

**Acts of the Apostles 16: 16-34****Seventh Sunday of Easter****June 1, 2025****The Rev. Katherine Bush**

Maxine Kumin was a Poet Laureate and Pulitzer Prize winner, and I'm not going to quote any of her poetry in this sermon. In the 1980s and 90s, she was also a professor of poetry and known for requiring her students to memorize thirty or forty lines of poetry each week. This seems an antiquated practice in the world of Google, where we don't have to remember anything, but she insisted upon it for two reasons. The first was to better appreciate sound and form, for these burgeoning writers to be shaped by the best of the craft. "The other reason," she said once in an interview, "as I tell their often stunned faces, is to give them an internal library to draw on when they are taken political prisoner. For many, this is an unthinkable concept; they simply do not believe in anything fervently enough to go to jail for it."

Had she been looking for examples to press her point, Maxine Kumin could have pointed to Paul and Silas. Paul and Silas join the parade of the faithful who discover themselves ensnared in an unjust justice system precisely because of their fervent beliefs. From Joseph, falsely accused by Potiphar's wife, to Mordecai, ensnared by Haman and ultimately rescued by Esther, to so many of the prophets, to, of course, Jesus himself, we witness again and again a way of following God that often leads a person into the crosshairs of those in power. You, like me, might have gotten the idea that being a good, religious person will keep us out of trouble, but the record of scripture suggests that our faithfulness might lead us directly into trouble - good trouble, as John Lewis quipped.

Often, those who believe fervently in the kingdom of God discover that they are at odds with the kingdoms of earth. And in today's story, Paul and Silas take their place in that crowd, not for the first nor the last time, mind you. This time, they have undermined the profiteering of some slave owners, who in turn have leaned on the local authorities to have the two men swept up under a charge of disorderly conduct; they are beaten and arrested. Ms. Kumin's counsel emerges in what follows.

"About midnight, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them." Paul and Silas each had and perhaps shared an internal library to draw upon. The prayers and hymns were there, like a well from which they could draw in their prison. Granted, this sing-along is a small moment in a story with much more dramatic turns, including earthquakes and pre-dawn baptisms and an impromptu feast.

I want to tell you another story about this small moment in the story. It's a little precious: precious in the sense that I treasure it, and also precious in the sense that it might be so sweet that it's saccharine, but trust me. Years ago, I was observing a kindergarten teacher's lesson to her class about this very tale. Now, for starters, teaching the Bible to little ones is both miraculous and precarious work. The stories are beautiful and complex, in ways that our smaller friends both intrinsically understand and can be overwhelmed by. This teacher persevered. The students learned the names of Paul and Silas, they grasped that the two men had found themselves unfairly locked away, and then, as she told them that Paul and Silas began to sing, she asked her kindergarteners what songs they could sing in a time of trouble. In a moment that still brings me up short, without any pause, these pint-sized sopranos began spontaneously singing *Surely the presence of the Lord is*

*in this place* ... the song which opens their weekly Chapel, they knew it well. At five and six years old, they already had a shelf of resources in their internal library.

To be sure, this story from Acts is full of other teachable moments and also replete with strange occurrences. I suppose we could have wondered together for some time about the prophecy of the slave girl or about that earthquake that unlocks chains but leaves buildings safely upright. Or perhaps you noticed the tender order of events in which the jailer tends to their wounds before his baptism.

Still, I keep coming back to this small moment, which shakes me. "About midnight, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them." Though much like Ms. Kumin's students, I find myself discounting the idea that I might ever be a political prisoner, I wonder what would sustain me in that dark night? What stories or poems would emerge from my internal library? And if not in a jail cell, then in the other dark watches of illness or despair, or of the trap of spiraling worry. I have known those who were locked up inside the walls of dementia, who seemed not to know their own beloved ones, who yet joined in the Lord's Prayer or a few bars of a favorite hymn. You see, we all have such libraries, deep resources stored inside us.

We don't know which prayer or what songs came forth from Silas and from Paul. We do know that the other prisoners were drawn like moths to the light of something beautiful in that innermost cell. Their fervent belief had brought them to that place where they were beaten, flogged, locked away, fastened in stocks. And their fervent belief provided a treasure trove of sustaining hope. Maybe it was a chant from their countless days in the Temple, or words of prophetic witness learned by heart as scribe and pharisee.

We learn both by intention and by osmosis. We might choose or be assigned something beautiful to memorize, like thirty or forty lines of poetry a week. And we also steep in the patterns of sound and story all around us. Consider the songs that were playing when you were in high school, how those tunes and lyrics are embedded along with the feelings they parallel. And give a moment of thanks for the repetition of liturgy, how strange, even arcane, words trip off your tongue after years of weekly practice.

In April, for National Poetry Month, the New York Times challenged its readers to memorize a poem. In the introduction to the project, the editors suggested that "learning [something] by heart doesn't have to be drudgery. It can be a way of holding onto something beautiful ... [words] recited under your breath or in your head can soothe your nerves, drive away the noise of everyday life or grant a moment of simple happiness." Silas and Paul would probably push back on the bit about under your breath or in your head, because it turns out our prayers and hymns can comfort and inspire those around us who are also trapped in despair.

Silas and Paul would have also pushed back on that idea that our faithfulness will safeguard us from suffering, countering the idea that faithfulness should or will keep you and me out of trouble with the authorities. In this, they join a stream of stories from Joseph in Egypt to fervent and faithful protesters today. Ms. Kumin's students may have been surprised by her proclamation that they would need some inner well for the days of trouble ahead, but even kindergartners know that a song can carry us through.

And if it's not too late at this point in the sermon to mention the Gospel, might I suggest that cultivating an internal library is one of the ways that we are one: Christ in us and we in him, and one with one another. Drawing from the stories of how God's love propelled Christ and his fervent believers into the world and propels us still, carrying and carried by the prayers and hymns we know by heart.