

A few years ago, Bridget Flynn, a school librarian from Philly, was one day looking through some family heirlooms. Her daughter Rebecca was getting married, and Bridget wanted to find an old family drawing she could have printed on the invitations to Rebecca's bridal shower. Well, as she was rummaging through several generations of family artifacts—letters, photographs, an envelope of hair clippings—she came across a stack of small envelopes tied together with a black shoelace. "Oh, honey, these are love letters," Bridget pointed out to Rebecca.

Quickly, Rebecca untied them and began reading the first one. "Mr Ros," it read, "be not uneasy, you son charley bruster be all writ we is got him and no powers on earth can deliver out of our hand." Surprised, her eyes wide, Rebecca exclaimed, "Mom, these are ransom letters."

Later, Bridget sifted through the rest of the stack with her husband, David. They counted 22 letters in total, and all of them were addressed to Christian Ross. What they learned was that kidnappers had taken his four-year-old son, whose full name was Charles Brewster Ross, and demanded \$20,000—today's equivalent of about \$400,000—for his return. David then googled "Christian Ross" and found that in 1876, Ross published a memoir about the kidnapping. The memoir, available online, includes facsimiles of several of the letters. As he compared the handwriting in the images to the documents that lay before him, David soon realized what he held in his hands were America's first known ransom notes. What a surprise that must've been! One minute, you're looking for some family design to print onto bridal shower invitations; the next minute, you're holding a stack of ransom notes!

Well, what a surprise for us too. Right now, in our own way, you and I kinda stumble onto something similar. We might all have our own reasons for being here today—we come to this church for one thing or another. And here we are, innocently sifting through the stacks of God's Word—the liturgy, the hymns, the readings—looking for whatever it is we hope to find. But instead, what we discover is a ransom note of sorts. It might not necessarily be written like a ransom note—y'know, the usual from the kidnapper, demanding his money. But nevertheless, this document upon which we stumble does detail a ransom.

Now this morning, I want you to ask yourself something. Today, I want you to ask yourself, what it would be like if *you* were the one kidnapped and held for ransom. If you were being held for ransom, what would be going through your mind? What would be going on in your heart? Would you be lonely? Would you be afraid? How long would it take before you began to lose hope? And the reason I want you to ask yourself this is because what might be most surprising of all—perhaps even more surprising than Bridget and Rebecca and David's discovery—is that this ransom we learn about in God's Word isn't about just anybody. No, the ones being held for ransom are none other than . . . you and I!

Here's what I mean. As we study the found documents here in this place—God's Word in liturgy and hymns and readings—we hear how this whole world—ourselves included—has been kidnapped. There's one hymn I sing with the chapel kids every Wednesday—*God Loves Me Dearly* it's called—and the first half of the second stanza puts it this way, "I was in bondage, Sin, death, and darkness . . ." "I was in bondage, Sin, death, and darkness . . ." it's another way of saying we've been kidnapped. Even the Psalm we heard this morning used the language of kidnapping, "The snares of death encompassed me;" it said, "the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me; I suffered distress and anguish." And if we had more time right now, we could do a mini Bible study and look at all the places in God's Word where this terrible truth is found.

But y'know, I don't even think we need to do that. If we have our eyes open to it, it's easy to see it firsthand. I mean, how else do you explain this type of existence? This ain't heaven, is it? Would you say this is the kinda place God would call home? No, this is a bad place—we know things aren't right, not the way they should be. And the only explanation is that somehow, somehow you and I have gotten ourselves kidnapped. But how is it everyone doesn't already know this?

There's this movie called *Room*—just *Room*—in 2016 it won several Oscars. It's about this young woman, Joy's her name, who was kidnapped and held captive for seven years. For those seven years, she was confined to this squalid

shed—pretty much just four walls and a bathroom. The only window being a skylight at the very top, which was too high for Joy to ever reach. But the most gripping thing about this movie was how after two years of captivity, Joy bears a son, Jacob. And born into this situation, “Room” as they call it, it’s all Jacob ever knows for his first five years. He has no real concept of what lies beyond “Room,” just what exactly’s going on.

The reason I share this with you today is because this “Room” we call the world, is all we’ve ever known. Like Jacob, you and I have been born into it, it’s home to us, and we’ve accepted its boundaries and limitations. But what you and I need to know is that there’s more—much, *much* more! There’s a whole outside world waiting for us beyond the four walls of our fallen planet. There’s a loving home that is ours, and a God who wants us to call Him Father, along with the rest of our heavenly family—they’re all just waiting for us to come home. Like Joy’s family, their hearts ache to have us back with them—something’s missing without us. And like Jacob needed his mom to tell him about the outside world, we also need to know about it. Which is why God has left us His Word—the written documents that you and I stumble upon every time we get together.

