

Podcast Transcript

April 24, 2022

Easter 2C (Mutual Interest Series)

Scripture: Acts 5: 27-32

Mutual Interest: No Prisons Post-Resurrection

<<Music:

“Building Up a New World,”

1st verse, fade out under opening sentence.>>

<<“We are building up a new world, builders must be strong.”>>

Intro:

Welcome, friends, to *The Word Is Resistance*, a podcast of Showing Up for Racial Justice, or SURJ. This is the podcast where we explore the weekly Christian scripture readings with an eye toward racial justice and collective liberation.

My name is Nichola Torbett. I use she/her pronouns, and I’m recording this at my home, which is on the ancestral and unceded homelands of the Ohlone people in what is now known as Oakland, California.

As many of you know, this podcast is aimed at white Christians like me who want to respond to the call to dismantle white supremacy. We recognize that as white Christians, we have our own particular work to do - that it is our responsibility to learn how to resist the forces of white Christian supremacy from which we’ve benefitted and with which we are otherwise complicit. We are seeking to find and uproot white supremacy wherever it shows up, including in our own Christian tradition. And from there, we are seeking to follow the leadership of people of color as we build up a new, more joyful, more just world.

We are building up a new world.

That’s also the song you are hearing throughout this podcast. This live recording of Dr. Vincent Harding’s song for the freedom movement is of a multi-racial “movement choir practice” in Denver, CO in December 2014, being led by Minister Daryl J. Walker. We are deeply grateful to the Freeney-Harding family for letting us use the song for this podcast.

It’s the second Sunday of the Easter season. The first Sunday gets all the hoopla, but we actually get SEVEN Sundays of Eastertide, which always feels like a really good thing to me, because, frankly, resurrection is confusing. The tradition has been handed down to us as a joyful

celebration, and there is nothing wrong with that, but as far as I can tell, the actual experience of Easter for the disciples was pretty darned disorienting. I mean, their beloved teacher and friend is gone, except that...he's...not? He's here? But not like before? They're not supposed to hold onto him—there is no comforting hug or arm around the shoulder like before—but he does keep popping up, often not immediately recognizable, and then he disappears again. And that's not even to begin to talk about what this all means for everything they, and we, thought we understood about life and death, what is possible and what is not. It's confusing! So we get seven Sundays, if not to figure it out, which might be impossible, at least to try to adjust.

Here at *The Word Is Resistance*, this year, we've decided to focus our Easter episodes on the lectionary passages from the Book of Acts, and specifically, to explore what those scriptures have to teach us about what we call “mutual interest”—in other words, what our own stakes are in the work of dismantling white supremacy and every oppressive system. We'll be looking at the early (and very *Jewish*) Jesus movement, looking for what made it so compelling to Gentiles. How did they see the connections between their own struggles and a movement that was, at least initially, about the liberation of Jewish people from colonial occupation *by Gentiles*? What can we extrapolate about our shared interest, as white people, in dismantling white supremacy? If we are going to stay in this fight for the long haul, we need to get clear about why we are in it and what we have to gain. We'll also be looking for the ways folks *failed* to understand their shared interest and how that led to more oppression, including a lot of antisemitism that shows up in these texts. We hope you'll join us for the whole series as we deepen our understanding of how we can all get free together.

This week, we're in Acts, chapter 5. Let's jump in.

<<timestamp 4:36 >>

<<Music interlude, verse 1 of “Building Up a New World.”>>

<<“We are building up a new world, builders must be strong.”>>

This week, we catch up with the early apostles at a time when they've been getting in trouble with the law for healing, preaching, and teaching about this guy, Jesus, the same activist and organizer whose radical liberation message Rome had done its best to neutralize by assassinating him. The apostles have been arrested, held in jail, questioned by official authorities, warned to stop invoking Jesus' name, released for fear of further inciting their movement comrades, empowered by the Holy Spirit to *keep* spreading the Jesus movement, arrested *again*, jailed, freed by an “angel of the Lord,” and then recaptured from the temple where they were once again preaching, teaching, and healing in the name of Jesus. That's where this week's passage picks up. Here's Acts 5: 27-32:

27 When they had brought them, they had them stand before the council. The high priest questioned them, 28 saying, “We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name,[a] yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man’s blood on us.”

29 But Peter and the apostles answered, “We must obey God rather than any human authority.[b] 30 The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. 31 God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. 32 And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him.”

