

Tonks Liberated ***A Tonk Resurrected***

Easter Reflection
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This spring, our church has been responding to the plight of Central American asylum seekers trekking to our border in record numbers. Their trek to our border is an exodus from bondage.

That's how I see it. Like the ancient Israelites escaping bondage in Egypt, Central Americans are escaping bondage in Central America.

Drug cartels, crime syndicates, and gangs are holding people in Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala in bondage. Pay us or we will kill you. Join our gang or we will kill you. It's pretty explicit bondage.

Human traffickers are canvassing cities and villages in Guatemala and El Salvador, capturing girls, and selling them in vast networks of sex ranches and strip clubs that extend from Central America to Mexico's border with the US. It's pretty explicit bondage. It's slavery.

Over a hundred years ago, people of European descent forcibly stole land from indigenous people in Guatemala, and pushed them onto land that couldn't sustain them long-term. A familiar story.

Today, far too many people are living on far too little land in the indigenous highlands of Guatemala. The soil is depleted and the region is suffering from a sustained drought. The land no longer gives, people who live there say. People who live there are chronically hungry.

But there's nowhere else in Guatemala for people who live there to go. There's no other land they can farm. Vast shanty towns filled with poor people who've already migrated from the countryside surround Guatemala City. There's no future there, no hope. In Guatemala, poverty imprisons people. It's pretty explicit bondage.

Many Central Americans are escaping bondage. It's their exodus from bondage, like the exodus of our spiritual ancestors, the ancient Israelites.

Because our church is responding to the plight of poor Central Americans, I'd like to lift up an image that I've lifted up before.

In his book, *The Devil's Highway*, Louis Alberto Urrea describes the ordeal twenty-six Mexican men suffered while crossing the border east of Yuma, Arizona. Fourteen of the men died in the desert. The rest barely survived.

Urrea notes that US Border Patrol agents have several in-house nicknames for the Mexicans and Central Americans they track and apprehend. One is *tonk*. Some claim the nickname *tonk* comes from the sound a border agent's flashlight makes when it hits an immigrant's head. The sound of metal hitting a human skull. *Tonk!*

Poor Mexicans are *tonks*.

Central Americans joining the exodus, escaping bondage, are *tonks*.

In his day, Jesus was a *tonk*.

Like many refugees and asylum-seekers today, Jesus was a poor person who lived in bondage, and who sought liberation from bondage. In his case, from the Roman Empire, and the local power structure in Jerusalem that collaborated with Rome.

Like many today, Jesus violated borders. By radically interpreting Jewish Law and tradition, rubbing shoulders and breaking bread with sinners, reaching his hand out to touch the flesh of unclean outcasts, and speaking truth to self-aggrandizing power, Jesus repeatedly stepped over the line. Jesus crossed borders more powerful people didn't want him to cross.

Recognizing only God's sovereignty, Jesus refused to submit to Rome and the Jerusalem elite, who sent their agents to arrest and detain him. They didn't hit his head with a flashlight. They nailed him to a cross. *Tonk! Tonk! Tonk!*

Jesus was a *tonk*, not only because an Imperial power caught him and punished him for his transgressions, but because he personally identified with all the other *tonks*.

In Jesus' day, *tonks* included small subsistence farmers in Galilee and Judea who couldn't make a living on their land because Rome and the local elite bled them dry.

Tonks included all the suffering poor people we encounter in the gospels: blind men on the side of the road crying out for mercy, sick women taken advantage of by their physicians, outcast lepers and prostitutes, the possessed, oppressed, and exploited.

Tonks were the ones to whom Jesus said, "the Kingdom of God belongs to you."

Tonks were the people Jesus was referring to when he said, when you give food to a hungry person and clothing to someone who needs clothing, when you heal someone who's sick, or visit someone in bondage, you feed, clothe, heal, and visit me. Whatever you do to the *tonks*, to least of these, you do to me.

Jesus was a *tonk*.

And the powers-that-be treated him like a *tonk*. They captured him like a *tonk*, and they disposed of him like a *tonk*, crucifying him on a cross. Crucifixion was a *tonk's* death. Death on a cross defined one as a *tonk*.

Jesus was a *tonk*.

And three days after the powers-that-be crucified him, his followers claimed that Jesus was resurrected. He's risen.

But that was an unbelievable claim, because *tonks* didn't get resurrected.

Other people got resurrected, but not *tonks*.

