

Acts 16:16-34  
*We Are All Here*

7<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter ~ Sacrament of Baptism ~ Memorial Day Weekend ~ May 29, 2022  
 The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis

*Introduction*

Last week, when I was away on Study Leave, and you got to hear Dan Crump's fine sermon about "Andy..." I attended the 30<sup>th</sup> *Festival of Homiletics*, where over a thousand preachers from multiple denominations and countries gathered in person and online, to learn and grow in the challenging art and craft of preaching. We heard 3 – 4 sermons daily, by a wide variety of outstanding preachers, worshipped every time we turned around, and attended a variety of workshops. (Homiletics, by the way, is just a fancy word for preaching.) The theme of the festival this year was, "*After the Storm: Preaching and Trauma*." Of course, the theme was set months ago, perhaps with the hope that at least the storm of COVID would be past us.

And then just two days before the conference began, on May 14, a gunman on a white supremacist rampage, opened fire in a grocery store in Buffalo, New York. Ten citizens out to do their Saturday afternoon grocery shopping, never returned. That was not the first mass shooting this year. It was the 198<sup>th</sup> mass shooting in 2022, alone. And four days after the conference ended, on May 24, another gunman in Uvalde, Texas, opened fire at Robb Elementary School. When his horrifying rampage was stopped, he had killed 19 children and 2 teachers who would never come home from school that day.

Here in Wisconsin, we live far away from New York and Texas, and probably don't know personally any of the victims of these two acts of domestic terrorism. Even so, these traumas touch all of us. Heartbreaking traumas for which no words are adequate. Still the words pile up quickly: We lament and shout: Again? How can this be happening here in our country? And we want to know the motive. What could have caused another human being to commit such violence? We want this to stop, of course. We want to do something.

And we all care. Caring is *not* the problem, as Tressie McMillan Cottom wrote in her opinion piece in the *New York Times* on May 26. The problem, she points out, is what we care about *more*. Perhaps we really care more important about winning an argument. Or maybe we care more about making money. Or about guns. Or maybe we care most about feeling in control.<sup>1</sup> All of these cares and concerns are certainly in the air we breathe and the media we consume today. And yet, our second scripture lesson from Acts 16, written back in the first century, touches on all of these competing struggles. Way back when Christ had just ascended into heaven, and the church was first getting started.

Nadia Bolz-Weber, who preached on this story at the Festival of Homiletics, called it the "ultimate trauma combo pack." As I read it now, notice the multiple traumas that fly fast and furiously. And at the same time, it is a baptism story. Baptism of not only one person, but of an entire family. Baptism and transformation: from incarcerator to wound dresser and host. We witness a change of heart and mind. In the eye of the storm, in the moment of crisis, someone, something rises. Perhaps this is just the story we need to hear this day.

### *Sermon*

Never underestimate the power of praying and singing hymns. Especially when you have been stripped and beaten and thrown in prison with your feet fastened in stocks. As unbelievable and cartoonish as this story may seem, the multiple serious issues just under the surface offer material for multiple sermons. I will try to preach just one.

But first, I'm wondering if you had ever heard of an exorcism inspired by pure annoyance? Whatever you think about Paul, his letters, his theology or his influence on the Christian church today, Paul's exorcism here, the catalyst for this whole story makes me smile. The slave girl (not a funny situation at all) and her persistent shouting in his face for days and days was actually saying something that could be called a truthful proclamation, "These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation." (v. 17) But something about her persistence, proximity, or projection seemed drive him crazy. So out of annoyance, he exorcised that spirit out of her—just to make her stop shouting. But in doing so he also took away the one thing she had that made her of value in the eyes of her owners. I could take that fascinating thread and run with it. But not today.

Instead, I am inspired to focus on v. 28, the verse on which this story turns for the jailer and his household. And the ever-present danger of suicide.<sup>ii</sup> "There are only two kinds of people in the world – good people and good people in pain." That is what I heard Scarlett Lewis say in an interview this week. Having lost her son, Jesse, at 6-year-old in the Sandy Hook Elementary shooting, this statement from her, after the shootings in Buffalo and Uvalde, is even more powerful. I would add to her profound statement, as we seek to free ourselves from binaries that all people are created good **and** all people experience pain. Some more than others, some sooner others later. And our wounded healer God is with us in the pain. Especially in the void. Our Savior Christ who cried to God from the cross, from the depths of the void he chose to experience first-hand, for our sakes. Our good God experiencing the depths of mental and physical agony.

