

“Breaking Chains”

Sunday, May 16, 2010—Seventh Sunday in Easter

Acts 16:16-34

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Things take a decidedly darker turn for Paul and Silas this morning as we continue to journey with them in Philippi, in northern Greece. Last week, by contrast, was a good week for these men as they went about spreading the Gospel to the non-Jewish world. The businesswoman Lydia and her entire family became followers of Christ, were baptized and invited Paul and his colleagues to stay with them. But today we find them stuck in much less comfortable accommodations—specifically, the local prison. Here’s how it happened.

Paul and Silas met up with a slave girl. Luke describes her as demon-possessed; today we would probably call her mentally unstable. She follows the apostles around, announcing to anyone who will listen that the apostles have the message of salvation. It’s the truth, but after a while, even Paul gets tired of hearing this woman shriek the truth. And so he commands the demon to leave her. Whether Paul was motivated more by compassion for the woman or by his own irritation with her shrieking and ranting is unclear. What is clear is that the woman was healed; her demons left her. Unfortunately for Paul and Silas, their problems were just beginning. You see, this woman had the gift of fortune telling. It was a popular form of entertainment, so her services were no doubt in demand; and the slave owners pocketed the fees. Now that her demons are gone, her gift of fortune telling has also disappeared. The slave owners were not happy about that. Indeed, they were furious. So they drag Paul and Silas before the local authorities. Their real complaint, of course, is that Paul and Silas have destroyed their profitable business, but they are smart enough not to come right out and say that. They know a better way to win people over to their side. They appeal to people’s fear of strangers and outsiders. “These foreigners are infiltrating our city!” They exclaim. “These do-gooder subversives are out to destroy Roman peace and order. Something must be done about them!”

Well, that was all the crowds needed to hear. Paul and Silas are stripped, beaten, and thrown in jail, where they are locked into leg irons to prevent escape. That’s how Paul and Silas ended up battered and bloody, housed in the most miserable surroundings. So, what do they do? Curse? Despair? Threaten lawsuits against their captors? Start trying to figure out how to get a sharp instrument smuggled to them in the lentil salad? No, they call a choir practice. They sing of the power of God, the power that has defeated death, the power that breaks down walls and barriers, the power that makes the impossible, possible.

Next thing you know, there is a powerful earthquake. It’s difficult to think about earthquakes these days without the recent horrors in Chile and Haiti coming to mind, but Luke tells us nothing about the impact of this particular earthquake outside the prison walls. We can only imagine that. But inside the prison, the effects of the quake are readily apparent. Door hinges break; locks crack; the prison doors hang open. Bright rays of sunshine penetrate into the damp, dark gloom.

It’s a Roman prison guard’s worst nightmare. The cells are open; clearly it’s only a question of time before all the prisoners head out for parts unknown. The guards are responsible for prison security. If the prisoners escape, they will be held accountable, and the fate awaiting them will not be a pleasant one. One guard rapidly concludes that death by suicide would be preferable, and he’s about to fall on his sword when Paul stops him. “Not to worry, sir, I know the prison walls have collapsed, but all your

prisoners are still right here, and we're just about to sing the last verse of "Christ the Lord is Risen Today." Don't harm yourself, please, everyone is present and accounted for."

Did you notice? Just about everybody in this story is captive to something. The slave girl—Paul frees her from her illness, but she remains a slave to her owners. The slave owners are preoccupied with profit and oblivious to the human suffering required to produce it. When Paul and Silas interfere with their economic self interest, they become captive to obsessive desire for revenge and retaliation. The crowds? They are enslaved to their fears and suspicions of outsiders. The magistrates? They know they better do what's necessary to keep the crowds under control if they want to keep their jobs—they, too, are captive to their fears. The jailer? He is probably a Roman soldier, battle savvy, proud to be a symbol of the authority of the mighty Roman Empire and its brutal opposition to the Christian movement. He knows all about power and authority. He knows who's captive and who's free—after all, he's in charge, the guy holding the keys. And then there's Paul and Silas, beaten up, locked up, literally behind bars—but wait! Locked up in prison, they sing hymns. So who are the real captives here? And who is really free?

