



Lexington Presbyterian Church

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Set Free – Now What?

Acts 16:16-40

A sermon by William M. Klein

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Today's reading from Acts tells some stories about people who were in bondage and people who were free. Listen and see if you can identify who in this story was free.

16 One day, as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a slave-girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling. 17 While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, "These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation." 18 She kept doing this for many days. But Paul, very much annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, "I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And it came out that very hour. 19 But when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the authorities. 20 When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, "These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews 21 and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe." 22 The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. 23 After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. 24 Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks. 25 About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. 26 Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened. 27 When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped. 28 But Paul shouted in a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." 29 The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. 30 Then he brought them outside and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" 31 They answered, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." 32 They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. 33 At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. 34 He brought them up into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God. 35 When morning came, the magistrates sent the police, saying, "Let those men go." 36 And the jailer reported the message to Paul, saying, "The magistrates sent word to let you go; therefore come out now and go in peace." 37 But Paul replied, "They have beaten us in public, uncondemned, men who are Roman citizens, and have thrown us into prison; and now are they going to discharge us in secret? Certainly not! Let them come and take us out themselves." 38 The police reported these words to the magistrates, and they were afraid when they heard that they were Roman citizens; 39 so they came and apologized to them. And they took them out and asked them to leave the city. 40 After leaving the prison they went to Lydia's home; and when they had seen and encouraged the brothers and sisters there, they departed. (Acts 16:16-40 NRSV)

Raw data rarely tells the whole story...but it does tell a piece of the story...and sometimes that story is troubling. We logged into the news Friday and heard about the murders at the municipal building in Virginia Beach. Why did that man do this terrible thing? How many families are suffering because of the evil of this one man! How long, O Lord? How long?

Day after day reporters reveal stories of a type of brutality we find hard to comprehend...domestic brutality, police brutality, brutality against law enforcement personnel, unreasonable policies that brutalize people who are poor and powerless and non-white, brutal words spoken and tweeted meant to wound and dehumanize. We wonder how people can treat one another with such cruelty! It is so disturbing that we are reluctant to let our children listen to the news. And, as if it makes things better, we say ignorant things like, "We are stunned that such brutality can happen in America."

A psychologist conducted a famous experiment at Stanford University in 1971. He had a jail constructed and randomly assigned healthy young American men the role of prisoners and guards. Within several days the guards became brutal and sadistic. They inflicted physical and psychological harm upon the prisoners. The experiment, planned to last two weeks, was halted after six days. Psychologists were shocked that so-called normal people so instantly could become agents of cruelty and humiliation simply because of the role they were assigned.¹

I only hope you and I would have acted differently if we were asked to participate in such an experiment. But can we say with absolute certainty we would?

Our story from Acts takes us into a prison. Since there are no gruesome pictures to serve as documentation we'll have to take Luke's word for it that the Roman magistrates had Paul and Silas stripped of their clothing and beaten with rods. After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison...and the jailer was sternly ordered to make sure they stayed there. It's a story that could have been written today, isn't it?

Why were Paul and Silas in prison in the first place? What had they done to land themselves in jail?

What would land someone in jail today? The obvious things - murder, theft, rape, peddling drugs. There are less obvious things, though, aren't there...things like being in the wrong place at the wrong time...things like being from the wrong side of the tracks... things like impertinence, i.e., speaking truth to those who are powerful and wealthy.

Well, Paul's offence, his crime, was disrupting commerce. Apparently there was a slave girl in Philippi who earned considerable money for her owners by telling fortunes.²

One day as Paul and Silas were going to the place of prayer by the river outside the walls of Philippi, this slave girl followed them shouting, "These men are slaves of the Most High God. They are laying out the road of salvation for you." It was the truth...but remember, so often during Jesus' life it was evil spirits who recognized him for who he was. The same principle seems to be at work in this story, as well.

When the slave girl kept up her ranting day after day, Paul became annoyed, and so turned to her and said, "I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And the spirit that made her able to tell fortunes came out of her. But the evil spirit wasn't all

that went away. So did the profits. If the girl could no longer tell fortunes then her owners could no longer count on her for a handsome income.

Luke, in his Gospel story and here in his story of the Acts of the Apostles, wants us to understand that Jesus came to bring liberation. This liberation was and is about setting people free to worship God and to live a life of holiness. What the Holy Spirit brought this slave girl through the words of Paul was liberation from exploitation – liberation from bondage to evil in order that she may be free for a life of holiness. That liberating spirit has been active in the world since creation...and is what Christ intends to bring to everyone!

The owners of the slave girl, though, were not interested in her liberation. They were interested in the money she made them. The enraged owners seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the authorities. Finding the Roman magistrates, they said, "These men are disturbing the peace. They are dangerous Jewish agitators subverting our Roman law and order."³

It's hard to know what customs they were referring to. But that was a ruse anyway. As Martin Luther King Jr. pointed in his letter to the white ministers from the Birmingham city jail in 1963 who accused King of being disruptive...

