

PRISONBREAK  
Acts 16:16-34  
May 16, 2010

There are many reasons people end up in prison, most of which are justified by the crimes they commit.

One eminent attorney told the court how he had helped capture the defendant. He had been walking to his car after the theatre when he was mugged. During the commission of the crime, he recognized the mugger. "Look here," the attorney protested, "don't you recognize me? I'm the attorney that once saved you from a life sentence by proving you were crazy."

"Sure I remember you now," the mugger said as he continued his work. "and ain't holdin' up your lawyer a crazy thing to do?" (10,000 jokes, toasts and stories, Copeland, ed., Doubleday, 1965, pg. 115 #1156).

Though there are many ways and means people end up in prison, they all have only one thing on their minds once they're in—to get out by whatever means possible!

At one prison the warden stood before his assembled "guests" and told them "I've had charge of this prison for 10 years. We're going to celebrate. What kind of a party do you boys suggest?" To which the prisoners answered in unison, "an Open House." (Ibid., pg. 119 #1196).

The lure of freedom is always present when one is imprisoned, and the creative juices flow when all you have to think about is getting out. If you have the time, Google the top ten prisonbreaks in history and read about some of the most inventive ways people have broken free of the places that imprisoned them. A few of these real-life stories have been made into movies—"Escape from Alcatraz," "The Great Escape," among others.

[Second Service, Watch Shawshank Redemption clip](#)

This morning, our scripture offers us another prisonbreak story, but one that redefines the nature of prisons and freedom.

[Second Service Read the Text](#)

You heard \_\_\_\_\_ read Luke's report from the book of Acts this morning. The apostle Paul and his fellow disciple, Silas, were in Philippi, staying with their new friend and convert, Lydia. Each day they would go to the place where the faithful gathered in prayer, and on many of those days they encountered a young girl who was known for her ability to tell the future. For those of you who are Harry Potter fans, the Greek root for her ability is to speak in the tongues of serpents—or Parceltongue.

Our text tells us that the young girl was a slave, bound to men who used her unusual skill to make money for themselves. Whatever her abilities or, perhaps more realistically, her mental illness, the men who owned her would force her to tell the future of those who came to their stall in the market. She must have been fairly accurate because our text tells us that she brought her owners much gain.

But whenever she saw Paul and Silas, she would shout, "These men are servants of the Most High God." The scripture tells us that after repeatedly being confronted with the young girl's shouts, Paul was annoyed, and demanded that the spirit that possessed her come out.

This is the first break-out moment in our text today. I'm choosing to believe that Paul was not simply annoyed by the little girl's repeated shrill prophecy. I choose to believe that Paul was appalled at the way this girl was enslaved for other's benefits, and chose to step up and advocate for her, to help set her free from those who bound her.

As I read this part of the text today, I couldn't help but reflect about how our world continues to be involved with human trafficking, especially with the enslavement of little girls. Most of us assume that slavery ended in this country with the emancipation proclamation. But the US Department of Justice reported last year that in a 21 month period, over 1200 cases of human trafficking were uncovered in our country. Their report stated that "Most (83 percent) of the reported human trafficking incidents involved allegations of sex trafficking. Labor trafficking accounted for 12 percent of incidents, and other or unknown forms of human trafficking made up the remaining five percent. About a third (32 percent) of the 1,229 alleged human trafficking incidents

involved sex trafficking of children.” (<http://traffickingproject.blogspot.com/2009/01/usdoj-releases-trafficking-victim.html>).

We can't blame Paul too much for his delay in standing up for the girl when most of us don't like looking at the ugly realities of one of our darker sides of commerce in our own time. We like to believe we live in a more civilized time—that slavery is a dark blot on our past that has been erased in our present.

And, like us, he knew that there would be a price to pay for messing with the money-gaining operations of those nefarious slave-owners. It takes courage to stand up to evil-minded individuals who make money off the bodies of others.

Still, knowing that, Paul spoke up for her, and to her. He commanded the spirit that possessed her to come out of her, thereby disabling the money-making ability she brought her masters.

As a result, he and Silas suffered the consequences. The slave girl's owners seized them and brought them before the city magistrates, charging them with “disturbing the peace.” Apparently, these guys had influence in the city—probably because they had greased the hands of the city officials over the years with a portion of the ill-gotten gains.

Paul and Silas were stripped and beaten and then thrown into prison, their feet locked in stocks against the prison wall. And then we hear of the amazing moment when, as the two Christians were singing hymns and praying outloud together, an earthquake hit, shaking and breaking the foundations of the prison so that the prison doors were opened and the chains that bound them were torn free.

