To heck with that place!” (Or, being God, I suppose could’ve directly meant it in saying, “To Hell with them!”) Instead, the resurrection puts an exclamation point on God’s insistence for life in this world, in

existence we already know, of Jesus’ commitment to how things go here in this place, not in some heaven lightyears away.

So if we’re looking for the location of our Bible story, the prison break cannot be understood as God liberating the select set of Christians or the humans or whoever from the jail Earth.

What if we reverse it, then? What if, instead of the Earth as the prison, it’s the Earth in prison?

There’s plenty I like about that notion (even while disliking what it means). First of all, that it upends the troublesome theology of the other. It refuses to see creation as bad and further recognizes the bondage that our ways place on Earth. We humans want everything under our control, or enslaved to secure our selfish benefit. We limit nature as resources for us to use. We seek to tame wilderness, or else to exterminate it.

This employs the wrong reading of the creation story in taking permission to be domineering, to dominate and subdue as brutal masters, to ignore wellbeing of all else while presuming we preserve our own isolated me-first advantage. That model is nothing we’d associate with Jesus as loving Lord, who willingly laid down his life for the good of others. It is not the character of our God, and is not what God would intend for us.

Yet our rampage is rampant. It’s plain in mountaintops removed and groundwater poisoned by fracking, in these ecosystems detained entirely under our control. It’s evident with polar bears and coral reefs and elephants captive to our whims and shortsightedness, with birds whose migration and mating is malfunctioning because our actions have managed to keep them from their natural rhythms. Birds may be mobile. But trees can’t run away. They are locked in place to face the emerald ash borers and pine bark beetles. It’s the white nose syndrome that means bats won’t be flying free from hibernation caves this spring.

As our children readily recognized for us, our persecuting power over the earth is clear in clearcutting forest, drying out evergreens into deserts, plowing up prairie, pumping out aquifers, changing the chemistry of our atmosphere, and every project where we constrain the livelihood of life and ridiculously refer to it as “development.” We might as well see each and every as expansions

of the prison industrial complex for the incarceration of creation.

The condemning death sentence of such tendencies is summarized in a saying from a native American\* woman that was on a poster I had in my bedroom growing up: “When the last tree is cut, the last fish is caught, and the last river is polluted; when to breathe the air is sickening, you will realize, too late, that you can’t eat money.”

If we’re following this parallel reading, if the Earth has been imprisoned by our human society and culture, maybe our role for a positive change could be associated with the jailer from the Bible story, as God’s Holy Spirit is converting us, calling us to new life, from the waters of our birth. Maybe we hope to be among those of a new perspective, who don’t extract and deplete the planet, don’t trap it under the threat of death, who don’t claim maximum security while minimizing actual life, but recognize that God’s salvation is to liberate, to free, to release from captivity to fears and diminished existence, not only for human benefit but on behalf of all life and we heed the call to serve as caretakers.

Maybe there’s still more. Maybe that possibility for us as jailers-turned-caretakers could lead us to a third consideration. Not that the Earth is bad and good people are stuck here. Not that humans are bad and Earth is stuck with us. What about the apparent notion that sin and abuse are bad and God is striving to liberate us and all creatures from what would inhibit life, to give us freedom to live together well?

Our hint of this may be that in the Bible story the jailer’s life is bound to the inmates. God’s work wasn’t just to free Paul and Silas, but also to free the jailer. They, then, could share in new relationship—not of hierarchies of fear and oppression and inevitably leading to death on the one side or the other (either execution for the prisoners or suicide for the guard if they escaped), but a relationship of blessing and celebration and company of rejoicing—joy that spreads among the other prisoners and to the jailer’s family and on from there—a relationship of binding up wounds and healing and caring and striving for life.

This is God’s abundant Easter work for you, among us on this Earth Day, and—indeed—every day. It is striving to break you free from your individual prisons that confine you into thinking you’re not good enough, that your wrongs are inescapable, that your existence is worthless, that you’re too harmful for life around you, whether the broader planet or closer relationships. That captivity to sin from which you cannot free yourself keeps restricting you and holds you trapped in the negative. In forgiveness and holy inspiration full of creativity, right now Jesus is liberating you from that prison cell, undoing your lock and those chains that have stifled your wellbeing and sense of yourself.

And this is also how God is operating in systems that ensnare us. God is mutually working to free humans and the planet when systemic oppression often overlaps—that people with darker skin are apt to live closer to pollution, that lesser developed nations will suffer worse effects of climate change, that the little guys trying to do the right thing can’t fund fake corporate science reports, that those who have done less harm and can afford less opportunity to purchase the get-out-of-jail free card are caught, and that really such situations are no good for any of us, even those who think they’re winning.

From Pope Francis to secular organizations now recognize these systems are interconnected, that none of our projects stand alone. Environmental work is bound to racial justice,

which is tied to economic wellbeing,  
which is part of the body of health care,  
which interfaces with your body image,  
which stands against capitalist propaganda,  
and is united with sustainable agriculture,  
which is part and parcel with the global peace movement,  
which attends to school systems,  
which confronts gun violence,  
which is linked with immigration and refugee relations,  
and relates to those actually physically in prison or trying to re-enter society,  
which is amid your daily life,  
which is of course constrained with politics,  
which is wholly related to our religious practice,

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\* actually First Nations filmmaker, Alanis Obomsawin  
<https://quoteinvestigator.com/2011/10/20/last-tree-cut/>

which must be a congregation of every creature, from small to large, near on these grounds to original stars.

In the old image of a food chain, all creatures would suffer if any link were broken. Well, we now know that's a web of creation more than simple chains, that my wellbeing is dependent on your wellbeing which is connected to Earth's stability, that everything is hitched to everything else (as John Muir said) and we are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality (as Martin Luther King put it, for a very different reason, but with a very similar end result).

And for the purposes of our Bible story on this Earth Day, Martin Luther said\*\* that you have been set totally free and are obligated to no one, which also means you are totally captive and obligated to all. Your chains are gone, and that has served to reinforce your connection to everyone and everything else. The life-sucking bonds that imprisoned you have been released. Now you are free for the life-giving bonds that tie you to live faithfully and lovingly with God, your neighbor, and creation.

That is the good news of life this Easter season, breaking free from tomb and gloom, and resurrecting you with Jesus and with all that God so loves.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

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\*\* "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all." – see "Freedom of a Christian"