

Acts 16:16-34

I've heard the book of Acts described as being a lot like your uncle's holiday slideshow. It starts off interesting and exciting, but it slows down slide by slide, and by the end it's hard to keep your eyes open let alone be excited about the content. All the excitement of the early chapters – the miracles and supernatural happenings eventually give way to apparently mundane and repetitive legal proceedings.

In fact, bible studies on the book of acts quite often fizzle out somewhere in the middle chapters.

But we are blessed today with a part of chapter 16, in which we get demon possession, an exorcism, an arrest and a beating, followed by imprisonment, supernatural intervention, and rather than the expected miraculous escape, we get an intriguing twist.

It is exciting, but it's also puzzling. It is stuff that is mostly beyond our experience, and besides that we often downplay anything supernatural in the modern church.

Our reading starts on the streets of Philippi. Paul and Silas and their group of followers are going to a place of prayer – and they are met by a female slave. Slaves certainly weren't uncommon in Philippi – or in the first century world in general – but this one was special. [She] had a spirit by which she predicted the future.

What an amazing thing to have. What a useful ability. And we read that it was used to make money for her owners by fortune telling. But on this day, rather than selling fortune telling sessions to make money for her owners she started following Paul and the others shouting "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved."

She's telling the truth. It's what we know to be true, Paul and the others are the servants of God, and they are telling the people the way to be saved.

It may have even been helpful – if the people of Philippi knew that this slave woman was able to predict the future accurately, they may have also accepted what she said about Paul.

While she knew and shared the truth, though, there was a problem: she didn't stop. She followed them around for days shouting, over and over again, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved."

They wouldn't have been able to share their message, to actually tell the people about Jesus, because of this woman's incessant shouting. Even though she was shouting something true... she was stopping people hearing the gospel. The good news of Jesus.

"Finally," in verse 18 we read "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.

Paul had been patient. He had put up with the distraction of this woman's accurate declaration for days. And then he commanded the spirit to come out of her. In the name of Jesus Christ come out of her.

That's all it took. I'm not generally a fan of horror movies, but I know what Hollywood movies portray the driving out of spirits. Lots of holy water, and speaking in Latin, and holding up crucifixes and all the rest of it.

But that stuff is far removed from what Luke tells us about here in the book of Acts. Paul simply says, "In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!", and at that moment the spirit left the woman.

In that, Paul got rid of the spirit, and he got rid of the distraction and disruption to their ministry in Philippi. In this act he probably even showed the power of Jesus to the people of Philippi.

Wow.

But the problem was that in casting out the spirit, he made that slave less valuable. In the face of the power of God displayed in Philippi... what mattered was the slave-owners' income.

"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. They brought them before the magistrates and said, "These men are Jews, and are throwing our city into an uproar by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice."" (19-21)

They don't even tell the magistrates what the problem is. They make some claims that these men, who have been trying to go about their mission, have been throwing the city into an uproar – which doesn't seem to have been the case at all.

So many things in life come back to money. People will put up with an awful lot of things, but threaten their income, and they get angry.

And the crowd, as crowds so often do, jumped on the bandwagon. Just as we know the crowds joined in the leader's cry of "Crucify him" on good Friday, they joined in the attack on Paul and Silas.

It seems that it wasn't only the crowd that joined in the attack, the magistrates did too – they ordered Paul and Silas to be stripped and beaten with rods.

And then in verse 23 we read that After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully.

These weren't robbers. They weren't murderers. They weren't terrorists. They were missionaries. And it seems that poor Silas hadn't even said a word.

But when he received these orders, [the jailer] put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks. This is the first century equivalent of supermax. These were important

prisoners – potentially dangerous prisoners, according to their accusers – and the jailer was going to take no chances in securing them.

They were there for no reason except for being the faithful, obedient that Jesus had called them to be – right back at the beginning of the book of Acts (1:8) to “...be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth”.

They did the right thing. They did the Godly thing. And they were stripped and beaten and thrown into prison for it.

Jesus never said following him would be easy; and in fact the scriptures are clear that the opposite was true – Jesus had told his disciples that trouble was not a possibility, rather it was an absolute certainty, John 16:33: “I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”

I guess you have noticed by now that this life is hard. Being a follower of Jesus is hard going. Jesus said we need to take up our crosses and follow him.

We know that there will be some rough times along the way – for us as individuals, for us as a congregation and for us as a whole church.

There will be times when trials and suffering will dominate our lives, even as we work to follow Jesus.

