

**Scripture Lesson: Acts 16:16-24**

Pew Bible N.T. pg. 128

<sup>16</sup> One day as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a female slave who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling. <sup>17</sup> While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, "These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation." <sup>18</sup> 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. <sup>19</sup> 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. <sup>20</sup> When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, "These men, these Jews, are disturbing our city <sup>21</sup> and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us, being Romans, to adopt or observe." <sup>22</sup> The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. <sup>23</sup> After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. <sup>24</sup> Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

**Special Music: "What Did He Die For?"**

w/m by Twila Paris

*Bethany Tomasino, Soloist – Bryan Latimer, Piano***Scripture Lesson: Acts 16:25-40**

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<sup>25</sup> About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. <sup>26</sup> 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. <sup>27</sup> 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. <sup>28</sup> But Paul shouted in a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." <sup>29</sup> The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. <sup>30</sup> Then he brought them outside and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" <sup>31</sup> They answered, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." <sup>32</sup> They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. <sup>33</sup> At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. <sup>34</sup> 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. <sup>35</sup> When morning came, the magistrates sent the police, saying, "Let those men go." <sup>36</sup> And the jailer reported the message to Paul, saying, "The magistrates sent word to let you go; therefore come out now and go in peace." <sup>37</sup> But Paul replied, "They have beaten us in public without a trial, even though we are Roman citizens, and have thrown us into prison, and now are they going to discharge us in secret? Certainly not! Let them come and take us out themselves." <sup>38</sup> The police reported these words to the magistrates, and when they heard that they were Roman citizens, they were afraid, <sup>39</sup> so they came and apologized to them. And they took them out and asked them to leave the city. <sup>40</sup> After leaving the prison, they went to Lydia's home, and when they had seen and encouraged the brothers and sisters there, they departed.

**Response to the Word**

One: This is the Word of God for the people of God

**All: Thanks be to God!**

Acts 16:16-40  
05/25/2025 – Saginaw First U.M.C.  
“Calling for Light”  
Rev. Amy Terhune

“A young soldier and his commanding officer got on a train together. The only available seats were across from a very attractive young lady who was traveling with her grandmother. As they engaged in pleasant conversation, the soldier and the young lady kept eyeing one another; there was an obvious mutual attraction. Suddenly the train went into a tunnel and the car became dark. Immediately two sounds were heard: the “smack” of a kiss, and the “whack” of a slap across the face. The grandmother thought, *“I can't believe he kissed my granddaughter, but at least she had the good sense to give him the slap he deserved.”* Meanwhile, the commanding officer thought to himself, *“I don't blame the boy for kissing the girl, but it's a shame that she missed his face and hit me instead.”* And the young girl thought, *“I'm glad he kissed me, but I do wish grandmother hadn't slapped him for doing it.”* And as the train broke into the sunlight, the soldier carefully concealed a smile. He had just seized an opportunity: he got to kiss a pretty girl and slap his commanding officer; and he had gotten away with both!” [from *The Story File 1001 Contemporary Illustrations for Speakers, Writers and Preachers* by Steve May (Peabody, MA; Hendrickson Publishers, 2000) pg. 219-220.]

Like the young soldier, events are conspiring around Paul and Silas that put them in position to seize a wonderful opportunity—they save a young woman, convert a family to Christ, and publicly demonstrate the inability of secular authority to sabotage the work of God in the world. And like the young soldier, Paul and Silas are quick in their thinking. Their eyes are open and they're ready for the opportunities God puts before them.

This is a story about being ready—about faith that expects and plans on God's intervention. But even more than that, this is also a story about freedom, and it is masterfully told. Some of you may not, perhaps, be aware that the book of Acts is written by Luke (who also, of course, wrote the Gospel). The two, in fact, form one continuous story of God's salvation before and after the resurrection of Christ. Both are addressed to Theophilus, and more so than Matthew or Mark, Luke is a literary genius. He has the power to focus themes through his language. For those of you who are into that kind of literary analysis, watch how the use of language unfolds here. Luke is focusing in on the major Gospel theme: through faith in Christ, we find freedom—freedom from ailment, freedom from bondage, freedom from sin. The wise Christian is ready—expecting God's freedom at every turn.

Our story begins innocently enough. Paul and his companions have arrived at Philippi in Macedonia to share the gospel. They are not met with much success. They do manage to convert a few women to the faith, among them a prosperous independent widow named Lydia, but that's about it. Day in and day out, they preach in the marketplaces and squares of the town, and meet constant ridicule. Philippi, after all, is thoroughly Greek and somewhat anti-Semitic. The one claim to fame for Paul and his companions is the dubious pronouncement from a deranged teenage girl who is possessed by a spirit. The girl follows them around shouting out that they are SLAVES of the most High God. She's not helping their credibility any, that's for sure. Imagine wandering the streets, being laughed at when you know you're telling them the most important message they'll ever hear, and being followed by a crazy person who mimics your message! Sound frustrating? After about a week, Paul mumbles under his breath to Silas that if that girl opens her mouth one more time, he'll throttle her! When she does cry out her message again, Paul's irritation and annoyance boils over, and he

barks at the spirit: *I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her! Go away!* And out it comes.

