

**Circle of Mercy Sermon**  
**May 8, 2016**  
**Acts 16:16-34**

### **An Escape Without an Escape**

Paul and Silas were spending time in the city of Phillipi, a colony and outpost of the city of Rome. Phillipi was a city where the values of the Roman Empire ruled the lives of the people. Earlier in this chapter, Paul and Silas had visited with some women gathered at a place on the edge of the city known as a place of prayer - where they met a woman named Lydia, whose heart was opened to what Paul and Silas were saying, leading not only to her, but her entire household being baptized. After her conversion, she convinced Paul and Silas to stay in Phillipi a little longer.

And this is where our story to today picks up. Paul and Silas were on their way back to the place of prayer, when a girl who had “a spirit of divination” crossed their path. The girl could tell fortunes, predict the future. She was a slave, who made her owners a great deal of money through her power to tell people about the future.

For several days, she followed Paul and Silas through the city, crying out loudly, “These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of

salvation.” Let’s note that she wasn’t speaking lies about them. She was telling the truth about who they were and where their allegiance rested. But remember . . .

Phillipi was a city under control of the Roman Empire. Having this girl announce their presence and purpose probably wasn’t the best PR for Paul and Silas, but she persisted - for days.

And, you can probably imagine, how Paul and Silas might have reacted after a few days of this girl following them around, announcing their arrival before they had a chance to explain who they were, before they had a chance to choose the words that would be shared about them and their work. She was drawing the kind of attention that they didn’t necessarily want, the kind of showy and brash attention that could actually undermine their work and message.

I’m not surprised that, after many days of this girl following them, that they were maybe even plotting how to get from place to place via routes that would avoid crossing paths with her - to no avail. I’m guessing that their patience was wearing thin. In a moment of frustration and annoyance, Paul turned to her and said to the spirit within her “In the name of Jesus Christ, come out of her.” And just like that, the spirit was silenced.

For a split second, Paul and Silas may have thought that their problems were solved, but they weren't. Sure, they had silenced the spirit within this girl - who then disappeared from the scene. What they didn't expect was the response from the girl's owners, who were outraged that Paul and Silas had so easily eliminated their ability to exploit the girl in order to fill their own pockets with money.

The angry owners of the girl, immediately dragged Paul and Silas in front of the magistrates of the city to accuse them of inciting a disturbance within the city and encouraging/advocating customs that were not legal for citizens of the Roman Empire to observe or adopt. There wasn't much room for explanation or defense. In the accusations against them, the slave girl wasn't even mentioned explicitly.

They were simply accused of "disturbing our city." They were upsetting the status quo, that was never questioned or interrupted. There was no fair trial. They had disrupted the usual order and were promptly stripped, thrown into the crowd, beaten and flogged, and then thrown - bruised and beaten and shackled - into the innermost part of the jail.

But Paul, Silas and the other people being held in the prison were not the only captives in this story. The slave girl was captive to her owners. Her owners were captive to the rules and values of the Roman Empire, exploiting others for their

own personal gain. The jailer, who was given the task to watch over the prisoners, was captive to a system that punished anyone who threatened or challenged the way of life established by the Roman Empire. His own home was in the jail. The Roman system provided for him and his family, as long as he upheld and enforced the rules of the Empire.

Just as Paul and Silas thought they had silenced the spirit within the girl, the imperial leaders of the city of Phillipi probably thought that they had silenced Paul and Silas for good, but that wasn't the case either. The next verses tell us that at midnight, Paul and Silas were not silenced in the depths of the prison, bemoaning their plight. Instead, they were singing and praying. And the other prisoners were listening to them.

I couldn't help but think of the scene from the movie *Shawshank Redemption* when the prisoner Andy, the character played by Tim Robbins, locked himself in the warden's office, placed Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro* on the record player and started playing it. He then turned on the microphone that broadcast throughout the entire prison, turned it toward the record player, and the music played through the building of the prison and onto the prison yard. Everyone stopped and stood still.

The guards beat at the door. Andy turned the music up louder. He landed himself in solitary confinement for two weeks.

Later Andy tried to explain to his fellow prisoners what it was that had helped him survive and make it through his time in solitary - a box with no windows, no interaction with anyone else. The thing that had helped him survive was the music.

Andy pointed to his heart and said: “It was in here. That’s the beauty of music. They can’t get that from you. Haven’t you ever felt that way about music? Here’s where it makes the most sense. You need it so you don’t forget that there are places in the world that aren’t made of stone. That there’s something inside that they can’t get to, that they can’t touch. Hope.”

Andy’s fellow prisoner Red, played by Morgan Freeman, later reflected: “I have no idea what those Italian ladies were singing that day. I like to think they were singing about something so beautiful it can’t be expressed in words and makes your heart ache because of it. I tell you those voices soared higher and further than anybody in a gray place dares to dream. It was like some beautiful bird flapped into our drab little cage and made those walls dissolve away. And for the briefest of moments every last man at Shawshank felt free.”

Paul and Silas must have known something about this kind of hope and inner freedom. They must have recognized that no matter what their external circumstances might have been, that there were places within themselves where they could go that had no walls, no barriers, no way of being contained. So they went to those places deep within themselves. They sang. They prayed. They had already made their escape without setting foot outside the jail. They were already free before they had even arrived.

Don't we all long for that kind of freedom, the kind of freedom that comes from a source so deep within ourselves, that we can call upon it in the moments when all the other voices and circumstances around us tell us that we are anything but free? Don't we all long for that song to emerge within us that can take us to a place of calm centeredness despite what may be happening around us or to us? Don't we all long for that song so beautiful it can't be expressed in words that it makes your heart ache?