The earthquake provides a whole new perspective on those questions. Paul and Silas are literally free to go, but instead they choose to stay. The bars and shackles are gone, but they decide to stick around the prison, so the life of another human being can be saved. Maybe freedom is about something more than my right to go and do as I please, and to heck with the rest of the world. Maybe freedom is about something more than looking out for me, myself, and I.

The jailer gets it. As he stands knee-deep in the earthquake debris, with all the trappings of his authority in ruins around him and his life in jeopardy, he realizes that Paul and Silas are connected with a power that makes prison walls, handcuffs, chains and bars look like so much rubble. In an instant, his perspective is transformed. He realizes his former prisoners have the answers to questions he desperately needs to ask: What gave them the hope that allowed them to sing hymns while in chains? When prison walls crumbled, what made them stick around to convince the guy who beat them up yesterday not to kill himself? So he asks: How can I get some of what you have? What must I do to be saved?

Eugene Peterson translates the jailer's question as: What do I have to do to really live? I like that way of putting it. I like it because the "being saved" terminology comes with so much baggage. "What must I do to be saved?" is a question that's forever linked in our minds with a too-simple answer. Believe in Jesus, you're saved, you go to heaven when you die. Period. End of discussion. It encourages thinking about faith as a once-and-done decision, rather than a lifetime process of growth and change.

But suppose we ask, what must I do to really live? Now that's a question that invites us to do some serious thinking. That's a question that invites more questions. Questions like, to what am I captive in my life? From what do I need to be freed so I can live a truly full and abundant life?

The list of things that can hold us captive is endless. This morning's text suggests a few of them. Materialism can enslave us, just as it enslaved the owners of the demon-possessed woman. We can be captives to a culture that tells us our value is found in what we have and what we own. We can be consumed with resentment for those who have more. We can be preoccupied with finding scapegoats to blame for what we feel has been taken from us, just as the slave owners were with Paul and Silas.

Misconceptions about power can enslave us. The jailer thought that having a uniform and a weapon and the keys to the cellblock made him powerful. He learned all of that can disappear in an instant. If our idea of power is bombs and weapons and the ability to control others and make them do our bidding, we

are not free. If we think freedom means never making commitments and being accountable to no one, then we are captive to the most powerful jailer of all, ourselves.

Our fears can imprison us. When we live in fear of those who are different, when we are so consumed with our own security that we cannot open our hearts to others, we are imprisoned. When we are so convinced that we know all the truth that we cannot hear those who think or believe differently, we are imprisoned.

What must we do to be free?

Paul and Silas are ready to answer that question. They said, “Put your entire trust in Jesus. Then you’ll live as you were meant to live—and everyone in your house included.” (Acts 16:30-31, The Message). Do you hear the emphasis on faith as a process, rather than a one-time event? Putting our entire trust in Jesus, that’s the task of a lifetime. Next thing you know, the jailer starts cleaning up Paul and Silas’ filthy wounds, the ones he himself may have inflicted. He and his family are baptized. Then he invites his former prisoners to his house and feeds them. He begins to live a completely different kind of life.

You see, that’s what the gospel is all about. It’s about God’s love for you, for me, for all people. It’s about God’s forgiveness and God’s amazing grace. It’s about the freedom to live a different kind of life, trusting God’s promise that nothing, not even our own death, will ever separate us from God’s love in Jesus Christ.

But the gospel is about more than just myself and my personal relationship to God. It’s about God’s dream of a different kind of world, a world at peace, a world of justice for all people, where children and the elderly are protected and cared for and no one is excluded because of their race, their religion, or their ethnic or cultural background.

The new life to which Jesus calls us is a life of commitment to helping making God’s dream for the world a reality. It’s about living that dream out loud, with all the passion and energy and love and creativity we can possibly muster.

Being free is ultimately about breaking the chains that bind us to ourselves and our private visions of the world. It’s about breaking away from the fears that keep us on the sidelines of our lives, and prevent us from committing ourselves to something larger and holier than ourselves.

Jesus Christ is the hope that allows us to sing in prison.

Jesus Christ is the earthquake with the power to break our chains.

May it be so, for you and for me.

All to God’s glory, honor, and praise.

Amen.