That’s how Luke tells the story. The Book of Acts was written by Luke, a Gentile, and we get the story through his lens *as a Gentile*, and if you read this version without a lot of context, you might think the tension here is between Jewish orthodoxy and a new upstart religion. That’s often the way the Book of Acts gets taught, with the apostles representing a persecuted and heroic Christianity counterposed with a rigid and controlling Judaism. You might even believe the propaganda, the fake news, that Jewish authorities killed Jesus. Luke writes it that way, puts those words in Peter’s mouth: “whom you killed by hanging him on the cross!” But that is not true! Jesus was crucified not by Jewish authorities but by Rome. Luke gets it wrong. He puts the blame in the wrong place.

And this is what imperial power relies upon—that we put the blame in the wrong place. Rome and Rome’s present day proxies, which we might name as global capitalism, or white supremacy, which serves capital, or white supremacist cis-heteropatriarchal capitalism—these imperial oppressive powers and those who profit from them maintain their dominance by encouraging us to blame each other for our suffering rather than looking UP and noticing the systems that are harming us all. “Don’t look up,” right?

In the face of a repressive regime, subgroups of those facing repression are pitted against one another. In our context, that means poor white people are pitted against poor BIPOC people. Working class citizens of the United States are pitted against immigrants. Heterosexual people are led to believe that same-sex unions threaten their marriages because they can’t name the ways that heteropatriarchy disfigures mutual love. A friend and I have been talking recently about bi-phobia within queer community: The problem is not people who are bisexual and in relationships that carry straight privilege, but the (patriarchy-serving) heteronormativity that confers that privilege. We put the blame in the wrong place. Likewise, antisemitism blames Jewish people for economic inequality and serves to distract from the larger economic systems that actually generate that inequality.

And Luke's words here in Acts 5 have bolstered that antisemitism by spreading the fake news about who killed Jesus. Why did Luke do that? Did his own divided loyalties—as a Gentile and likely a citizen of Rome—make him confused about the real power dynamics at play? Or was he *afraid* to name the real enemy of the people, Rome, for fear of repercussions? Or, maybe most likely, did the fear *make* him confused? I am reminded of what I once heard adrienne mares brown say about white people working to dismantle white supremacy, that, in her words, “when we meet...even a well-meaning white person..., we know deep down that this person has been socialized into a very deep cowardice that is very hard to overcome.” I think it is likely that Luke intended to be faithful in telling this story, that he did not mean to put dangerous words in Peter's mouth, but that fear got the better of him, maybe unconsciously. It's something to watch out for. Our fear, conscious or not, can make us dangerous to other vulnerable people. Then and now, the state is powerful, and one of the ways it expresses its power is by punishing those who challenge its abuses.

<<timestamp 10:45>>

<<Music interlude, verse 2 of “Building Up a New World.”>>

<<“We are building up a new world, builders must be strong.”>>

If the stories in Acts are true, Peter and the other apostles become intimately acquainted with the penal system within Roman-occupied Palestine. They are repeatedly arrested, imprisoned, tried, flogged, imprisoned again.... Why are they so violently and persistently surveilled, policed and punished for talking about Jesus, and what does this mean for us?

The apostles are not incarcerated for starting a new religion. There was no Christianity at this time, and there is no evidence that Peter and friends intended to start a new religion. They were, at this point, Jews struggling to understand and articulate what had happened during their time with Jesus, whom they understood as a Jewish messiah. Nor were the Jewish authorities persecuting Jesus-followers because they were challenging Jewish orthodoxy, *per se*. The key to why the Sanhedrin feels they must do something about the apostles who are teaching about Jesus lies in this phrase from the passage we read: “You are determined to bring this man's blood on us!” That's the NRSV translation, and it really gets at the heart of the matter. The danger perceived by the Sanhedrin is that the activities of the Jesus-proclaimers was going to bring the violence of Rome—the same violence that crucified Jesus—down on the Jewish people as a whole. The high priest, Caiaphas, is quoted in the gospel of John as saying, “it is better to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.” He is trying to safeguard his people from the violence of Rome.

Oppressive powers pit people against one another through threat of violence. That was the whole point of crucifixion—to make an example of anyone who threatened Rome's power and to

broadcast a warning to everyone else lest they do the same. Then, as now, the carceral system serves to maintain existing power structures.

Mass incarceration function similarly in our time and place. Under the guise of public safety, the prison industrial complex serves capital in all kinds of ways— through contracts with for-profit prisons, private contractors who build and serve both private and public prisons, and countless other private interests who profit from incarceration. It also serves as a warning, a threat, to anyone who might interfere with the smooth functioning of capitalist systems.

