

NO PRISON STRONG ENOUGH

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Lamington Presbyterian Church

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Psalm 105:23-45; Acts 16:16-34

***“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.”***

Acts 16:26

Thirty-six years is a long time. Archie Williams knows exactly how long it is. That's how many years he spent in Louisiana's infamous Angola Prison for a crime he didn't commit.

In 1982, Archie was 22 years old when he was arrested for rape and attempted murder. He was 58 this past March, when a court cleared him of all charges. You may have seen the story in the news.

There were fingerprints found at the crime scene, and the police knew they didn't match Archie's. But the victim had picked him out of a police lineup as her attacker. So he went to prison.

For years, Archie requested that the fingerprints found at the crime scene be run through the FBI's national database, to see if they matched anyone else's prints. No one — neither in 1982, nor in all the years since, had done that — until this March. The fingerprints matched those of a man who had committed a string of similar crimes, in the same year, in the same area. Based on the new evidence,

the court threw out his conviction.

Reporters asked Archie, after his release, if he held a grudge against the victim who had wrongly identified him 36 years before.

“God does not let me hold grudges against anyone,” he said. He went on to say that recent events made him feel like Joseph — the biblical son of Jacob who spent years as a slave in Egypt, before being raised up to a high position in the Pharaoh’s court.¹

We have a very fine justice system in this country, but it’s a human system, and humans sometimes make mistakes. Sadly, it does happen people are imprisoned for the wrong reason.

We heard about two people wrongly imprisoned in today’s text from the book of Acts. Paul and Silas are locked up in a Roman jail, their feet immobilized in a set of stocks. The miracle that frees them is not a fingerprints database, but an earthquake.

So, how did this miscarriage of justice happen?

Paul and Silas — and very likely the writer of Acts himself, the apostle

¹Thomas Fuller, “He Spent 36 Years Behind Bars. A Fingerprint Database Cleared Him in Hours,” *New York Times*, March 21, 2019.

Luke — find themselves in the city of Philippi. They've been doing some preaching and teaching. One day, as they're going to the synagogue to pray, things go suddenly and terribly wrong.

There's a slave girl in Philippi, who displays what our English translation calls "a spirit of divination." Literally, the Greek says "a spirit of Python" or "a Pythonic spirit."

The translators have dumbed it down for modern readers — and understandably so — because very few people would get the ancient meaning of the word "Python." I didn't understand, myself, until I did some research on this passage.

In Greek mythology, Python was a wise and powerful serpent, who lived by the oracle of Delphi, that place where people could come to hear predictions about their future. According to myth, Python's task was to guard the Oracle, which the Greeks considered to be the navel of the earth, its very center. Python herself was the daughter of Gaia, the primordial earth goddess.

The sort of "divination" this slave-girl is practicing — on behalf of her masters, who own her and profit richly from what she does — is understood by the Greeks and Romans as deeply rooted in this unspeakably ancient religious practice. It's powerful stuff, to the Greek and Roman mind.

Luke gives us some idea of how the slave-girl dispenses her prophecies. She sticks herself to Paul like glue, following him and his companions around — making quite a nuisance of herself. The message she shouts out is this: “These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.”

Now, you may think, when you first hear this, that the slave-woman gets who Paul is. He ought to be flattered, don’t you think? But he’s not. In fact, Luke says he’s “annoyed” by what the woman’s saying.

The reason for his testy response is that the woman is not, in fact, speaking from the standpoint of Christianity. The “Most High God” she’s referring to is very likely Zeus, not the God of Israel. That means she’s calling Paul and his companions “slaves of Zeus.”

She’s saying, also, that these newcomers are “proclaiming to you a way of salvation.” There’s no reason to think she’s talking about salvation in Jesus Christ. Now, that happens to be *exactly* what Paul, Silas and company are proclaiming, but this woman doesn’t yet know it.

She seems to be a little mad: demon-possessed, they would have said in those days. Through the clouded confusion of her mind, this slave manages to string together words that make sense: words that sound to some like Python’s fortune-telling.

A madwoman's recommendation is not exactly the best form of advertising. But despite feeling annoyed, Paul also feels compassion for this lost soul. And so, he turns to her and says to the evil spirit the he's sure must be infesting her, "Come out!" Luke tells us the spirit "came out that very hour. The mad fortuneteller is in her right mind.

It's a mighty impressive feat of healing — to everyone except the owners of the slave girl. They've been raking in the coin for years. They've monetized her madness. But suddenly their gravy train has come to an end.

So what do they do? They haul the Christian preachers into court, suing them not for the content of their preaching, and not for their claim to be healers, but for obstruction of trade.

