

Sermon, May 10, 2026
"Prison Break!!"
Sixth Sunday of Easter
St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Wilton, Maine

Just the other day, Karen and I finished watching a new eight-episode version of "The Count of Monte Cristo", the classic novel written by Alexandre Dumas in 1846. While the majority of the story focuses on the desire for and implementation of an elaborate plan for revenge, what led to that revenge was the false imprisonment of the story's protagonist in one of the worst prisons in history, Chateau d'If. The Count spent 15 years in the most deplorable of conditions, and was saved by an elderly priest who tunneled over from the next cell, giving him reason to continue finding hope and keep living, and eventually the means of his escape.

Escape movies are a combination of adventure and suspense that create an entertaining movie going experience. They offer us immense excitement, yet challenge us by causing just the right amount of anxiety. Want to escape from a POW camp? How about "The Great Escape" or "Stalag 17"? Escape from prison? "The Shawshank Redemption" or "Escape from Alcatraz". Get away from reality for a day? "Ferris Bueller's Day Off". Animals want to get in on the action too. Want to root for some animals trying to escape being made into chicken pot pies? "Chicken Run".

Now I don't see anyone out there wearing an orange jumpsuit or even the old-fashioned prison stripes. I'm guessing most if not all have never been in jail or prison. But perhaps your mind goes back to our years of isolation during the pandemic or even an extended illness or injury when we felt imprisoned.

Our epistles this Easter season have been from the First Letter of Peter and today's verses deal with where Jesus went immediately after the crucifixion, labeled as "The Harrowing of Hell". It refers to the very first great escape story: Noah, Mrs. Noah, the kids and all the animals who are the only ones to escape the Great Flood.

Frederick Buechner writes that *after the crucifixion, Jesus went and preached to "the spirits in prison, who formerly did not obey", and it's not altogether clear just what spirits he had in mind. Later on, however, he is not obscure at all. "The gospel was preached even to the dead," he says, "that though judged in the flesh like men, they might live in the spirit like God"*

"He descended into hell," is the way the Apostles' Creed puts it, of course. It has an almost blasphemous thud to it, sandwiched there between the muffled drums of "was crucified, dead, and buried" and the trumpet blast of "the third day he rose again from the dead." Christ of all

people, in hell of all places! It strains the imagination to picture it, the Light of the World making his way through the terrible dark to save whatever ones he can. Yet in view of what he'd seen of the world during his last few days in the thick of it, maybe the transition wasn't as hard as you might think.

The fancifulness of the picture gives way to what seems, the more you turn it over in your mind, the inevitability of it. Of course that is where he would have gone. Of course that is what he would have done. Christ is always descending and redescending into hell.

And what happens when Christ gets there? Prison break!! A few weeks ago in our Adult Discussion time after coffee hour, we began studying the book "Resurrecting Easter"; we've begun to look at early Christian art of the Universal Resurrection, not just the individual resurrection of Jesus rising from the dead but going down into Hades and breaking the doors free and pulling out Adam, Eve and all of humanity into a life of freedom and eternal life. It's a marvelous image and it's one which gives us hope at this time.

Remember in Noah's story that, given he had built the ark, it was the water that saved him, that kept him afloat in the ark. And in the Easter season, it is the water of our baptisms that saves us. In drawing on the story of Noah, Peter wants to assure his readers that they are indeed the church, a new ark rising and falling with the waters of adversity, yet proceeding toward the day of peace when the chaos around them would recede and a new world would be established. No people have been excluded from God's saving grace—not even the dead. All through time, God has sought to make salvation available.

Does our country need a prison break at this time? This year the US will spend \$46 billion building ICE detention centers, planning for 100,000 beds by the end of the year, 74% of those people have no criminal record. And the inhuman conditions of those prisons rival that of Chateau d'If.

But they are not the only ones suffering today. There are the psychological prisons of our current times. I turn on the news in fear of what I will hear next. I can't feel the same about our flag, our nation, the people of our nation without feeling some measure of revulsion, and a large measure of alienation, to use the title of Robert Heinlein's novel, "A Stranger in a Strange Land". And to us in either physical or psychological prisons, Peter counsels a very different response to persecution. Rather than focusing on our persecutors and being overwhelmed by fear and hatred, keep your eyes on Christ."

Judith Jones reminds us that those to whom the first letter of Peter was written faced similar times. They had committed no crime, but their witness to Christ's love and their determination to dedicate themselves to Christ's service made them the constant targets of those who served the Roman empire and hailed Caesar as Lord. Despite their innocence, they lived in fear of the authorities who controlled their world.

She continues in words she wrote in 2015:

Although we do not live in a world dominated by Rome, we still know the feeling that our lives are subject to forces beyond our control. Many faithful Christians in the U.S. are stopped and searched simply because of their skin color or the way they are dressed, even though they have done nothing wrong. If those of us who do not experience such prejudice on a daily basis try to identify with the people in our society who live under a constant shadow of suspicion, we may end up being treated just as they are. If we protest against police brutality, we may be arrested. If we express our concern for human rights or for God's creation by participating in non-violent protests, we may face legal consequences or find it difficult to get a job. Few among us live under the threat of death, but if we seek to live out our faith in the world, we may indeed encounter systems that oppose our witness and cause us to suffer.

For us, just as for the first-century Christians to whom the author of 1 Peter was writing, today's passage speaks an important word. No government, corporation, or employer is ultimate. No oppressive system is greater than the power of God. If we suffer because we work for justice, if we are publicly shamed for doing what is right, we can be sure that our lives are in God's hands, and God will have the last word. Christ walks with us in our suffering. Christ has already won the victory. Our task is to remain faithful and wait for God's triumph to be revealed to the world.

Prison break??? I pray for it.