We see that really clearly here in Oakland, which has one of the ten largest container ports in the country. Huge barges bring consumer goods from all over the world into the Bay and leave carrying American goods to be sold elsewhere. After more than 75,000 residents showed up to shut down that port for 36 hours during the Occupy movement, big business, developers, police, and a largely pro-business city council drafted an ordinance allowing police to use, and I quote, “all necessary force” to keep the port open. You do not mess with the flow of capital. If you do, the full force of the carceral system will be mobilized against you.

I am not an expert on the ins and outs of the prison industrial complex, but I found myself studying up as I worked on this episode for you all. I’ll link to some really helpful resources in the transcript. One of them is an account out of Atlanta of how police, private interests, media and the local government worked together to push through plans for a large, expensive new police training center, against massive public opposition, right in the middle one of Atlanta’s treasured green spaces. Author and organizer Micah Herskind explains how the term “prison industrial complex” was first theorized by radical thinkers like Angela Davis and Mike Davis and also has roots in the struggles of incarcerated people, for example, in the North Carolina Prisoners Labor Union in the 1970s. The sinister brilliance of an industrial complex is that, in Herskind’s words, it “disguises infrastructures of mass misery...as seemingly inevitable facts of life.” The PIC is comprised of corporations, politicians spouting tough-on-crime messaging, unions of police and prison guards, nonprofits, banks, media, governmental entities, and more.

In other words, the prison industrial complex is an example of how “mutual interest” is used among self-seeking entities to profit materially and politically from the suffering of people—mostly Black, Brown, and poor people—who are targeted, harassed, and imprisoned at staggering rates.

How is it in *our* mutual interest to dismantle the prison industrial complex as one pillar of white supremacy? At SURJ, we are convinced that white supremacy and all its manifestations eventually harm all of us, even if they harm us very differently depending on how we are positioned. While mass incarceration targets Black and Brown people disproportionately, it

impacts all of us, shapes our culture in ways that are largely invisible, and, I would argue, actively works against resurrection life.

Some of us have been to prison and know the dehumanizing realities of that system from the inside out. White people are not immune to incarceration, especially poor white people. Maybe you yourself, or your family members, have done time as a result of decisions shaped by the realities of a society as dysfunctional as this one, with eroded familial and community supports.

Maybe you have been jailed, or even imprisoned, as a result of political resistance. Maybe you've heard about Jessica Reznicek, the Catholic worker who is currently serving time for resisting the Dakota Access Pipeline; a "terrorist enhancement" was added to her sentence because she directly interfered with the flow of oil, or the flow of capital, in order to protect the flow of water that we need to survive. The prison industrial complex is deeply entwined with efforts to suppress dissent and criminalize protest.

Maybe you or someone you love has wanted to make amends for something they did but could not because of the risk of incarceration, especially if they were not white, or were poor, or were queer or trans or nonbinary. The prison industrial complex actively works against accountability, substituting instead the fantasy of punishment that rarely if ever results in real restoration.

Maybe you or someone you love has been endangered as a sex worker and been unable to seek help for fear of legal repercussions.

Maybe you or someone you love has experienced child abuse or intimate partner violence and had to choose between sending someone they love to prison or forgoing their own safety. The prison system drives these forms of intimate violence underground, where they become even more dangerous. Many survivors of domestic violence have themselves been incarcerated for trying to defend themselves against harm, a tragedy that is being unmasked by the #SurvivedAndPunished movement.

Maybe you or someone you love has been 5150'd, held against their will in a psychiatric facility for being queer or transgender or fat or angry or despairing of this world as it is. Psychiatric diagnoses and institutions are intimately connected to policing and punishment. The first mental institution was opened by Quakers in Philadelphia. It was housed in a basement and featured shackles on the walls. More than 350 Native Americans were detained at the Canton Indian Insane Asylum, many of them for resisting removal from their land or otherwise interfering with government or business activities. At least 121 inmates died while in custody.

As in first century Palestine, incarceration was used to protect a violent and unjust status quo.

The policing, prison, and punishment systems promise safety but protect property and private acquisition of wealth.

What's more, the prison industrial complex has thoroughly reshaped our society around punishment and disposability. Anyone who is too difficult to deal with will have to be disposed of. This affects every aspect of our lives, including the culture of our movements. At this point, it is difficult for us to think through solutions to even interpersonal problems without resorting to exclusion, shunning, excommunication, and other forms of punishment, and these almost never lead to healthy accountability and real change that reduces the incidence of harm. They just move the harm to another community or location or drive it into secret places.

