

Believe On

In August of 2011, an earthquake shook the east coast. On the day the earthquake struck, I was sitting at the computer in my office when the building began to sway. I stepped into the hallway and asked if anyone else had felt what I had. Other staff members had felt the tremor, but none of us had a clue what had happened. There was a quarry nearby. We had grown accustomed to the booms and shakes that came from there, but this was different. I sat back down at the computer. My newsfeed erupted with updates from friends up and down the east coast. From North Carolina to New York, people posted “Earthquake!” Others wondered aloud, “Who knew we lived on a fault line?” The Washington Monument was damaged by the quake as was the National Cathedral: “The earthquake’s force most strongly affected the pinnacles of the central tower, where stones were literally shaken apart.”¹ Those of us who live thousands of miles away from the San Andreas fault don’t expect an earthquake. We don’t think about living on a fault line.

Our passage from Acts this morning picks up where we left off last week. Paul and Silas and the others have made their way to Philippi, a Roman colony responding to Paul’s vision of a man in Macedonia pleading for help. They have met Lydia, a wealthy merchant who welcomes them into her home following her conversion and baptism. We don’t know how long Paul and the others have been in Philippi, but the text gives the impression that they have been there long enough for the locals to recognize them. On their way to the place of prayer one day, Paul and the others meet a young girl. We don’t know her age; we don’t know her name; all we know is

¹ <http://www.nationalcathedral.org/dcquake/earthquakeFAQ.shtml>

that she is doubly bound—possessed by a spirit and owned by powerful masters. Unlike Lydia, she has no power, no say in her own life, and yet, she sees at least in part who Paul and the others are and gives voice to the good news they offer—repeatedly and annoyingly, too, it seems. We are told that Paul is annoyed by the girl and her persistent calls— “worked over” the phrase reads in Greek.² Paul responds by casting out the demon. We never hear from or about the girl again, but her exorcism serves as the first tremor in the earthquake to come.

The young girl’s owners protest her healing when they recognize that “their hope of making money [is] gone.”³ The language mirrors the exorcism—their hope “goes out” when the demon goes out of the girl.⁴ Their hope is misplaced, this hope in a demon. Their goal is wrong, this goal of profiting from the exploitation of another human being, a child nonetheless.

The owners respond by hauling Paul and the others before the local Roman authorities. They accuse these troublemakers of disturbing the city, of overturning Philippi with their preaching.⁵ The gospel that Paul preaches and lives poses a threat. The gospel rattles the faulty foundations and calls the economy and the entire structure of Philippi into question. The authorities respond by having Paul and Silas beaten and thrown in jail. The description of their imprisonment is extensive. The authorities go to great lengths to contain these men. Paul and Silas’s liberation of one nameless enslaved girl threatens to upend everything the rulers in Philippi represent and shakes the very foundation on which they stand. Before Paul and the others arrive on the scene, I’m pretty sure no one in Philippi recognizes that they live on a fault line. As the tremors begin, they race to nail things back into their rightful, contained, and controlled place.

² As cited by Joe Clifford in his paper for the Well, February 2013, p. 2.

³ Acts 16: 19, NRSV

⁴ Clifford, p.3.

⁵ Clifford, p.3.

Strikingly, we hear nothing from Paul or Silas during what passes for a trial. We hear nothing until midnight, when hymns and prayers rise up from deep within the prison walls. Then scripture tells us:

Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened.⁶

Suddenly, without warning everyone is free to go... and no one goes anywhere. That's not how it normally happens is it? In every prison movie ever made it seems, if an opportunity to escape presents itself, no one hesitates to flee. But freedom arrives for those prisoners long before the ground beneath them shakes. The prison walls do not define Paul or even the other prisoners. Their identity, their salvation, their freedom is not contained by walls of stone. Their identity, their salvation, their freedom is defined by the One who was not contained by a tomb of stone. Their foundation is Jesus Christ, the cornerstone, the solid rock, their living savior and liberator. He is the one foundation who cannot and will not be shaken.

Hope is found in shaken foundations that night. When the prisoners choose to stay instead of flee, the jailer's job is saved and his life is spared. In the rubble, the shaky foundations of the jailer's existence are exposed. The one in charge of the prison discovers that he is in fact the one in chains. He falls at Paul's feet and asks, "What must I do to be saved?" Paul and the others reply, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved." Believe *on*...