We lose people we love, we suffer disease and our bodies become frail, we see people turn away from us, and from the church, and so often life hurts.

And all the good deeds, good prayers, good hopes, good wishes, and good thoughts will not be able to prevent us from going into a metaphorical prison from time to time.

It's tough. It's a tough message.

And wouldn't it be wonderful if I could declare to you that life is all joyful and loving and we won't suffer? Or even if I could say to you that that life could be like that if only we loved each other more, or if only we did more good deeds, or if only we prayed harder or whatever?

But I can't do that, because it's just not true. It might be tempting to believe such things - and some people will happily tell you those things - but scripture tells us, and our very life experience tells us, that that's not true.

There's a great line in the movie *The Princess Bride*, “Life is pain, highness. Anyone who says differently is selling something.”

But pain, misery, suffering and anguish isn't the end of the story.

When Paul and Silas found themselves in prison, they were hurting, humiliated and in need of some encouragement.

They'd done the right thing and had carried the gospel to Philippi, and now they were they were sitting in squalor, chained in a cruel Roman prison.

Roman justice was brutal. There was no way they could talk their way out. No escape. No one was going to rescue them.

So in this dark place, they turned to the only source of help available to them. They turned to God, and they lifted their hearts to God in prayer.

Verse 25, About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them.

They were praying and praising God. And the other prisoners listened. Even in chained up in prison, they were following Jesus' command to witness to the people.

But "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. "

When first reading this passage to prepare for this morning, I started singing 'And can it be?' to myself. Verse 4 that great hymn really seems to echo this passage:

"Long my imprisoned spirit lay, fast bound in sin and nature's night

Thine eye diffused a quickening ray – I woke, the dungeon flamed with light!

My chains fell off, my heart was free, I rose, went forth, and followed thee"

Of course, Charles Wesley, wasn't talking about a physical dungeon or physical chains, but the figurative dungeon and chains of our lives if we don't know and put our faith in Jesus.

But there's also a contrast between that hymn and Paul and Silas' story:

My chains fell off, my heart was free, I rose, went forth, and followed thee.

But their chains fell off, and they stayed exactly where they were.

Imagine this: You are in a miserable prison. And the doors open and your chains come loose. What do you do? I think that most of us would be making a break for it.

But Paul and Silas didn't.

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. As a jailer, he was responsible for his prisoners with his life. If he was found to have failed in his duty, he would have been stripped and beaten, he would have been executed, likely slowly and painfully. Falling on his sword would have been preferable.

But Paul shouted, verse 28, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!"

After everything that's happened to him and Silas, Paul is concerned for the jailer. The jailer who is responsible for at least part of their suffering. I'm reminded of Jesus praying from the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing".

The jailer had lights brought in, honoured the missionaries, and brought them out.

Then he asked "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

He knew what they were there for – after all there had been a slave girl shouting out to all and sundry for days – he’d witnessed God’s power in the earthquake, and he’d now seen God’s compassion – God’s love – in Paul not running, and instead saving the jailer’s own life.

He knows that Paul and Silas have the good news, are sharing the way to the kingdom of God, but he doesn’t know how to respond, and so he asks them.

Verse 31 gives us the key: they replied, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household.”

The good news, say Paul and Silas, isn’t just for him, but it’s for his family and his household too.

Paul tells us in his letter to the romans “If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved” (Romans 10:9).

Our church’s mission, Christianity’s mission, is to tell people everywhere about Jesus, praying that the day will come when they will come to know God through Jesus. Those who believe are accepted into God’s family as they acknowledge that Jesus is the son of God who died for us, and rose again to open the way to eternal life.

And then we read in the final verses of our reading that “Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his household were baptized. 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.”

And so the story has a happy ending. But it is a strange story. And it’s a story that is at one level quite foreign to our own experiences.

But at another level, I think it’s a story that I think we can relate to: Whether it’s the missionaries being distracted and annoyed by the shouting in the streets, or love of money shown by the slave owners, or the persecution by the hostile crowd and the unjust magistrates, or the darkness of a metaphorical prison. Or the power of God even in the darkest times. Or the love of God shown through the compassion of Paul and Silas. Or the joy of salvation that the jailer and his household came to know.

That joy is on offer for us. That’s not to say that we won’t go through hard times and dark places, but that joy, that hope is there for each one of us and for all us.

We need to turn to Jesus in faith, to put our hope, and our future in his hands.

Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved

Amen.