The prison industrial complex and our semi-conscious imitations of it...they all but eliminate the possibility of resurrection life, which would manifest in healthy communities working for mutual thriving.

But! Peter and the apostles offer us a bold alternative in this passage—a reliance on God and not on the state for protection. What would it take for us to transfer our loyalty away from reliance on the state, which on the surface appears to work for us as white people, at least mostly, at least for now, at least if we don't speak up, at least if we don't resist, at least if we don't make a mistake that gets us cast out of community, at least if we don't care about real deep lasting relationship...?

What would it take for us to rely instead on God, knowing that the state, that oppressive power structures, will continue to do what they do until we face them down?

To me it is telling that the apostle's resistance to the carceral state comes after they receive the Holy Spirit. This story comes after the Pentecost moment when the Spirit descends and emboldens the apostles to speak out and to love each other across lines of difference. May we catch that Spirit and be likewise emboldened. And may the prison walls come down.

Amen.

<<Timestamp: 23:12>>

<<Music interlude, verse 3 of "Building Up a New World.">>

<<"Courage, people,: don't get weary, though the way be long.">>

(Call to Action and Outro)

How is the prison industrial system impacting your life? How has it impacted your family and the people you love? How is the logic of punishment showing up in movements and

communities of which you are a part? How does the logic of punishment show up inside yourself? What is your stake in dismantling it?

You can learn more about the prison industrial complex and efforts to dismantle it in the transcript, where I've listed references and resources. How can you contribute to the vital work of abolishing punishment in favor of real accountability?

As you do that work, be sure to stay connected to the reasons this matters to you and to your life. Don't forget your mutual interest.

That's what I've got for you this week, folks.

We'd love to hear what you think of this episode and of the work we're doing here generally. What are you making of it? How are your own movement struggles unfolding, and what are you learning from those? You can interact with us on our Facebook page—look for SURJ Faith—and at our podcast page on Soundcloud. Search for “The Word Is Resistance.” We appreciate your feedback very much and are especially eager to hear from BIPOC folks and people who are not Christian: How are we doing? What's working, and what's not? We'd love you input.

And don't forget to tune in next week to hear a resistance word from Rev. Anne Dunlap.

Finally, we want to thank our sound editor for this week, Claire Hitchins. Claire, so much love and gratitude to you, always!

That's it for now, friends. So many blessings to you for grounded accountability, deep transformation, and loving connection as we build up a new world. Until next time, I'm Nichola Torbett.

<<Timestamp 25:18>>

<<Music: “Building Up a New World,” verse 1>>

<<“We are building up a new world, builders must be strong.”>>

RESOURCES

Mapping the prison-industrial complex handout:

<https://files.cargocollective.com/c1012822/MappingPICHandout.pdf>

Critical Resistance, a nationwide organization working to dismantle the prison industrial complex: <https://criticalresistance.org>

There are a couple great short videos on accountability here:

<https://bcrw.barnard.edu/videos/what-is-accountability-2/>

<https://bcrw.barnard.edu/videos/what-is-accountability/>

<https://bcrw.barnard.edu/videos/what-is-self-accountability/>

<https://bcrw.barnard.edu/videos/how-shame-can-block-accountability/>

You can find a toolkit and video series here:

<https://project-nia.org/building-accountable-communities-toolkit>

And here's the brilliant national gathering on Building Accountable Communities:

<https://www.facebook.com/BCRW.Feminism/videos/1035701983283041/>

Accountability Mapping course: <https://accountabilitymapping.thinkific.com>

SURJ-Faith is excited and proud to launch the “Community Safety for All Congregational Action Toolkit” for white faith/spiritual leaders and congregations across traditions. The toolkit offers extensive resources to support white faith/spiritual communities and institutions **ready to take action to stop relying on police and build alternatives instead**. The toolkit includes a 4-Movement model we've developed to support congregations in moving to action, including assessment tools, political education suggestions, action ideas for a variety of scenarios, theological reflection, alternatives congregations can utilize, and support options from SURJ-Faith. [You can get the toolkit here](#)

REFERENCES

Herskind, Micah. “Cop City and the Prison Industrial Complex in Atlanta.” Mainline Zine. Accessed 18 April 2022.

<https://www.mainlinezine.com/cop-city-and-the-prison-industrial-complex-in-atlanta/>

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