

Scripture Reading for June 2 2019

Acts 16:16-34 (NIV)

¹⁶ Once when we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a female slave who had a spirit by which she predicted the future. She earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortune-telling.

¹⁷ She followed Paul and the rest of us, shouting, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved." ¹⁸ She kept this up for many days. Finally Paul became so annoyed that he turned around and said to the spirit, "In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!" At that moment the spirit left her.

¹⁹ When her owners realized that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to face the authorities. ²⁰ They brought them before the magistrates and said, "These men are Jews, and are throwing our city into an uproar ²¹ by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice." ²² The crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas, and the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten with rods. ²³ After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. ²⁴ When he received these orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

²⁵ About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. ²⁶ Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everyone's chains came loose. ²⁷ The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. ²⁸ But Paul shouted, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!" ²⁹ The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. ³⁰ He then brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" ³¹ They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household." ³² Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. ³³ At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his household were baptized. ³⁴ The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole household.

Sermon: Get Out Of Jail Free

In the book of Acts, Luke relates the story of how the gospel spread from Jerusalem to Rome for his likely patron, Theophilus. We know virtually nothing about Theophilus or the community of which he was a part. But it does seem curious that Luke considers it important to relay a lengthy account of the first Christian martyr, Stephen,¹ along with two miraculous escapes from prison, one concerning Peter² and the other, Paul – our reading for today.³ If Luke’s readers were experiencing hardship or persecution, then such stories may have been intended as words of encouragement to hold firm to the truth of the gospel regardless of circumstances. Moreover, Luke may also be portraying his confidence that *God’s* mission will both expand and ultimately be successful regardless of opposition along the way. Today’s reading contains an exorcism, an earthquake,⁴ a conversion story with elements of surprise, irony, and humour, and, ultimately, Paul and Silas *and the jailer* all “get out of jail free.”

This incident takes place in the Roman colony of Philippi, a prominent city in Greece, and it marks a new venture in Paul’s missionary journeys.⁵ Paul has now moved beyond Turkey and is beginning a mission trip to the Greek cities of Philippi, Thessalonica, Athens, and Corinth. Apparently, there were not many Jews living in Philippi because it had no synagogue – although we are told some Jews would meet outside of the city to pray on the Sabbath by the river.⁶ As Paul and Silas were going to this place of prayer, they encountered a slave girl who was possessed of a some kind of prophetic spirit which, in turn, brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling.⁷ However we might describe her condition in contemporary language, we need to appreciate that she was *doubly*-possessed, as she was also the *property* of her owners. Luke is revealing the sad moral state of affairs within this Greek [i.e., Gentile] city of Philippi that tacitly sanctioned such exploitation for financial gain. She follows Paul and his team shouting, “These men are slaves of the Most-High God, who are telling you the way to be saved.”⁸ While the girl probably didn’t know what she was saying, the spirit within her was actually speaking the truth - and this is in common with other biblical stories of demon possession.⁹ Ironically, she describes Paul and Silas as “slaves,” just as she was, and although she mentions the “Most-High God,” that would have been understood locally as Zeus,¹⁰ *not* the God of Abraham. Moreover, the mention of the “way to be saved” would *not* be seen in a Christian or Jewish context, but the means for health or prosperity or rescue from some kind of disaster – like an earthquake. The slave-girl is persistent and Paul could do without this publicity, so he addresses the demon: “I order you in the

¹ Acts 6:8-8:1.

² Acts 12:1-17.

³ Acts 16:16-34. This is not the only prison experience of Paul relayed in Acts; Paul was later imprisoned in Caesarea (23:23-26:32) and Rome (28:16-31), as well as underwent beatings and hardships of various kinds. See also Acts 8:15-16.

⁴ Luke sees the earthquake (16:26) as part of God’s provision.

⁵ Paul’s first visit to Philippi occurred in ca. AD 50. Paul later wrote a letter to the Philippians *from* (another) jail.

