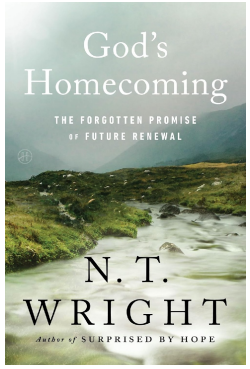
SERMON TAKE-HOME NOTES — May 3, 2026

Hymn "Build a Longer Table" (*All Creation Sings* #1062), verse 2:

Build a safer refuge, not a larger jail;
where the weak find shelter, mercy will not fail.
For any place where justice is denied,
Christ will breach the jail wall, freeing all inside.

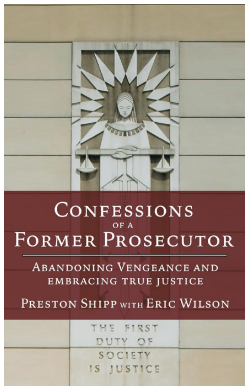
What does it mean for Christ to breach a jail wall and free those inside? Could it be about followers of Jesus, the Body of Christ, undertaking jail ministry? Before telling a story about this, let's recap *two* Easter themes:

- Raising Jesus on Easter is not so much about us being able to go to heaven when we die as it is about the opposite: namely the launching of God coming home to earth to set things right and restore the whole Creation.
- In coming home through Jesus and the Spirit, God is revealed not as the One (like an emperor or strong man leader) but as One-from-Many — things like the Body of Christ.



Our Gospel Reading shows forth both themes if we read it in that light. We often read the first few verses at funerals and have been taught to hear it about Jesus preparing places in heaven for us. But read in the context of John's whole Gospel. It is about the opposite. It's about God coming to abide in and with us. We, through the Spirit, are the abiding places Jesus prepares. That's why Jesus can promise that we, as his abiding presence in the world – the Body of Christ – will do greater works than he has done. (See today's Excerpt Page from N.T. Wright for more on how to read John 14:1-4 in the context of God's Homecoming.)

Story about my friend Preston Shipp, who we hosted as a speaker at our Theology and Peace Conference in 2016 in Chicago. Preston later became President of our Theology and Peace Board for several years, hosting the annual conference in his home of Nashville. Preston's story is about how he, as a prosecutor for the Attorney General's Office in Tennessee was changed for good by doing prison ministry, especially a special education program in the woman's prison. He could no longer be a prosecutor but began working to release those who are unjustly incarcerated. He's an example of Christ breaching the jail walls, freeing all inside — including him! Preston tells his full story in his book *Confessions of a Former Prosecutor: Abandoning Vengeance and Embracing True Justice* (Chalice Press, 2024). I use the book in telling the story; here's a timeline to give a framework for the telling.



Preston Shipp Timeline

- Born in 1977 in Nashville to Mike & Julia Shipp; raised in a conservative church – "Church was my place"
- Growing up in the 80s he knew he wanted to put the bad guys away; from a young age he had his sights set on being a prosecutor
- Attended Lispcomb University 1995-99, a private Christian liberal arts school, where he met his wife Sherisse (m. 1999)
- Went to U. of Tennessee Law School beginning in 1999 and then clerks two years for a judge on the TN Court of Criminal Appeals
- 2002: he and Sherisse join a church in Nashville that has an active prison ministry; Preston follows in his father's footsteps in joining the prison ministry (primarily leading worship there)
- 2004: begins his dream job as a prosecutor for TN Attorney General
- Seeing the law up close, combined with prison ministry at church, he begins to have doubts about his dream job
- In 2006 he is approached by his former Lipscomb professor Richard Goode about a very different kind of prison ministry 15 residents of the women's prison taking a sixteen week class with 15 Lipscomb students, all for college credit; classes begin in 2007 for Lipscomb Initiative for Education — L.I.F.E.
- In November 2008 Preston decides he cannot be a prosecutor anymore and submits his resignation; joins an arm of the TN Supreme Court, the Board of Professional Responsibility

The heart of the story revolves around one inmate in particular in the woman's prison where he taught classes: Cyntoia Brown. You can also view a 20-minute documentary about their story on YouTube; search the title "The Redemption of a Prosecutor."

Friends, as the Body of Christ in the world, we are called to do greater works than Jesus. We are called to participate in our own redemption.