Thomas Merton spoke of this when he named the "hidden wholeness" that exists within all things that are visible. Merton recognized the source from which this kind of song emerged from Paul and Silas, as being birthed from the spark of the divine within us all. It is "a quality so deeply embedded in us, so fundamentally

strong, that it cannot be tarnished by our suffering, diminished by our fears, or fractured by our tragedies . . . it is a part of our soul that, unlike our bodies or our hearts, does not break.”<sup>1</sup>

We long for this kind of freedom because we are all held captive in one way or another. We are caught up and implicated in the messiness of the rules and values of the Empire - both externally and within ourselves. We are caught up in the ways that we personally attempt to protect ourselves - building up walls that isolate us from each other and that keep us even from knowing ourselves fully and honestly. And, if we are honest, we are all imprisoned in one way or another. We are all searching and yearning for a way to be released - for that hidden wholeness that sets us free no matter what imprisons and binds us.

The story didn't end neatly with Paul and Silas praying and singing contently in the jail, celebrating their inner freedom, while the other prisoners listened.

The next thing that happened was an earthquake that shook the foundations of the prison, opening all the doors and releasing the prisoners from their chains. This was a terrifying moment for the jailer, who had been charged with keeping watch

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<sup>1</sup> Muller, Wayne. *A Life of Being, Doing and Having Enough*. Three Rivers Press (New York, NY): 73.

over the prisoners. His livelihood and the livelihood of his family depended on his job performance, how well he kept the prisoners in line. Now, with the doors of the prison flung wide open and all the chains broken free, his own security and wellbeing were at risk. Failing to keep the prisoners contained, failing to do the primary part of his job, meant the end of life as he knew it. The foundation of his personal world had been shaken so violently, that in the crisis of the moment, the only thing he could think to do, the only way out of this mess was to end his life.

As the jailer raised his sword to take his life, he was stopped by Paul's voice from within the prison. "Don't harm yourself. We are all here."

Paul's voice broke the tension of the moment. Perplexed, the jailer called for a light to be brought into the prison. When he rushed in with the light and found Paul and Silas still in the prison, he fell down trembling. Then he took them outside and asked them immediately what he needed to do to be saved.

This question might have surprised the jailer himself. It was probably not a question that he expected to ask Paul and Silas. His duty was to contain and restrain them, not to engage them in conversation about what it was that gave them freedom in the midst of being held captive.

What is it about the moments in our lives that shake us to core of our very foundation, when we feel like we are completely out of control of the circumstances around us, when the path that we have so clearly planned and committed ourselves to is spinning so wildly off the course we have charted, what is it about these moments, that our questions have the ability to tell us so clearly what we most need – if we are willing to actually ask them.

What is it about these kind of falling on our knees moments that bring us to a sudden sense of clarity and lucidity that no amount of planning, anticipating and organizing could ever do?

You have known such moments, haven't you, those times that have brought the most essential questions that you need to ask to the forefront – questions that surprise you, catch you off guard – questions that you might be afraid to ask out loud?

What the jailer did was allow himself to respond to the present moment. He might not have fully understood the implications of his response in that moment, but he felt the power of something beyond himself - something even beyond Paul and

Silas. But it was in their presence that he witnessed a freedom that could not be contained by any chains or walls erected around them. They had already escaped before they ever set foot inside the prison.

After hearing (along with everyone in his household) that what he needed to do was believe, the jailer took Paul and Silas and washed their wounds, and then his whole family was baptized. They were all invited into the experience of inner freedom and hidden wholeness that they had witnessed and learned about from Paul and Silas.

Remember from the text that it was after he washed their wounds and they were baptized that the jailer then brought Paul and Silas “up into the house” and fed them a meal. The jailer’s house was actually part of the jail itself. Paul and Silas were not set free physically yet. They were still prisoners.

So, the jailer’s first acts of escape as a captive in the system of the Empire took the form of cleansing and washing Paul and Silas’ wounds and breaking bread with them alongside his family, all while Paul and Silas technically, were still imprisoned, under the rule of the Empire. He had a choice to make, and he made

the choice that led him a few steps closer to freedom and wholeness, even while he was still tangled up within the system of the Empire.

Writer Wayne Muller says: “Our choices are sacraments. They lift up invisible, sacred truths and, through the process of choosing and acting, make them manifest and alive in the world. Our choices may seem like small, tender things, insignificant in the eyes of the very big and complicated story of the world. But, like a small piece of bread or a tiny sip of wine, they hold great power and meaning in our lives, and they can change the shape and destiny of more people and events than we will ever know.”

Back to *Shawshank Redemption* - Andy’s fellow prisoner Red had been very skeptical of Andy’s tenacious, inner commitment to hope. At one point Red says: “Hope is a dangerous thing. Hope can drive you insane. It comes down to a simple choice, really. You get busy living or you get busy dying.”

In his critique and warning about hope - that it is dangerous and can drive you insane – I think Red gets it exactly right. It does come down to a simple choice - “You get busy living or you get busy dying.”

We have a choice to make. We can get busy living or we can get busy dying. So let's listen closely, together, for the song within us that is so beautiful it can't be expressed in words and makes our hearts ache because of it. When we begin to recognize and sing that song together, we come a little bit closer to knowing what real freedom looks like, and we come a little bit closer realizing that there are, in fact places that are not made of stone and that our escape might already be possible, right where we are.

Amen.