Singing a Song of Hope

St. John's Sermon | Seventh Sunday of Easter, 6.1.25

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Good morning, and welcome. Some of you may recognize me, and some of you may not — though chances are you've at least received emails from me, as I used to serve as the Communications Coordinator here. I'm so grateful that job introduced me to the wonderful community here at St. John's.

Surprise, I'm also ordained! Over the years, I've served in a variety of ministries, but these days my primary focus is pursuing a Ph.D. in Practical Theology.

So it is truly a joy and an honor to worship with you this seventh Sunday of Easter — a season that asks, *now what?* How do we hold hope and live into resurrection life? It feels like a bold question to ask in times like these (gestures) — though, as we'll see, the disciples faced no shortage of challenges either.

Let me tell you a story…. It was a cold day in February. Deep in Georgia, a team was getting ready. Their tools were prepared, their documents in order --- they were ready to administer a lethal injection to a death row inmate named Kelly Gissendaner. After years of appeals, the date had finally been set. Kelly was provided with her last meal.

Outside the prison walls, huddled at the immediate gates and gathered across the country, people lifted cries of hope to God. Theologians and legal experts, activists and family members, praying for something, anything, to change. I myself was a theology student in Atlanta at the time, lighting a candle at my desk, feeling, if I'm honest, somewhat resigned.
And then the earthquake came. Okay, this time wasn't an earthquake. But, it was a snowstorm. They couldn't transfer Kelly to the prepared location. The execution was stayed.

So, 2000 years before, in Phillipi, Paul and Silas are going about their business, heading to the place of prayer, when they decide to interrupt the local economic system in favor of liberation. You know, casual disciple stuff.

They cast out a spirit from a young girl, freeing her from a form of bondage where her voice and body were not her own. In doing so, they also free her from enslavement to her owners, because her fortune-telling skill is gone.

And Scripture says, the owners become enraged *when they see their hope of making money was gone*.

For daring to disrupt the flow of money, Paul and Silas are seized and brought to a public trial. This does not go well for them. It's not really a fair trial after all. After a brutal beating, Paul and Silas are put in the innermost cell with stocks on their feet. It's the middle of the night. It must seem very very bleak.

Back to 2015. Let me tell you a little about Kelly Gissendaner.

18 years before, Kelly had arranged for the murder of her husband, Doug. Even though she didn't commit it herself, the crime was terrible.

While in prison, Kelly entered a theological study program. A subversive warden overlooked the high-security restrictions and allowed Kelly to participate.

Over time, she was completely transformed by the love of God. Without making excuses, Kelly became deeply repentant of her crime. Kelly reconciled with her children. Kelly became a true theologian, proclaiming through both her writing and her life that no one is beyond God's redemption. She became penpals with Jurgen Moltmann, a German theologian who had been behind bars as a prisoner of war, where he also came to know Christ. He wrote profoundly on suffering and a theology of hope. Moltmann even came to speak at her theology program graduation!

Kelly wrote a devotional, so let me share some of her own words…

> In the preface to the devotional, Kelly speaks directly of this desire: "I hope the words on the pages that follow touch you, teach you, and open your eyes to a new way of looking at God and a prisoner."
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> > Over the course of the Certificate in Theological Studies Program and through much reading and studying, I've learned that the Bible is not a book of saints, but of sinners and prisoners. God's word is full of very real women and men; it tells of their failures, struggles, and sorrows. But it is also a story of their victories—won through the power of the God of Israel revealed in Jesus the Christ. . . .
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> > As I began to read the Bible, I discovered that it was full of people like me; who had made big mistakes, caused a lot of pain, had been forgiven and healed. After I committed my life to Christ, (for real this time!), I saw the same healing process slowly take place in me. I had been bruised and battered inside. Have you? Jesus Christ restored me; I am no longer bent on destruction, but filled with new life and love.

Kelly was often kept in a secluded cell --- similar to Paul and Silas. When other women in distress were placed on lockdown near her cell, Kelly was able to counsel them through the air vents. Some women even credit her with keeping them from suicide.

She spoke to them of the hope she found in Christ and encouraged them to stay alive when all seemed bleak.

Paul and Silas, beaten, wearing chains, in prison do not break down but *begin to sing.* They pray and sing songs to God, and all the other prisoners hear them.

I don't know what they sang… but let's imagine…. They're meditating on a Taize chant like how we opened today. Perhaps, they're bursting out *We Shall Overcome*... Yes, those would be a bit anachronistic. It's just to get our brains moving. What is the song we sing when the world seems bleak?

We *could* imagine they were singing today's psalm…

> *For you are the Lord, most high over all the earth; * you are exalted far above all gods. The Lord loves those who hate evil; * he preserves the lives of his saints and delivers them from the hand of the wicked.*

A song of praise, a song of deliverance, a song of liberation and hope. HOPE - at least the way Moltmann and Kelly understood it - is acknowledging God's promise of justice and healing for the world and resolving to live *into* that future. A song that proclaims God's world could be different than the current reality.