Here we are once again on a Sunday morning, looking into the void together. The wounds of today loom heavy, even on this Memorial Day weekend. Yes, the traditional first weekend of summer. But more importantly: A holiday originally set aside to honor the ultimate sacrifice of those who fought and died saving the union of our country in the Civil War. And on this May 29, when we just baptized Kendra into our faith in Christ our wounded and risen Savior. We just made promises, to her, the same promises we made to Willie, Jamie, and Antonio. Since we have had four baptisms in the past five Sundays, we have had an unusual amount of professing what we believe. What we take, what we hold onto when we face the void.

What difference does it really make in our lives and for the well-being of the world? I wonder what will we say to Willie, Jamie, Antonio, and Kendra, and to one another as we look back on this day. What does our faith in Christ teach us about how to look into the void? How to proclaim in word and action that "we are all here," with the power to bring life out of death.

Mass public shootings in schools, temples, mosques, churches, grocery stores, theaters each have a unique story. And leave, along with unspeakable heartbreak, many unanswerable questions. Still there are things we do know. We know that the vast majority of these mass shootings are carefully planned for weeks and months in advance. Clues are left by people who are thinking of committing these horrible crimes. We need to do a better job of listening, of caring, of acting. And we know that more often than not, a mass shooting is part of an elaborate suicide plan from the beginning. With each of these mass shootings there is a person with a story that took them down this dark path. A story down a hole dug with lies upon lies.

What lies do we tell to ourselves and about other people that make us decide to end our own lives, or to take the lives of others? They are different for everyone. But I can tell you whatever they are, wherever they come from, they are not the voice of God. Perhaps you know someone right now who needs to know they are not alone. Someone who doesn't know we are all here, still. Here for them. With them. Broken, and in pain, but together. Valuing them as they are right now.

In 2020, some forty-five thousand Americans died of gun-related wounds, more than half of them suicides. No corner of our country is untouched by this scourge. No community. More than one in ten Americans considered suicide in the summer of 2020. And one quarter of young adults in that same summer. This threat is present among us. I feel moved to call attention to this thread of today's story in part to honor the life and legacy of Ken Neumann, whose life work as a counselor and social worker saved countless young people and adults from suicide. I am addressing this thread, where we see an attempted suicide prevented, because this is the final Sunday in May, which is "mental health awareness" month. The threat and the call to address suicide continue in June and beyond.

We need each other to offer the truth of our God who is love, and in whose image, we are all made. When we are alone, it is easy to start telling ourselves the wrong story. And believing it. What lies do you suppose the jailer in Philippi believed that made him ready to draw his sword and kill himself? We can never know the whole story of what goes on inside another individual, but surely the shooter in Buffalo, New York and the shooter in Uvalde, Texas, were driven by lies. By stories that were not of God. Evil stories that led them astray.

"Trusting in the gracious mercy of God, do you turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world?" As we prepared to baptize Kendra, her parents: Olga and Nicholas said "we do" to this question. And so do all of us, who profess our faith in Christ. But do we, really? And if we do not renounce evil, who will? What *do we* really care most about? In the darkness of the evil all around us, and that lurks within, we know that Love wins. We are Easter people. On this 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter: let us proclaim this truth, and act accordingly.

We know that in Christ, we have been given a better story. But alone and apart from God's love and grace, we begin tell ourselves the wrong story. And then we start to believe lies. We can become a threat to ourselves and to others: Bit by bit, sound bite by sound bite, tweet by tweet, until we are ready to harm ourselves and others. Today, let us take a page from Paul's

book. Let us pray and sing hymns, and get ready for earthquakes that open doors and lead to freedom from every prison of harm and hate. Perhaps there is someone, some group of people, some version of America, to whom we must say, *“Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.”*

Let us gather strength for this call with the prayer our children were teaching Kendra right before her baptism. It’s an open-eyed prayer with which I will end my sermon today:  
*May love and strength be in our hands,  
May love and courage be in our hearts,  
May love and wisdom be in our minds;  
May God be with us, in the work before us.  
Amen.*

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/26/opinion/texas-shooting-hope.html>

<sup>ii</sup> Nadia Bolz-Weber’s sermon titled, “On Freedom,” preached May 18, 2022 at the Festival of Homiletics which addressed the topic of suicide, was the initial inspiration for me to work with this theme in today’s sermon.