This could have made the #1 spot on Google's all time most spectacular prisonbreaks list. This could have been the piece de resistance of God's intervention in the world on behalf of Jesus Christ's followers!

But instead, our Christian heroes choose a different route. “The jailer wakes, and when he sees that the doors are open, he is horrified. Knowing what happens to jailers who permit their prisoners to escape he draws his sword and prepares to

do the honorable thing for disgraced jailers. Having the key to someone else's cell does not make you free. Iron bars do not a prison make.

"Paul shouts, 'Don't do it. We're all here, just singing.' The jailer says, 'but you were bound in chains, now you are free to escape.' Paul says, 'no, we prisoners are free, and you our jailer, were chained, but now you're free to escape.'

"And the jailer asks, 'What must I do to be saved?' In other words, 'What do I have to do to be free like you?'"

And Paul shared with him the Good News of Jesus Christ—a healing word for the jailer. The jailer, in response, too Paul and Silas home with him, washed their wounds in return, and then he and his whole household were baptized."

Preacher and professor William Willimon asks at the end of our text, "What is freedom? By the end of the story, everyone who at first appeared to be free—the girl's owners, the judges, the jailer, is a slave. And everyone who first appeared to be enslaved—the poor girl, Paul and Silas—is freed." (This section taken from the Interpretation Commentary on "Acts," William Willimon, John Knox Press. 1988. pg. 140.)

We Americans value our freedom more than anything else in the world. We fight for it. We are the destination for many in other nations who do not have it.

And yet, we still live behind locked doors, activating burglar alarms, building prisons faster than building other businesses.

What is true freedom?

The motivational speaker Zig Ziglar once shared this story about the great escape artist, Harry Houdini, who once claimed he could free himself from any jail cell in the country. Different counties around the country took him up on it, and he proved his claim was true in all but one instance.

Houdini entered the jail in a particular small town wearing his street clothes and heard the heavy metal doors clang behind him. He took from his belt a

concealed piece of metal, strong and flexible. He set to work immediately, but something seemed to be unusual about the lock. For 30 minutes he worked and got nowhere. An hour passed, and by now he was bathed in sweat and panting in exasperation. Finally, after laboring for nearly two hours, he collapsed in frustration and fell against the door he could not unlock. But when he fell against the door, it swung open. It had never been locked at all! (Ziglar, Zig. From Illustrations Unlimited. James L. Hewett, ed., Tyndale. 1988. pg. 225).

Jesus Christ came to remind us that true freedom was created in the beginning, and is still open to us today. But we keep locking ourselves in because of our tendency to sin. It's just common sense, friends. When we break the commandments by killing, or lying, or stealing, or disrespecting—we force ourselves to build walls to protect us from each other. When we break the laws of the land and the laws of God, we are forced to need prison cells with bars to keep us all safe.

Jesus tried to simplify it for us—Jesus said “If you just love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength; if you just love each other as you love yourself” you won't have need for prisons. When you really live God's way—the loving way—there will be no need for locks and bars.

Jesus gave us the key to the prison doors.

Paul and Silas were handing out those keys to all who had ears to hear.

And we can, too. That's the good news of Christ that we celebrate everytime we gather. We can step out of the prisons of our own making and into the freedom of our life on this earth IF WE COULD ALL LIVE like we believed it.

So first, we must take a look at our own lives, where we have locked ourselves into prisons of our own making. We must come clean, confess, make things right—we must repent—which means we must turn our lives around and quit hating and hurting and squandering this freedom we've been given.

Today is the day that someone in this room can break free of whatever it is that has been pinning you down, imprisoning your future and the fullness of your life.

And today is the day that we all have been granted the understanding that we, too, hold the key to other people's prisons—that by sharing the good news of Jesus Christ, we can help them live in freedom—true freedom.

At the end of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s famous "I have a Dream" speech, he ended with a line from the Negro Spiritual, "Free At Last." An updated version of the song was used in the more contemporary Broadway musical, *Big River*, the lyrics of which get to the essence of what Jesus offers us.

The song goes:

I wish by golly I could spread my wings and fly  
And let my grounded soul be free for just a little while  
To be like eagles when they ride upon the wind  
And taste the sweetest taste of freedom for my soul

CHORUS:

Then I'd be free at last, free at last  
Great God Almighty I'd be free at last

To let my feelings lie where harm can not come by  
And hurt this always hurtin' heart  
That needs to rest awhile  
I wish by golly I could spread my wings and fly  
And taste the sweetest taste of freedom for my soul

CHORUS:

Then I'd be free at last, free at last  
Great God Almighty I'd be free at last  
I'd be free at last, free at last  
Great God Almighty I'd be free at last