My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. Lord God of our Eastertide Resurrection, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

This year’s Festival of Homiletics conference focused a lot of its content on trauma, and for good reason. We all agree COVID tested the limits of relationships and in some families probably still generates spirited discussion. But there are other kinds of trauma that are hidden from our everyday worlds and we have deep in our bones, for some still present and for some long forgotten, but there is trauma from events which maybe shape our lives now, but surely shaped our lives for a time when we could not avoid confronting the reality before us.

So there’s a couple of things about the text today that caught my attention. I think the most obvious one is at the beginning, where someone is following Paul around constantly shouting things at him, and all of them probably not so benign as what is listed in our scripture. Did that happen to you as a kid or a teen? Sure.

But the other part of this text that maybe we missed is that moment when the earthquake comes, and the jail doors are opened, and the jailer is jarred awake. The text tells us he reaches for his sword and he’s about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners escaped.

So let’s wonder, let’s ask what might be going through his mind in the moments between the time he’s jarred awake and he draws his sword to commit suicide. What do we think might be happening in his thinking? (Take all answers, but if there are none, here’s a few):

* He can’t face having failed at his one job, to keep the prisoners in prison.
* He can’t take the consequences of letting down his employers.
* He cannot take the shame that will befall him and his family.

What our assumptions share is that it’s too much to bear; too much to face; there is no possibility of life after an event over which the jailer had no control. And yet, the jailer somehow feels responsible. There is an inner voice, which repeats these inner dialogues in his head.

All of these inner dialogues are untrue, of course, we can see that. Mostly because we’re not the jailer, who is spiraling downward, hard, and somehow believes what he would never otherwise contemplate is his only option.

I think we can all agree this is not the voice of God in the jailer’s mind at this moment between when the doors open and when he reaches for his sword. The voice in his mind is an accuser, one who seeks to drive all thoughts of God from our soul. An accuser who seeks to blame, to hurt, to divide us from our image of the one who created us.

Our own accuser says that we could have prevented a friend’s suicide by saying something magical at just the right time, or knowing when their accuser overwhelms their voice of God. We cannot. We could not. The one who took the life of our loved one now seeks residence in our soul. This voice is not of God, and we must be able to recognize it and say so. That’s why we’re here today talking about a topic no one wants to talk about: suicide.

Currently 18.8% of teens 15-19 years old consider suicide at least once. For adults, 1.4M attempts were made in 2019. It’s the second leading cause of death for adults under the age of 45. For veterans, it’s 1.5X that of civilians. Post 9-11, it turns out 7,057 soldiers died in combat operations from 2001-2021. For that same period, 30,177 military and veterans died of suicide. We all know someone in these statistics, don’t we?

When it comes to unexpected death of a friend or loved one by their own hand, it is almost impossible not to hear the voice of the accuser in our heads, too. As a pastor, I’ve had conversations with parishioners and had to decide whether they were a harm to themselves or others; it’s what’s called being a mandated reporter. Pastors can be first-line responders in that way, hearing a person who is drowning in darkness as to hear only the accuser as the dominant voice in their lives.

In a church that I served, there was a cluster of suicide attempts at the high school: 8 in a single day, one of them in from our church. He’s a beautiful soul, with so much to offer the world, a bundle of hope and ambition and angst and heartache and joy, wondering where he might fit in with his classmates. Any classmate. So alone that he could not share with me nor his parents the voice of the accuser. He didn’t know that what he was feeling was normal for a high schooler trying to find an identity. What he also didn’t know was that suicide should not be an option as a resolution to these feelings.

He didn’t have the wisdom to know that the pain of any given set of events or circumstances will pass. He didn’t have the trust in anyone around him that revealed feelings could be held and loved, and that he, too, would be loved for having said them. He just heard the accuser.

When I was 19, a friend that I worked with fatally shot himself in the head with a .38 Special. As we left work the last day of his life, he asked if I wanted to hang out and go bowling (that’s what you do in the middle of the country, have a beer and a bowl). I declined, and I don’t remember why. I never saw Mike again; he was cremated. Our only photo was his employee badge.

We wonder what the Bible can tell us, about how God somehow will intervene to prevent such a tragedy, asking the un-answerable question of theodicy: where is God in this, in the shadow of doubt, in the person who can see no other way, in the accuser telling us we are just too inadequate and to blame, and the seeming spiral of circumstances that will end in the jailer’s death by his own hand?

Paul’s words ring out to our aching hearts and our eager ears. What did Paul say? “We are all here”. Before the jailer has a chance to kill himself, the only thing Paul and his companions can offer is love and their presence, right here right now: “We are all here”. It’s something we can do. It may not be enough. But maybe it is.

“We are all here” can change the story for those who perhaps hear nothing but death, remembering the suicide of a loved one or the voice of the accuser in their head. “We are all here”. Maybe our presence and love can give one more day to live and survive. “We are all here”. Maybe it is ibuprofen for today, and that’s okay. But when talking about this text with my friend Nadia Bolz-Weber, she reminds us that ibuprofen isn’t necessarily effective in curing severe acne, is it?

I’ll leave us with these final thoughts.

Christianity, at its core and essence, is the story of us. It’s the story of us despite our shortcomings, our social anxieties, our failures with the best of intentions. Christianity is the story of resurrection for persons who are imperfect, because God created us like that. And it makes me smile because if we’re created in God’s image, that means he’s got some rough edges as well, just like us. We accept each other’s imperfections and faults, and believe that the others among us will help remind us that we are loved. “We are all here”.

Don’t cause yourself harm. There are meals to share. We want, and need for you to stay for all of it.

 Thanks be to God, Amen.