It wasn't the resurrection itself that was unbelievable. It was *who* was resurrected that was unbelievable. Jesus. Which was impossible. Jesus was a *tonk*, he was crucified, and crucified *tonks* didn't get resurrected.

Back then, resurrection wasn't everyday news, but it wasn't completely unheard of either. People occasionally heard claims regarding the resurrection or the deification of a hero or a powerful person, someone like Hercules or Caesar.

It happened. People may have believed it literally or mythically, or just realized it was propaganda, but the news itself wasn't unheard of.

But the claim that Jesus of Nazareth was resurrected was unbelievable because Jesus wasn't a great hero or a powerful man. He was a poor man living in bondage to Rome, whom Rome captured, tortured, and crucified on a cross.

Biblical Scholar Stephen Patterson puts it this way: "Ancients, for the most part, had no problem in believing in resurrection per se...For ancients, resurrection is quite

possible. It is what happens to the sons of gods and heroes. But Jesus did not fit into this fraternity. Ancients readily believed in resurrection; they just would not have thought Jesus to be a likely candidate. His death was not heroic. He was born a peasant and died a criminal. Yet his followers said of him what others said of Hercules, Aesclepius, or Caesar.”

Yet his followers said of him, Jesus is risen.

A *tonk* resurrected. A *tonk*. Unbelievable.

Our spiritual tradition is deeply rooted in the experience of *tonks*. Our spiritual tradition is *tonk* spirituality.

Our founding spiritual ancestors were slaves, *tonks*, who escaped from bondage in Egypt. That experience—exodus from bondage—forms the first root, and the deepest root, of our spirituality.

The very first claim our ancient spiritual ancestors made about God is that God liberated them from bondage. Long before our spiritual ancestors claimed God created the earth, long before our spiritual ancestors claimed God is love, they claimed that God liberated them, *tonks*, from bondage.

The second claim our spiritual ancestors made is that God obligated them to show hospitality to other *tonks*. Welcome them, help them, support them. Show hospitality to the sojourner, the widow, the orphan, because you were once slaves in Egypt.

Liberation from bondage, the obligation to help others in bondage or escaping from bondage—these are the two oldest and deepest roots of our spiritual tradition.

We can interpret the claim, Christ is risen, as a further development of this liberation tradition.

The story goes like this...

The powers of bondage kill Christ on the cross.

The powers of bondage extinguish God’s light, the light of liberation, they silence God’s voice, the word of liberation. Christ, the human embodiment of God’s spirit that liberates people from bondage, is dead.

The powers of bondage have achieved complete victory.

With liberation’s spirit dead, liberation’s light extinguished, liberation’s voice silent, there’s no hope for liberation. The powers of bondage will reign forever, and ever, and ever. No hallelujahs there.

That’s bad news if you’re in bondage. Bad news if you’re a *tonk*. Bondage forever. No hope.

But here’s good news if you’re a *tonk*: Christ is risen! Christ is alive!

The spirit people killed is alive again. The light people extinguished is lit again. The voice people silenced is speaking again.

Christ is risen! Christ is alive!

That’s good news.

It means, if people kill liberation’s spirit, it will come back to life.

If people extinguish liberation’s light, it will light again.

If people silence liberation’s voice, it will speak again.

It will come back to life again. And again, and again, and again.

Christ is risen, not once. Christ rises again, and again, and again.

Repeatedly, the powers of bondage kill people's spirits, extinguish people's light, silence people's voices. That's what powers of bondage do, and as long as there are powers of bondage, that's what they'll do.

And Christ will rise again, and again, and again. That's what Christ does. Rises by bringing people's spirits back to life, by relighting people's light, by restoring people's voices.

You may have experienced this yourself in your life.

The spirit within you died, the light within you went out, your voice was silenced. But Christ brought the spirit back to life within you, relit the light within you, restored your voice to you. And you felt alive once again. You received a new lease on life. You experienced life a new way. You were risen, indeed!

The powers of bondage are not victorious. They're real, and they're powerful, but they're not victorious. Because when bondage kills, extinguishes, and silences, Christ rises, again.

Which means there's hope. If bondage cannot ultimately prevail, that means it may one day end. There's hope for an end to bondage, because Christ is risen.

If you're in bondage, to anyone, to anything, that's good news.

If you're a *tonk*, that's good news.

There's hope!

The powers of bondage are not victorious. They cannot be.

Christ is risen! Christ will rise again!

There's hope!