⁶ Acts 16:13.

⁷ Acts 16:16. NRSV has a “spirit of divination,” and even this is a(n appropriate) cultural adaptation of the original Greek.

⁸ In Acts 16:17 Luke mentions “us.” Traditionally this has been seen as Luke accompanying Paul on this journey. Modern scholarship recognises this isn’t necessarily the case and could be a well-accepted, rhetorical style of writing in Greek culture.

⁹ See Luke 4:31-37; 8:26-39; note, the same title is used – “Jesus, Son of the Most-High God” by the demon.

¹⁰ Or whoever the people thought was the top god in their local pantheon.

name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.”¹¹ And the demon left her, demonstrating that the Spirit of the risen Jesus is more powerful than the spirit within her.¹² She was released from spiritual bondage, at least! There is, however, a reaction, or an unintended consequence, and that can be the way of things when someone does something good.¹³ Her owners quickly realize that their slave could no longer be the money-making possession they had before. They could have brought a complaint under Roman property law for the loss of the value of their slave; but that’s *not* what they do! Instead, these money-grabbing slave owners make Paul and Silas out to be dangerous criminals who are threatening the stability of the state!¹⁴ It is almost as if this is a warning for us today, in that if the Church challenges unjust *economic* systems, we will be accused of *political* offences or bias. Paul and Silas are subsequently beaten and thrown into prison. We’re told the jailer puts them in the innermost cell and fastens their feet in the stocks,¹⁵ implying escape was impossible.

In a sense, the prison itself symbolizes the place where an invisible, cosmic battle is taking place between God and evil, in the form of Zeus in this case. And, somewhat humorously, Paul and Silas are doing what exemplary believers might do in such dire circumstances, namely praying and singing hymns to God at midnight! In 2 Corinthians Paul writes, “Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom”¹⁶ and evidently Paul and his colleagues were not defeated by their flogging or imprisonment! Their liberation comes in the form of an earthquake, which were not uncommon in that area, so demonstrating God’s victory over Zeus and divine judgement on injustice. Thinking his prisoners must have escaped, the jailer is about to commit suicide with his sword because he fears torture and death. You would have thought he would have checked the jail first!¹⁷ Under Roman law, if a prisoner escapes, the jailer must suffer the penalty the prisoner would have suffered. Paul shouts in a loud voice, “Don’t do it – we’re still here!” The jailer calls for lights, rushes in and falls trembling before Paul and Silas, saying: “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”¹⁸

His question has been one of the favorites of evangelical preachers in recent centuries and salvation is often presented in terms of heaven and hell! We must resist such an interpretation. The notion of eternal salvation was not on the Gentile jailer’s radar.¹⁹ No, it is with rescue and deliverance in the here and now on his mind that he asks, “How I can get out of this mess?” or “What must I do to save my

¹¹ Acts 16:18. In a sense the girl is challenging Paul’s authority and his own authority is confirmed by the exorcism. See also Acts 3:6,16; 4:10 for the use of the “name (i.e., authority) of Jesus.” Invoking “the name of Jesus” is not a magical incantation but a confessional statement of Paul’s faith in the resurrected Jesus as being Lord of all.

¹² Or, for that matter, Zeus.

¹³ See Acts 19:23 – 41 for a similar *economic* reaction when Paul is in Ephesus; note that these reactions are *not on religious* grounds.

¹⁴ Acts 16:20-21. (This is not unlike the accusations made of Jesus.) Note the charge appeals to Roman anti-Semitism and is propaganda *without* legal merit. The intent is to incite prejudice against Jews in the pagan/secular marketplace and it is this appeal that sparks the crowds’ hostilities against Paul. (See also Acts 16:35-40).

¹⁵ Acts 16:24. (One wonders why they were not simply ejected and banned from the city.)

¹⁶ 2 Cor 3:17 and John 8:36. See also Luke 4:18–19 where Luke highlights Jesus’ ministry as bringing freedom to captives, and the “blessing” (as opposed to “curse/woe”) in Luke 6:22-23.