And as we grabbed yet another letter off the stack this morning, this time the Gospel of Mark, we came across these words of Jesus. “The Son of Man came not to be served,” He said, “but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many.” Did you hear what Jesus just said? In today’s Gospel, He says how He has given “His life as a *ransom* for many.” See, there’s more to the stanza of that hymn I was talking about earlier, more than just “I was in bondage, Sin, death, and darkness . . .” But it goes on to say, “God’s love was working to make me free.” And it continues this way, “He sent forth Jesus, My dear Redeemer, He sent forth Jesus And set me free” and “Jesus, my Savior, Himself did offer; Jesus, my Savior, Paid all I owed.”

See, dragging that cross to Calvary was nothing compared to how His spirits dragged with you gone. The pain of the nails was nothing compared to the pain of losing you. The death He died was nothing compared to going on living without you. No, for Jesus, no cost was too high, no price too steep—He’d have paid anything to get you back. You mean more than anything else in the whole world to Him, and so there’s nothing He wouldn’t give to bring you home. You’re not supposed to negotiate with kidnappers, but Jesus would rather die than let something happen to you—and so He does. Here in America we say, “Freedom isn’t free.” Well, Jesus hands it all over—everything He’s got—for your freedom. He gives His life as a ransom for you.

Now, go back to that question I posed earlier—what would it be like to be kidnapped and held for ransom. And take a moment now and picture what it might be like to be released after having gone through all that. Imagine the thoughts and the feelings you’d have finally getting to go free. Would you be relieved? Would hope be restored? Would you be thinking about how you have a future again?

Whatever you imagine yourself thinking or feeling, allow it to wash over you right now. Because in more ways than you might know, this is really you. Normally, when we talk about what Jesus Christ has done for you, we talk about it as forgiveness. But another way of translating the same word for forgiveness is freedom, liberation, release. And that’s what Jesus has done for you—He has freed you, He has liberated you, He has released you from captivity. You might appreciate it more if you consider what things might be like had He *not* freed you. But He has, so now experience it for yourself!

Moving on from here, please be aware that there are two ways you can go. The first one is that you can choose to live as if you’re still in bondage. Now this might sound funny, but in the movie *Room* we’ve been talking about, once five-year-old Jacob is introduced to his newfound freedom, he has trouble adjusting. He doesn’t know how to handle such a big change—going from being holed up in one room to exploring the endless possibilities of a great wide world. Because of this, Jacob tries to revert back and recreate what he knew before—shrinking down his world and minimizing the prospects for his life. Psychologists have found this often happens to people who have been set free—they’re so used to being held captive that they don’t know how to handle their full freedom.

It’s just like James and John, the sons of Zebedee, earlier in today’s Gospel. They carry on as if this Jesus standing right next to them isn’t cutting them loose from their sins. I mean, James and John ask Jesus to give them the best seats in

God's house—one on His right hand and one on His left—so that they can bask in glory with Him. And while this might sound like a pious request, it's actually sinful and selfish. And their evil ambitions don't fool Jesus for a minute. So, He tells them how He's come instead to give His life as a ransom, to set them free from such sin and to enable them to live liberated lives.

That's one choice we can make. We might long for the old and familiar—we might wish to go back to the way things were before. Our former habits can be comforting, they're just what we know. But think about it this way—willfully going back to a sin after it has been forgiven is like going back to your kidnapper's house and asking them to tie you up again and put you back in their basement. That's crazy, right! Who'd ever do that?

But here's a better way to go. When people are held captive, they don't have much to do but think about what they'll do once they get out. And usually, their thinking has never been clearer, but suddenly the clouds part and they're able to see what's really important in life. And what they find matters most are the people they love, and the things they've always wanted to do. Nothing else is really worth their time anymore. They just can't wait to get out and make the most of it.

For you and me, Jesus has paid our ransom and set us free. We've been given new hope, a new life. What is it that's really important to you—what are the people, the places, the things that matter most? As we rub our sore wrists where the ropes once were, and squint at the bright sunshine as we finally walk out into the fresh open air—we are given a choice to enjoy our newfound freedom. How will you enjoy yours?