Now let me pause here, just for a moment, and confess that I've always been a little troubled by this story. Years ago, in another parish, I did a funeral for a woman who suffered from schizophrenia. When I met with the family to plan the service, I learned that this brave soul who had so blessed my life and our church lived in a world of constant noise. Even on medication, she heard whispers and voices nearly every waking moment. I can't imagine what that's like, but I know it takes a sacred courage to get up, put one foot in front of the other, and embrace another day when you live with constant noise in your head. I don't know what this young girl in our lesson today lived with day by day, but most scholars equate it with some form of mental illness. The original text said she had a *Pneuma Pythōna*, or a python spirit, which Greeks in those days associated with clairvoyance, but which I tend to think may have been something slowly squeezing the life out of her. I so wish this lesson told us that Paul looked into her eyes and saw her anguish. I wish it said that he was indignant and grieved at the thought of a child being enslaved and exploited. I wish it said that Paul felt compassion for her and wanted to bring her freedom and fullness of life in her right mind. But it doesn't say that. She angered him and he lost his cool.

The question it begs of me is: who else gets forgotten, side-lined, and silenced? Many of you know that I'm a big fan of the TV show NCIS. When my phone rings, it plays the NCIS theme song. One of the reasons I like the show has nothing to do with the cast or the plot or the character development. I like it because when the show aired in 2003, we were heading to war. As veterans began returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, beginning in 2008, NCIS turned the spotlight on their plight, featuring episodes that dealt with PTSD, loss of limbs, readjustment to civilian life, and veteran homelessness – every single season year in and year out. Interestingly, since 2008, Veteran homelessness has decreased by more than 50%. But even today, there are still 40,000 homeless vets on the street. Public pressure to support the VA, and to increase mental health resources for veterans spikes every time an NCIS episode features the issue. You can correlate NCIS episodes with call volumes to congress. Google it – it's out there. This Memorial Day, we remember those who made the ultimate sacrifice. But we also remember those who continue to live in a war zone in their minds, in their families, or in their sleep. I'm grateful there's a TV show that won't let us forget their suffering.

Paul heals this girl in annoyance, but he doesn't forget because this is where the trouble begins. That girl is a slave to the spirit that possesses her, and both the spirit and the girl are slaves to men, who are slaves to commerce and to profit. Slavery's just running rampant here, and yet, the irony is that the only slave mentioned is Paul, the slave of the Most High God. He's the most free of the bunch, and he's the one doing the freeing! (Well, God through him, but they don't know that.)

He frees the girl from the spirit and thus, from the men using her for their own gain, which means they are now out a portion of their income. Now, even in that society—one very unjust by today's standards—one couldn't very well approach the authorities and report that a man cast a demon from a girl one has been exploiting for profit. So they have to trump up some charges—obscure and ambiguous ones. "These men are Jews. They're disturbing our city and advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe." Who knows what that means?

The legal authorities and the crowd assume that because they are Jews, they're second-class citizens, and they have a field day. Paul isn't given the opportunity to point out that he's a Roman citizen before they strip him, flog him and throw him in jail. Later that evening, Paul and Silas awaken to their surroundings. They're in pain, but alive. They're in jail, but together. They're in chains and stocks, but their voices are unfettered. And so they sing.

Let me ask you something? When life hits the worst moments, when you look back and think about the most difficult parts of your journey, could you sing in those moments? I couldn't. My heart, at times, has been so heavy that I can't choke out a sound. And yet, in those moments, the music of others ministers to me. Song speaks to the deepest part of who we are. I'm no scientist, but there's tons of documented evidence out there – singing is good for us. Music is good for us. When we're hurting, when we're grieving, when we're scared or lost or worried, music is literally a balm for the soul. Even patients with severe dementia can sing. Sometimes those who haven't said a word in years will respond to a sung phrase. Almost invariably, a baby stops crying when there's music. There's a reason Maria von Trapp sings about My Favorite Things. There's a reason all those freedom riders sang in prison during the darkest days of the civil rights protests. There's a reason that teenagers feel the call of Christ around a campfire at church camp as counselors strum their guitars in the firelight. And there's a reason all those prisoners in that jail centuries ago listen to Paul and Silas sing and pray. Music is ministry. Music is a witness. Music is a human necessity. Life without music will kill us, our culture, our sense of beauty, our health. Every Sunday, I come to worship. I already know what the sermon's going to say. Where do I get fed? In those moments when I can breathe deep and listen to the music.