Usually we speak of believing *in*. We say it in fact each time we recite the Apostles' Creed: "I believe in God...and in Jesus Christ." It is good and faithful to state clearly in whom we believe, in whom we place our trust, but when the foundations are shaky, it is important to

⁶ Acts 16: 26, NRSV

claim what we believe *on* as well. What do we lean on and depend on when the ground beneath us shakes?

Because you and I know the ground will shake, much as it did this past week in Uvalde and the week before in Buffalo and Laguna Woods, and too many days and weeks before, when we lost beloved siblings to horrific acts of violence. We live on a fault line. No matter how quickly the headlines forget the latest tragedy or move on from the most recent terror, we have come to expect that our world will be rocked. We live in a society that too often and too easily clings to faulty systems built on greed, prestige, control, profit, and power. Not one of those foundations holds—or holds us—when the ground beneath us shakes, when our world begins to crumble in the wake of violence, illness, death, or devastation. In those moments the questions return: What do we believe on? What do we stake our life on? Can it—whatever *it* is—save us?

A few years ago, the world witnessed a horrifying and extreme example of a faulty structure built on greed and on the backs of the powerless, thousands not unlike the young girl in this morning's text. In Bangladesh a building housing five garment factories collapsed on itself while the owner was adding floors on top of an already illegal and unsafe structure. Tragically, it quickly became clear that the disaster could have been averted:

A day before the collapse, an engineer examined cracks in the structure and warned [the owner of the building], as well as owners of the garment factories, that the building was unsafe and should be closed. Instead, workers were told to come to their factories the next morning.⁷

Someone saw the cracks; someone pointed out the flaws, but the lure of profit silenced the call for justice and safety. In the end, miraculously, death did not have the final word. As the death

⁷ http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/11/world/asia/bangladesh-collapse-death-toll.html?pagewanted=2&_r=1&hp

toll climbed above 1000, word came the following week that a woman named Reshma had in fact survived. Rescue teams saw a stick move and then heard a voice cry, “Save me!” A member of the rescue team responded: “We are with you... We will not move...from this place without rescuing you.”⁸ We will not move from this place, this rickety, risky, rubble-filled place until you are safe, until you are free, until you are saved.

When the jailer wakes up to discover the prison doors flung open, his first thoughts are of the system he serves and its expectation that he go along with its work of oppression. When the prison, the symbol of that system falls to pieces, he knows he will be held responsible. Life as he knows it will come to an end, for him and for his household. His world lies in rubble at his feet. And then he hears Paul say, “We are all here.” We who are free will not abandon you.

We do not save ourselves, nor do we believe in or on Jesus Christ all on our own. No one does. Our being saved sets us free from the power of sin and death, yet we are not saved simply to go on our own solitary merry way. Our believing, our being saved inextricably binds us to every other child of God, newly baptized one-year-olds, annoying enslaved girls, and rattled jailers included. On those days when the earthquake comes, when the foundations are shaken, when we find ourselves surrounded by rubble, we need someone to start digging, we need to hear a voice reminding us: “We are with you... We will not move from this place without rescuing you.” That is church. That is the Body of Christ. On other days, we are the ones called to offer good news, called to *be* good news, called to climb in the midst of the rubble, called to start digging, called to give a voice and a face to this Savior who offers us the only reliable foundation, reminding the ones in the rubble: “We are with you... We will not move from this place without rescuing you.” That is church. That is the Body of Christ.

⁸ <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/11/world/asia/bangladesh-collapse-death-toll.html?pagewanted=1&r=1&hp>

This community believes in Jesus Christ and this community believes on Jesus Christ. *He* is our foundation. He is the one who comes to us amid the rubble, the one who continually reminds us: “I am here. I will not move from this place without saving you.”

By the grace of God, may we the church believe on him and be saved;

by the grace of God, may we believe on him and be free;

by the grace of God, may we believe on him and sing;

and by the grace of God, may we the church believe on him

and find the courage to stay in the rubble

until every beloved child of God is saved,

until every beloved child of God is free,

until every beloved child of God can sing, too.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.