

John 17:20-26

‘I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.

‘Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.’

Acts 16:16-34

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. 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.” 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. 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. When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, “These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe.” The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. 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. 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. But Paul shouted in a loud voice, “Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.” The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them outside and said, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” They answered, “Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.” They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. 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.

Way back, in Jesus' first recorded sermon, he announced that he was here on Earth to "bring good news to the poor. ... to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, [and] to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."¹ Jesus does that. He brings good news to the poor. He heals the blind and the sick and the lame. He restores people to relationships and to their place in the community.

Last week, we spoke about the conversion of Saul and his name change to Paul. He was blinded by the light and healed by the same power of God that blinded him. He has since been promoting Jesus Christ and the Church with the same enthusiasm that he had previously brought to persecuting them. He has traveled all through Turkey and Greece, and he and his travelling companion Silas are now in Macedonia, which is just north of Greece.

This story is not the first time that Jesus' name has opened literal prison doors. Shortly after Pentecost, the high priest has the apostles thrown in jail for preaching about Jesus. The next morning finds them back in the Temple, teaching just like before.² Later, King Herod kills the Apostle James and has Simon Peter arrested. That night, an angel rescues Peter from prison. He walks out of the city a free man.³

This time, too, Paul and Silas are arrested unjustly. They are under arrest for "disturbing the peace" – for "damaging" a slave girl by expelling a spirit from her. Their captors beat them, and then lock them up about as securely as is possible. They lock them in the innermost room of the jail, with their feet locked in heavy stocks.

¹ Luke 4:18-19.

² Acts 5:17-26.

³ Acts 12:1-17.

Just like the other two stories in Acts of prisoners freed, all the obstacles are miraculously bypassed. An earthquake opens all the prison doors and releases the chains and the stocks while Paul and Silas are singing hymns.

But, unlike the other two stories, the prisoners don't hurry out of the jail.

We don't know what punishment the jailor is anticipating, that he believes suicide is a better outcome, but clearly it is bad. He sees the doors standing open and gets ready to kill himself before the city officials discover what has happened.

Paul sees this and stops him from doing anything so drastic. Paul shows him that, to his surprise, all the prisoners are still there in the jail.

Later in the story Paul and Silas even refuse to leave the jail quietly when they are officially set free – they are Roman citizens, so they have rights, rights that the city leaders violated when they beat Paul and Silas and threw them in jail. But that is another sermon.

Just because no prisoner escapes, however, does not mean that no captive is set free. The irony is that it is the jailor who is set free! When he sees Paul and Silas unperturbed by prison, and the miracle of the prison being opened and that the prisoners have not run for the hills, he asks the question, “What must I do to be saved [like you are]?”

That question echoes back to the story of Pentecost, when Peter tells this huge crowd the story of Jesus Christ, and, when he's done, they ask, “What must we do?” On Pentecost, Peter and the disciples baptize the crowd, and the church begins a new phase as more than a local movement.⁴

⁴ Acts 2:37-38

Here in Macedonia, Paul does the same thing. The jailor washes Paul and Silas' wounds, and then Paul and Silas baptize the whole household.⁵ Not only the man and his wife, but also their children, their servants, their servants' children. It must have been quite a production.⁶

The man who had imprisoned Paul and Silas now hosts them in his house for a feast where he and his household rejoice that he has become a believer in God.

The jailor has been set free from feeling trapped in his situation. He has been set free from the fear that had him ready to commit suicide rather than to face the city leaders and disappoint them.

Paul and Silas are examples for us. Examples of how we can serve God and how God can use us, even when we are going through tough times in our own lives.

Often, we think of stewardship and service in terms of giving and working out of our abundance – we give out of what God has blessed us with. That's right, but only when we understand all the abundance we've received. The abundance that God has given us includes money and property and other material things, but all that is the smaller and less important portion of the abundance with which God has blessed us.

If the Cross and the Resurrection mean anything at all, they mean that God has granted us an abundance of grace! Grace that fills our lives with meaning and purpose even when it seems that everything is against us.

⁵ Acts 16:33.

⁶ This is one of the times when infant baptism was clearly practiced in the Early Church.

We all experience the feeling of being trapped or imprisoned in our lives at one time or another.

We may be physically imprisoned, in jail, in our homes, or in a place we do not want to be. This may be because someone else holds the literal key, or it may be because of illness, or injury, or poverty.

We may be socially imprisoned, stuck with people who are not good for us and seemingly unable to change our situation.

We may be emotionally imprisoned, going around in circles and unable to make a breakthrough to get out of a vicious cycle.

We may be trapped in a job. Hating the job, knowing that it is not fulfilling, knowing that it does not use the gifts God gave us, but fearing to quit because of money or because of needing, say, health insurance for ourselves or a family member.

We have all experienced that feeling of being imprisoned. It is real and can be very powerful in our lives. Some of you may be feeling that way right now.

But the good news is that that situation, no matter what it is, does not get the last word in our lives. That last word is reserved for God — the God to whom we pray and of whom we sing in good times and bad. The God who is revealed to us not only in the Resurrection, but also in the cross of Jesus Christ.

Paul and Silas did not have to walk out of that broken prison door to be free. They already were free. The jailor just didn't know it yet. Paul and Silas already had such an abundance of God's love and grace that it was spilling out of them, onto the people around them.

This is how we can practice stewardship of the amazing grace that God has given us. We practice stewardship of property when we take care of it, making it better than when we found it, and when we use it for God's purposes in the world. We practice stewardship of money when we use it for God's works in the world.

We practice stewardship of God's grace when we let it go through us and show up in every fiber of our being. When other people see it in us, even when we're not trying to affect them, it's just how we are.

Christ's birth, life, death, and resurrection, mean that the worst thing in life is never the last thing. Even death itself does not get the last word.

We practice stewardship of God's grace when we live like that is the Truth that we know it is. When other people can see that grace in us in how we deal with difficult situations or difficult people.

You don't have to make the first move. Jesus Christ already did that. We celebrated that three weeks ago on Easter Sunday, and we celebrate that every Sunday. But we should respond.

When we pray, God gives us what we need to live our lives full of God's grace. When we live our lives full of grace, it breaks vicious cycles.

It may change the people around us. It may make them treat us differently. It may make them treat each other differently.

Or it may not change them.

But I guarantee it will change us.

So, this next week, I challenge you, when you feel that you are trapped or imprisoned in a situation, remember God's grace to you. No matter how bad the situation is, it is not permanent.

No matter how bad the situation is, Jesus Christ gets the last word.

And then pray.

Pray for God to give you strength.

Pray for God to give you comfort and assurance.

Pray for God to give you grace that you can show others.

If you do that, it's not so hard to give someone else the benefit of the doubt, or to cut them some slack.

It's not so hard to help someone who is trapped, even if it looks like it's their own fault.

It's not so hard to be gracious to others, even if they are not being gracious to you.

Jesus Christ gets the last word.

Every time. Always.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.