¹⁷ Presumably, this is part of Luke’s humour in his account!

¹⁸ Acts 16:28-30. See also Acts 2:37. Being “saved” to a Jew is about wholeness, divine rescue, healing, forgiveness, etc.

¹⁹ Unlike Cornelius (Acts 10:2), or Lydia in Philippi (Acts 16:14b), this jailer is not even described as a “God-fearing” Gentile.

skin?” The response of Paul and Silas is: “Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.”²⁰ While that statement can seem trite and simplistic, a wider and deeper conversation seems to have followed.²¹

In that discussion, the worldviews of the jailer and Paul would have needed to be explored. From a Christian perspective, the world is in a mess because of human freewill, idolatry, corruption of human life and relationships, our pollution of the planet, our worldwide systems of economic exploitation, and so on, right through to *this* particular messy situation here and now, or *this* sudden crisis, or *this* specific person’s desperate sorrow or need or fear, or *this* person’s willful rejection of God and his ways. All of this comes under the very large umbrella of “the way the world currently is,” as opposed to “the way it will be” when Jesus is reigning as Lord. And on Ascension Sunday, we acknowledge that his reign has indeed already begun. The risen and ascended Jesus is *already* reigning as King – the true Lord, not Caesar, and not Zeus. But that new reality must *spread* through people who acknowledge his Lordship – and there is much more to come. That is why Paul’s “believe in the Lord”²² is always the response to those who want to be rescued, at whatever level or sense.²³ Like the jailer, we may initially come focused on *our* mess and *our* desire and need of being rescued, yet the deeper issues require a paradigm shift in our thinking; one that recognizes Jesus *is* Lord and therefore we see the world from that new perspective. Our confidence, then, is in a God who is *in the process of saving* our messy world and is moving it towards completion by his Spirit, and with our humble and necessary assistance.

The jailer and his whole household respond positively to Paul’s message and are baptized. They then provide hospitality by washing their wounds and supplying food – a sign that they are actively living out the gospel and that the Spirit is at work in their lives.²⁴ What begins as an ominous jailing ends in a joyous celebration of faith. As in all conversions, however, the transition from “sinner” to “saint,” as it were, is a life-long journey. Nevertheless, it begins with a simple confession of faith. In his letter to the Romans, Paul puts it this way, “If you declare with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”²⁵ The jailer and his household understood at least that much. And in a later letter to the church in Philippi, Paul writes: “Therefore God exalted Jesus to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”²⁶ An appropriate reminder for Ascension Sunday!

Notice that there are three different types of captivity in this story. Paul and Silas are *slaves* to the Most-High God; the girl is in *bondage* to the spirit of divination *and* to her masters, and the jailer is *captive* to

²⁰ Acts 16:31.

²¹ Acts 16:32. “Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house.”

²² There is brilliant word-play in Luke’s account with his use of *kyrios*, which means “master,” “sir,” or “L/lord”: the slave-girl’s masters (16:19), the jailer’s question (16:30), and Paul’s response with reference to Jesus as Lord (16:31-32).

²³ I am not a fan of Shirley MacLaine, but I think she has a point when she says, “The world is in a mess because we are spiritually ignorant.”

²⁴ Acts 16:33-34. The jailer’s and the Lydia’s households (16:13-15) were, it seems, the first two convert families in Philippi.

²⁵ Rom 10:9. (Likely an early Creed.) Moreover, Gal 3:28 is embodied in the passage.

²⁶ Phil 2:9-11 (This is widely thought to part of an early hymn or a liturgical poem).

his sense of duty, one that leads him to nearly take his own life when he thought he had failed at his assignment. Ironically, the jailer, who supposedly has the keys to freedom, is the one who is shackled by his sense of obligation and, through a role reversal, Paul and Silas become the jailer's deliverers!