We all need a song to sing when life seems bleak. A song to sing when political despair seems hard to escape or when our personal life is falling apart. A song to sing while genocide in Gaza continues. A song to sing when a police officer commits murder in our city. A song to sing when climate change knocks on our door.

It doesn't *literally* need to be a song. What is the breath prayer, or silent walk around the block, or the poem you read on repeat? What practice feeds your soul in the struggle for justice? What grounds you in God's abundant love? Where do you draw spiritual sustenance to keep imagining God's kin-dom on earth as it is in heaven?
This type of hope is different from naive optimism. It is a hope that acknowledges reality but refuses to give over entirely to despair.

Despair in the face of resistance is by design - powers and principalities want to wear us down. As Cole Arthur Riley, the author of Black Liturgies, reminds us, “Resistance is not a solitary endeavor. It only surfaces in the arms of the collective.”

And maybe - today - you can’t sing that song yourself. You can’t pray because your own pain is too heavy. But you are sitting *here*, in a community of song and prayer. And we sing together. We pray together.

Kelly did not resist alone. She was transformed by the power of a community that dared to believe women in prison were capable of theological thought *and* deserved to live despite their crimes.

A groundswell of support emerged for Kelly in a nationwide campaign for her clemency. We protested outside, we delivered truckloads of letters to the Georgia governor, we held vigil and sang our prayers. The Pope wrote a letter of support. Once more, the prison prepared for her execution. Once more, it was stayed. This time, allegedly, for cloudy drugs.

One of Kelly’s friends on the inside, Carla J Simmons, wrote this… “The drugs may have been cloudy and the ice storm impassable, but it was obvious that politics were also at play. The state was hesitant to commit, as the world watched Georgia… Many saw the delays as divine interventions. I saw an evil, relentless system challenged by a body united for a cause. The protests and the international attention generated by Kelly's life were a spike in the spoke of the carceral machine. It meant that there was enough force in the love for human life to jam up the demand for Kelly's death. There was God in the power of the people.”

The state waited a few more months before scheduling another execution date. They let the public fervor quiet down. They refused clemency again. On September 30, 2015, the State of Georgia executed Kelly - *while she sang Amazing Grace.*

In those final, bleakest moments, Kelly did not let death have the final word. She held onto grace and hope.

I can only imagine what it was like for *that* jailor. Those lawyers in the room. Those officers. Those journalists. As people watched our tax dollars snuff out a transformed and vibrant life, Kelly sang of grace. Kelly sang praises to the God who set her free.

This was not the ending to Kelly’s story that any of us wanted.

It's not the ending that people behind bars hope for. The prison system continues to be brutal for the 2,100 people currently on death row and the 1.8 million people imprisoned in our country. 1.8 million of people's siblings, parents, and children. 1.8 million of God's beloved ones.

And, if we can hold the tensions of hope here…we trust this was *not the whole ending*. Kelly's life is a resistance to this death-dealing system. A life that has ripple effects of transformation.

Kelly's story is not one "deserving" individual finding God. It was a testimony to God's power against the systems that cause despair. It was a contrast to the destructive forces of the prison industrial complex because a whole community of people rose up and said, people deserve life.

In today's passage from Revelation we hear that Jesus is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. We are still living out the story of God - the ending is not yet here. *Jesus'*s ending is resurrection life, it is hope beyond what we see. It is disrupting oppressive economic systems, it is freeing the prisoners, it is unexpected hospitality. It is a ceasefire we still long for, it is a planet healed. It is a melody of liberation that continues to reverberate.

It is resurrection hope, that like Kelly, we can keep singing together even when change seems impossible.

In today's Gospel passage, Jesus prays for the disciples. He asks "that the world may know that you have sent me and you have loved them even as you have loved me."

At the end of Acts, the jailor comes to know that God loves him and his household through the faithfulness of the disciples. The jailor receives this love - and responds by tending to their wounds and welcoming them into his home for a meal.

Paul and Silas embody the hope of Jesus' prayer. That those who do not know God - indeed, someone who is *perpetuating* an unjust system - might see a different way of living, and become transformed. That a life of bondage might turn into a life of liberation.

We know that Kelly's way of living while she was imprisoned changed lives. That many people came to know that God loved them, that they were more than their prison sentence or more than their prison job.

There are ripples of transformation from Kelly's song of grace. We hold grief for her execution and for those currently imprisoned. *And*, we hold resurrection hope that something more is happening. That jailors become hosts. That prisoners become theologians. That the death penalty will be abolished. That the prison system will be transformed.

The world is not as we want it to be. Christ, have mercy.

And yet, let us keep singing. Let us hold hope, let us practice resurrection joy, let us always sing a song of liberation.