"Money doesn't talk," as Bob Dylan used to say: "it swears." The people being sworn at are the foreigners Paul and Silas. Who knows, but maybe there were other people in the city of Philippi — maybe even in law enforcement or the courts — who regularly got their palms greased by these shysters. The Christian missionaries never stand a chance. The magistrates buy the plaintiffs' argument, so Paul, Silas and the others are whipped and thrown into the deepest, darkest prison. Their legs are bound in irons.

And there they sit: hungry, cold, even discouraged but not so discouraged that they can't sing. Remarkably, Luke tells us that, about midnight, they are "praying and singing hymns to God" — and all the other prisoners listening in — when a tremendous earthquake shakes the prison to its very foundation. The doors are thrown open. Even the iron chains lie broken beside their feet. The jailer wakes up in terror and runs over to the cells. To his horror, he sees the doors of his prison gaping wide open.

Surely the prisoners are long gone — and surely, he despairs, the Roman authorities will make him pay dearly for all those empty cells. They'll make him pay with his life.

This man is not a civil servant. There's no official, state-run prison in the city of Philippi. He's more like a private contractor — perhaps a retired military man. The jail is very likely a portion of his own home — maybe a dug-out basement, secured by stout doors.

That means the jailer is personally responsible for the prisoners. If any should escape, his overlords will swiftly call him to account. In the case of a massive security breach, where all the doors have swung open — the penalty for him will probably be death. Better to die swiftly by my own sword — says the Roman honor code — than to submit to a humiliating beating and public

execution.

Before the man's able to turn his short sword around — placing it up against his belly before falling to the ground — something stops him. It's the voice of Paul, uttering the sweetest words that hard-bitten military man could ever expect to hear: "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here."

Could it be that this foreign God of theirs is somehow responsible for the earthquake? The jailer falls at their feet in terror. "What must I do to be saved?" he asks.

"Believe on the Lord Jesus," they tell him, "and you will be saved, you and your household."

Then the jailer does an extraordinary thing, for a man who moments before was so fearful of the Romans. He takes the apostles to his own quarters, tenderly washes their wounds, and allows himself to be baptized: he and his whole family with him.

This is a story about freedom. It is interesting to ask, after hearing this story, "Whose freedom?" Which characters are free, and which enslaved?

Quite simply, everyone in this story is imprisoned, in one way or another, except — ironically — the ones who are in prison: the apostles themselves...

The mad slave girl is imprisoned by the frightening symptoms of her illness.

The slave girl's owners are imprisoned by their greed.

The crowd is in bondage to their mob spirit, that leads them to the brink of riot.

The magistrates are imprisoned by a legal code that compels them to pronounce a harsh sentence — even for people like these, who are preaching of love and kindness.

Finally, there's the tragic figure of the jailer. He wears at his belt a ring of keys that open any door in the prison, but it turns out he's just as confined as the prisoners. He's imprisoned by his fear: by a terror so great that he would rather impale himself on his sword than face the wrath of his superiors.

If these are all in bondage, then the only ones who are truly free are the prisoners: Paul and his companions. They're free because of the Spirit of Christ that dwells within them: the same Spirit who gives them courage to sing and to pray, even in a stinking dungeon with their legs in the stocks.

That's the great irony of this story. By the time it ends, everything's flipped on its head. The jailer is himself a prisoner — a prisoner to fear — and those who have been behind bars are the only ones who are truly free

I wonder...how free are you, and how free am I: here in “the land of the free and the home of the brave?”

We’ve got civil liberties, to be sure, but you don’t have to look very far, even in this great land, to see people who are enslaved to addictions, or anxiety, or economic deprivation, or schisms within families.

Most of all, we are — all of us — enslaved to sin. It’s the human condition. A great many people are, but don’t even know it. All they know is, the things they used to count on to make sense of their lives no longer do. Something’s seriously out of balance: and none of the self-help nostrums can bring them the least bit of relief.

Charles Dickens’ novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*, contains a famous character known as Dr. Manette. Imprisoned for twenty years by the king, the doctor is finally freed by the French Revolution. Through his long imprisonment, the doctor has taken on a new trade, that of cobbler. In the gloom of his prison cell, he’s lived out his days tapping shoes with a hammer.

Finally, the day comes when Dr. Manette is led out into the sunlight: but the light of day terrifies him. He’s lived too long in the shadowy recesses of his cell. The only way he is happy, it turns out, is for a servant to lock him at night in a tiny

attic room. There he spends his time tap, tap, tapping on the shoes, just as he has done for lo, these many years.

Dr. Manette's story is pathetic: but it's not so uncommon as you may think. How many have been led, time and again, toward the light, but turn back instead, retreating into the same destructive habits, time and time again?

In Jesus Christ, you and I are offered freedom. He who is host at this banquet we call the Lord's Supper invites us to a feast of freedom. In him is healing and wholeness and strength, for the living of these days.

Accept his invitation, this day. Turn to the living Lord, Jesus Christ: for there is no prison on this earth strong enough to keep him out — or to keep you in!

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