Years ago, a young clergyman was on a ship sailing back to England. A storm rose up and he was afraid for his life. But down at the other end of the hull, a group of Moravians were singing. Even the children. How are they not afraid? He wondered. Convinced in his soul that they had something he did not, he began to meet with them, worship with them, study with their leaders, trying to understand. Then, 287 years ago last night – May 24, 1738, he went very unwillingly to a Moravian society meeting on Aldersgate Street where one was reading Luther's preface to the Romans. John Wesley writes, "About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death." He found his faith because they sang in a storm.

When everything went wrong, Paul and Silas prayed and sang. And the prisoners listened. And whatever they heard in those prayers and songs was more captivating than the fetters that held them, that's all we know for sure. Because when an earthquake comes to shake open their cells and shake off their chains, they stay—all of them. Which is odd. The natural response of one imprisoned is to escape if God opens away. But they don't.

Meanwhile, the jailor, sensing what has happened comes to the jail to find the door hanging open and makes the logical assumption—that he has a mass breakout on his hands. And knowing he'd be held responsible for the catastrophe, he considers taking the easy way out by taking his own life. Imagine what goes through his mind as he hears these prisoners singing and talking inside, assuring him that they're all still there. The text reports that he calls for light, which is a masterful bit of storytelling on Luke's part. Because the world is still calling for light. And it's our job to carry it into the darkened dungeons of human experience.

He called for light so that he could see the possibilities of new life. Maybe he was tired of running a prison. Maybe he wanted something that opened doors instead of closing them. Charley Reeb tells about a friend of his experienced that kind of hope. She lives in New York City and was in Times Square on the morning of September 11, 2001, when terrorists turned the World Trade Center into rubble. A few days after the attack, still dazed and upset, she got on the subway for the first time since the attack. It was packed, and not a word was spoken. She looked around for a place to hold on as the train moved, but all the poles and seats were covered with hands. There must have been a sense of deep disappointment on her face because a huge, muscular, African-American man looked down at

her, stuck out his bulging arm, and said, "Hold on to me. We have got to hold on to each other." As she wrapped her small hands around his rock-solid arm, she tried to remember when she had felt something so strong and so secure. Soon tears began to run down her cheek. Seeing her tears, the man wrapped his arm around her shoulder and decided to hold her until she got off the train. [from "More Beyond" by Charley Reeb, [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com).]

That jailor called for light, and when it flared, he not only saw possibilities—he saw the power of God's love. After all, love is what really lights up our world. And no doubt, love is what held all those prisoners in place when they could have fled. I wonder if they heard Paul telling about how God's grace sets us free from the sins of our past. I wonder if Silas told them the story of Jesus offering a place in paradise to the thief who was crucified with him. I wonder if they heard about how God loves the unloveable, how God is with us in our lowest moments. Whatever he heard, it led to faith, to a family baptism, and to the birth of the church in Philippi!

What are we to do when circumstances in life conspire against us—shackle our dreams and plunge us into a darkened tunnel—when things aren't looking up and hope is hard to come by? A young boy named Harry had to answer that question. He gave evidence of brilliance on the piano even as a child. In addition to being gifted, Harry had such discipline that at the age of seven he was at the keyboard by five each morning. He practiced faithfully for hours each day. His instructor grew more and more confident that he would eventually reach greatness.

When Harry was 15, his instructor brought news to her star pupil. Paderewski, the greatest pianist of the day was coming to town. The young boy was thrilled as he listened to Paderewski play. The instructor took her pupil backstage after the concert to meet Paderewski. With trembling voice, the young boy told the world-renowned pianist that he played his minuet. "There is a part of it," young Harry explained, "that I do not know how to execute." Paderewski walked back with the boy to the empty stage and to the piano. The boy sat at the same piano where Paderewski had played only a few minutes before. As the student played, Paderewski gave a smile of approval to the boy's teacher. A bright future seemed open before him.

But the next year Harry's father lost everything in the Kansas City grain market. Harry had to go to work, and his dreams of the concert stage were shattered.

Did the boy give up on life? Did he let this closed door imprison his spirit? Not at all, for this young, gifted, promising pianist followed a path he didn't expect. Whatever his faults, he seized opportunities and capitalized on whatever life threw at him. He continued to depend on the discipline that had made his musical career promising. His name was Harry S. Truman, 33<sup>rd</sup> President of the United States. [adapted from <http://www.revwaltermwambazi.com/2011/02/reflections-from-shack-some-antidotes.html>.]

This lesson from Acts troubles me and tests me. But it also inspires me. There are folks who need to be remembered, loved, cared for. There is justice to be done to bring healing to people and planet. We learn that when we pass through a dark tunnel, we must be ready, think quickly, seize opportunities. We learn that when we face trials and uncertainty, we must know that God's plan WILL be accomplished. We must learn to find faith to sing and pray, even when in shackles. We learn that those trials, those uncertain and perilous moments, the pressing darkness, the closed doors—these are not an end. Hope lives in what we do with those moments. These are opportunities to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ with our songs, our choices, our lives, and our love. Thanks be to God. Amen.