One question we can ask is, "What shackles us today?" or "To what are we in bondage and need rescuing?" There are many who feel bound by their circumstances, or to past life-events that have ongoing consequences. We can also be held captive to addictions and fears of various kinds. Others find life to be empty, lonely, or meaningless, and lacking hope or purpose. And there are many to go to work and are joyless, overwhelmed by the responsibilities and pressures that weigh them down. All of these things can define our very identities in a detrimental way and from which we need saving. If any one of these scenarios describes you today, I have four brief observations to share with you to ponder.

First, while saving or being rescued by Jesus is not a magic wand or eraser of past hurts, worship - including hymn singing and prayerful reflection - is a time when we can clarify our values, regain perspective, set priorities, and see all that we do and are in the light of the gospel message. Moreover, part of being rescued - or of being made whole - involves forgiveness, and while that does *not* mean forgetting, forgiveness enables us to be *released* as prisoners and *not* be held in bondage to our past. Letting go of things that negatively define us is the first positive step to our new identity in Jesus Christ.

Second, in 1979 Bob Dylan sang, "You're gonna to have to serve somebody"²⁷ and he was right. We all serve somebody: our families, employers, employees, clients, etc., and we can also be *self-serving*! Freedom does *not* mean personal autonomy; it is freedom *to serve*. Paul and Silas were *slaves*, serving the "Most-High God," and in doing so, they found freedom and peace *in spite of* their circumstances. And that is the key.

Third, it is worth noting that Paul and Silas understood their suffering as being "for the sake of the gospel,"²⁸ in other words, a consequence of being faithful to *God's* mission. In this case, they did not choose their circumstances; their beating and imprisonment were the unforeseen, human reaction to an act of healing and liberation - an exorcism. As I said earlier, the good done in the name of Jesus Christ can evoke surprising reactions, not least because the good done upsets the status quo - the way the world currently is - and transforms it. In working for the kingdom of God there will, therefore, often be setbacks, as well as successes, and we need to be mindful of real resistance and evil that opposes good.

Fourth, while in this case there is a dramatic prison rescue story and a joyous celebration of faith, that will *not* always be the case. John the Baptist and James, the brother of John, were *not* rescued from jail but were killed - and Luke told his readers of those events. Moreover, Luke must have known, though he does not mention it, that both Peter and Paul were dead²⁹ - killed by the Romans "for the sake of the gospel." Life is *not* fair and it will not always have a happy ending for a given individual - even for those we might term "holy" or somehow "deserving" of better. Even so, Jesus is Lord and God's reign

²⁷ The lyrics continue: "It may be the devil or it may be the Lord, but you're gonna have to serve somebody."

²⁸ See, for example, Matt 5:11-12; Mark 8:34-35; 2 Tim 1:8. Note: not all suffering can be categorized this way.

²⁹ Both Peter and Paul are thought to have been martyred somewhere between AD 62-68 in Rome. Luke-Acts were written somewhere between AD 80-90.

is advancing, even if not as fast or as dramatic as we would like. The kingdom of God is both “now and not-yet”; there is much more to come – but it *will* come. I find it helpful to liken it to builders of mediaeval Cathedrals. They saw their work as an important contribution to something for the glory of God, even though they knew they would never see it completed in their lifetime. A related image is that of a relay team in track and field. After a sprinter has run their leg, they pass on the baton to the next runner. This is one part of that paradigm shift in thinking that is a feature of a Christian worldview.

In conclusion, if you are saying to yourself today, “How I can get out of my mess?” Hear this bold, shocking, and non-trivial response: “Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.” And, like Theophilus, be encouraged by such prison escape stories; God’s Spirit is still present with us and is full of surprises. Some of those surprises are bold and powerful, many more are subtle. Nevertheless, they are all *transformative* contributions that are changing the world as it currently is into new life in God’s kingdom, where Jesus is Lord. Confidently hold on to that fact, by faith. Amen. Let us pray.