

Sword of Despair

May 16, 2010

(Easter 7 – Year C)

Acts 16: 16-34

St. Alban's Episcopal Church, Waco, Texas

Alleluia! Christ is risen!
The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Please be seated

Every morning, I do read the Waco Tribune-Herald newspaper.
I must admit that I don't read every article, but skim the paper to get the latest on what is happening in our fair city.
And I rarely get past the front section and the sports page.

But last Thursday morning, for some reason, I did read the advice column called Dear Abby.

The headline for the column was:

“Man's shame over infidelity prompts thoughts of suicide.”

This man's letter to Dear Abby tells about his marriage to his wife and his long history of affairs with other women.

This is how this man concludes his letter to Dear Abby:

“My last affair ended publicly with every gory detail exposed.

Friends, family and co-workers now shun me.

I have hit rock bottom.

If you have a hopeful solution, please share it.

Otherwise, please print this as a warning to other men like me that when they hit bottom - as will surely happen - there's nowhere to turn.

I want to end my life.

Signed: Shattered in Louisiana”

Shattered in Louisiana is not the only suicidal person to have ever hit rock bottom.

In the Book of Acts, we also hear a heart-wrenching story of another suicidal man who has hit rock bottom and who wants to end his life.

You see, after Lydia, the powerful seller of purple cloth, is baptized in Philippi,
A slave girl with magical powers is then converted.
Then the Apostle Paul and Silas are put in jail and they sing hymns all night long.

Suddenly there is an earthquake in the jail and the prison doors are opened and the chains on the prisoners fall off.
When the jailer wakes up, he sees that the prison doors are wide open. The jailer assumes that his prisoners have escaped, which means that he is in deep, deep trouble.
Certainly the prison guard will lose his job and be severely punished for his negligence in leaving the prison doors open.

Thinking that his life is over, the jailer pulls out his sword in order to kill himself.

However, just before the prison guard puts the sword into his own heart, the Apostle Paul calls out with a voice of rescue, yelling:

“Stop!
Don’t kill yourself!
All of us prisoners are still here.”

The poor suicidal jailer falls down at the Apostle Paul and Silas’ feet and asks them,

“What must I do to be saved?
What must I do to be rescued from rock bottom?”

And Paul’s answer is:

“Believe on the Lord Jesus - and you will be saved, you will be rescued.”

The adulterous man who wrote into Dear Abby last Thursday was suicidal and in desperate need of rescue.

And the prison guard in Philippi, whose jailhouse doors flung wide open to free Paul and Silas, he was suicidal and in desperate need of rescue, as well.

And all of us, at some time or other in other lives, feel that we have hit rock bottom - sometimes even having suicidal thoughts ourselves.

According to the National Institute on Mental Health, suicide is the 7th leading cause of death among men.

Suicide is the 3rd highest cause of death among young people.

And up to 25 times as many people attempt suicide as die from it, pulling out the sword on themselves, like the Philippian jailer did.

My family, as well as many of your families, has been touched by the tragedy of suicide.

The National Institute on Mental Health also reports that, contrary to popular belief, suicide is not an ill-fated bid to get attention.

Suicide, the taking of one's own life, is a tragic and violent reaction to a sense of hopelessness.

Suicide is a complex reaction to extreme stress, when people feel as if they have hit rock bottom and have no where else to turn for rescue and salvation.

In the Book of Acts, the jailer almost commits suicide by turning his sword onto himself.

But his suicide attempt is thwarted when Paul yells out:

“Don't kill yourself!

Instead, believe on the Lord Jesus!”

Now I don't think that a belief in Jesus is a good luck charm.

But I do believe that, when we are at rock bottom, a belief and a faith in Jesus Christ offers us two things:

A belief in Jesus Christ gives us:

A Community and a Cross.

When we cry out in desperation, like the prison guard in Philippi did, We have a community on which to turn for help.

The National Institute of Mental Health also reports that the greatest thing that you can do for someone who is suicidal is to not leave them alone.

As Christians, we pledge to each other, at every Baptism, that we will not leave each other alone when we hit rock bottom.

I believe that every single person in this church today will be here for you, no matter what.

Whether you are drunk or suicidal or adulterous or sick – we will be here for you.

Belief in Jesus Christ gives us a community of friends, the Body of Christ on this earth, where we can turn for help.

Secondly, a belief in Jesus Christ also gives us a Cross - and likewise, a Resurrection.

When the going gets tough and we feel like we are at the end of our rope, our God knows exactly how we feel.

We can look to the Cross of Jesus Christ and know that our Lord and Savior also reached the end of his rope, he hit rock bottom, as he was killed on the most shameful instrument of death in the Roman world.

God stands with us in the moments of our cross.

And then, not immediately, but after three days in a tomb of sorrow, there is resurrection.

There is a new day.

There is a new heaven and a new earth that we are promised.

For belief in Jesus gives us the gift of a Cross - and the hope of Resurrection.

In the Book of Psalms, Psalm 69 to be exact, the singer moans out in anguish:

“Save me, O God, for the waters have risen up to my neck.

I am sinking in deep mire, and there is no firm ground for my feet.”

From the most ancient of days in the Book of Psalms to the Book of Acts to the Letters to Dear Abby, men and women find themselves in waters that have risen up to their neck.

Men and women find themselves sinking in deep mire and with a sword ready to turn on themselves.

Men and women find themselves caught in a web of toxic relationships and in debt up to their eyeballs and in unbearable pain and nausea from chemo treatments.

Men and women find themselves sometimes just having a plain 'ole crummy day.

And the Apostle Peter yells out to us:
“Believe in the Lord Jesus!”

Believe in the Lord Jesus, not as a good-luck charm that will solve all your problems.

But believe in the Lord Jesus and the community of his family.

Believe in the Lord Jesus and his cross and resurrection.

Put down the sword of despair that you have drawn upon yourself – and believe.

AMEN.

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