*Wherever the early Christians entered a town the power structure got disturbed and immediately sought to convict them of being "disturbers of the peace" and "outside agitators."*⁴

It's not clear what the slave owner's basis for complaint really was...but that didn't seem to matter. It was a kangaroo court anyway. The magistrates, eager to keep public order and to mollify influential business interests, had Paul and Silas stripped, beaten, and thrown into a prison.⁵ The jailer was sternly ordered to make sure the prisoners stayed there...and so he placed Paul and Silas in the prison's most secure cell and fastened their feet in irons.

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Here is where the story gets really interesting. Toward midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns, as the other prisoners listened in. Suddenly there was an earthquake...an earthquake so violent the foundations of the prison were shaken and all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened.

When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he assumed the prisoners would do precisely what he would have done in the same situation...escape. Knowing what happened to jailers who permitted their prisoners to escape, he drew his sword and prepared to do the honorable thing for disgraced jailers...kill himself.

From the darkness, Paul shouted, "Wait! Do not harm yourself, we are all here." When the jailer saw Paul and Silas standing there, he was stunned. Falling down before them, the jailer said, in essence, "What can I do to be as free as you apparently are?" Paul answered, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be freed, you and your entire household."

The jailer then took Paul and Silas to his home, washed their wounds, and fed them. Then he and his entire family were baptized without delay; and he and his entire household rejoiced that they had become believers in God.

Everyone was having a grand time rejoicing. Food and drink...who knows, maybe even music and dancing. Paul had been the conduit through which the jailer and his family were set free to worship God. But Paul and Silas were still prisoners (albeit no longer in chains). When this occurred to the jailer, he told them they were free to go. But they refused to go free.

The jailer was thoroughly confused...until they said, "The magistrates had us beaten and thrown into prison without a trial, even though we are Roman citizens. And now they want to dismiss us in secret! We will not leave. Let those magistrates come lead us out in the sight of everyone."

When the prison guards reported all this to the magistrates they became very nervous. You see, they thought Paul and Silas were just Jews with no claim to civil rights under Roman law. They didn't know these two Christians were Roman citizens entitled to due process of Roman law. To bind a Roman citizen was a crime - to flog him was forbidden.⁶

The frightened magistrates went to Paul and Silas and begged them to leave prison and Philippi. Only then did Paul leave...whereupon he and Silas went to the home of their friend Lydia.

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So...what are we to make of this story? What is the take-away?

We miss the point if we spend our time trying to figure out how the things in this story happened...how, for example, the earthquake freed Paul and Silas. That line of inquiry is a deceptive rabbit hole.

I see this story inviting us to think about freedom...about how free we really are...specifically about the freedom God wants us to have in and through Jesus. As I said at the outset, raw data rarely tells the whole story...and I believe that is true here. There is more in this story about freedom than meets the eye. I say this because I think that while we live in an era of unprecedented freedom...we do not seem free. As a people and as a culture we are terribly lonely, afraid, and driven. The gated communities, burglar alarms, and chocked-full medicine cabinets...hollow nine-to-five jobs...monthly mortgage payments...kids over programmed in every way but church involvement...dog-eat-dog games children are forced to play in order to do all the things they need to do in order to impress admissions committees enough to get into a top-tier college. These things do not look like or feel like freedom.

Paul told the jailer what he himself had discovered...i.e., freedom begins by entrusting one's self to Jesus. That's where it begins.

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann describes this freedom as a journey. In fact, he calls it a "liberation" journey. He says this journey characteristically entails a departure from a settled circumstance and an entrenched authority...to a risky life of venturesome freedom.⁷

I think he's right. We are set free from bondage to all the lesser gods we find ourselves serving...in order that God's Spirit may bind us to Christ. Bound to him, yoked to him, we are set free for a life of venturesome freedom.

As your pastor and fellow journeyman, I can't wait to see where this liberation journey will take you and me next. Amen.



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Endnotes:

¹ Psychologists name was Philip Zimbardo (sp.).

² Wall, Robert W. 2002. Acts. *The New Interpreter's Bible*. Vol. X. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 232. The text literally reads that she was filled with "a pythian spirit" that recalls the Greek myth of the dragon that guarded the Delphi oracle at Mt. Parnassus and was killed by Apollo.

³ Peterson, Eugene H. 2002. The Message. Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002. Peterson's rendering of Acts 16:20.

⁴ Washington, James M. editor. 1986. A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King Jr. NY: Harper & Row Pub., 299-300.

⁵ Cousar, Charles B. et. al. 1994. Texts for Preaching: Year C. Louisville: WJK Press, 333.

⁶ Johnson, Luke T. 1992. The Acts of the Apostles. *Sacra Pagina Series*, Vol. 5. Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 302. Citing Livy, *History of Rome* 10, 9, 3-6.

⁷ Ward-Lev, Nahum. 2019. The Liberating Path of the Hebrew Prophets - Then and Now. NY: Orbis Books, xi. Citation is from the *foreword* written by Brueggemann.