



THE FIRST JAIL-HOUSE ROCK
Acts 16:16-34

This summer we are looking at those biblical stories where an individual encounters Jesus Christ or Christ encounters them. We have just read the breath-taking account of Paul's and Silas's deliverance from the hands of the Roman Empire - and the prison cells they were seemingly confined to. We read how God used this event - to literally turn the world upside down - to convert a **prison cell into a chapel** - from a hall of misery to a mission field. We see that the **Easter story continues**. We see how faith claims - and sets free a Roman guard, a Gentile business woman named **Lydia**, and a demon-possessed slave girl. It's no wonder we sing "All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name."

Many of you remember the song "**Jailhouse Rock**" sung by Elvis Presley and how it horrified parents that someone would move his hips and body in such a shocking and vulgar way. A revolution in music was soon on its way in American culture.

Well - that event was nothing compared to our story which I call "**The First or The Original Jailhouse Rock.**" It also led a revolution that turns the world upside down - and eventually claims the Roman Empire. You and I are part of the revolution because we stand on the rock and worship the Rock of all the Ages - the Lord Jesus Christ himself.

Last week we studied the amazing and dramatic conversion of the Apostle Paul on the road to Damascus. We observed that his conversion is authentic - because it is a conversion that changes him from a murderer to a missionary. It transformed him from a lover of the law used to separate people - to one who establishes the law of love to save people. His conversion is real - because he allows God to shape the direction of his life from that moment on.

Just before we pick up our lesson for today we read in **chapter 16** that God closes one door - only to open another. Paul wants and is planning to go to one place - but is forbidden to do so. So in **verses 9 & 10** Paul receives a vision to go to Macedonia. God often gives a vision when your will and his purposes are not in agreement.

God's world and will is always larger than our world and will. God's vision and call for him to wind up in Philippi shows us how large.¹ This seemingly obscure event turns out to be one of the most significant events in history. When Paul and his traveling companions set foot in Neapolis (Kavalla) – it signifies the entrance of the Christian faith onto European soil. Christianity becomes a world-wide missionary movement.

The continent of Europe centuries later becomes one of the greatest missionary sending forces in history. We here in America are part of that legacy. Rarely do we know the importance of our witness and obedient discipleship at the moment it is being offered to God. Here in the pagan city of Philippi – a colony of the mighty Roman Empire – God – through Paul and others – begins to plant a seed that will eventually over-take the Roman Empire. Wow! The jailhouse was not the only thing to rock!

About 30 years ago a very discouraged and desperate young pastor in Brooklyn cried out for God to give him a vision of what he was supposed to do. His congregation was failing. He was willing to do something - if he only knew what to do. God granted him a vision. We United Methodists are uncomfortable with such language - but it is biblical - and of the Holy Spirit. Remember, without vision – the world becomes small and selfish. Vision enlarges our capacity to enter into the dimensions of God's world.²

Today this congregation ministers right in the midst of a drug-infested community. However, the church has grown from 25 people to 8,000 members.

On Tuesday nights they have over 1,500 people for prayer meetings. The choir was started by a reluctant volunteer - the Pastor's wife. She was an untrained musician. Recently they packed the 6,000 seats at Radio City Music Hall to cut a new album and CD. You know them as the Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir and their Pastor Jim Cymbala.

Once a drug dealer said to a pastor in Boston when he was talking to him on the street corner, "Pastor, when those children are dismissed from school, I will be here to meet them. Where will you and your church be? Where will you be when they are discouraged and lonely? **I will be here - where will you be?**" Instead of moving to a safe place - his vision was one of creating a safe place where they were. Now, I believe God has different visions for different churches.

I believe there is some Macedonia for our church to go and respond to someone who is calling come over and help. I believe this spirit is motivating our own Ray Voran and his youth team in their outreach ministry to the youth of this area. It is not an easy ministry – but a very necessary one. Remember the story of the drug dealers in Boston who said, "We will be here to meet these kids when they are dismissed from school. Where will you and your church members be?" As Philip Brooks once shared: **"Do not pray for easy lives. Pray to be a stronger person. Do not pray for tasks equal to your powers. Pray for power equal to your tasks."**

It was this spirit that allowed Paul to go to Macedonia - and other places of ministry and mission to do God's work. This was the spirit that allowed the Brooklyn Church and its pastor to do a great work. This spirit empowers us to move beyond ourselves to the greater purposes of God.

As we pick up our lesson for today, we see in **verse 12** that when Paul eventually arrives in Philippi. If you were Paul or Silas, Timothy or Luke, how would you start a church plant in a pagan city which is an outpost of the Roman Empire? Paul's strategy usually was to go to the local synagogue and seek out fellow Jews and other God-seekers.

However, there is no synagogue in Philippi. The law required a minimum of 10 Jewish males to have a synagogue. However, the law also provided that Jews could gather on the Sabbath by a river and have a prayer meeting if no synagogue was available. So our guide, when Mary and I traveled in Greece, shared that is why Paul and his crew walked along the river.

In **verse 14** Paul is eventually led to a spirited gentile woman by the name of Lydia. Lydia was a Gentile who found no hope in the pagan religions and was seeking for a greater religious fulfillment. She most likely had been exposed to the reading of the Old Testament scriptures. Her heart was open to the truth of faith. Now, in all honesty, Lydia was probably not the person that Paul was hoping to meet. However, God had chosen her for very good reasons. She was a well-established business woman who owned a home and evidently had servants. She responds to the preaching of Paul. Lydia is baptized and all her household as well. There is a chapel at this very spot in Philippi to commemorate this great event. Lydia not only opens her heart to the Lord – but her home as well. When God calls us to a ministry and mission – he always provides. When we cannot see the way – we follow the one who does.

Lydia eventually becomes one of the leaders of the Philippian Church. This church was always a blessing to him. A letter written to them by Paul years later from a jail cell - is known as the "**Joy Letter**" of the Bible.

It demonstrates the special bonding between them and Paul. Who else but God could have brought together the likes of Paul and Lydia for ministry and mission? However, the best is yet to come.

In **verse 16** Paul and crew are led to a slave girl who is a psychic and fortune teller. She is under a demonic spirit. She is another unlikely candidate for conversion and church membership. This dear soul follows Paul and the others around wherever they went. As we know from the gospel accounts – the demons are fully aware of the power of the word of God. The girl said in **verse 17**, "**These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation.**" Demons know who Jesus is and speak the truth about him. However, Jesus does not want demons to testify concerning him. God wants his own people to be witnesses of Jesus Christ and his gospel – not demons. Like Jesus – Paul did not want publicity from demons – so he cast the evil spirit out of the slave girl. The slave girl was delivered out of her bondage. In a sense – the slave girl was in double bondage – she was a slave to the demons and to the business men who only saw her as their meal ticket. The girl – realizing her newfound freedom – gave her life to Jesus Christ as well.

Now the reward that Paul receives for transforming the life of this slave girl is to be thrown into prison. When her owners could no longer use her for profit - they got mad at Paul for destroying their meal ticket. People to this day get mad when the church upsets the status quo - and their profit margin. However, we learn that people are always more important than profit in the kingdom of God and in God's economy.

It is always disturbing to the powers and principalities of this world when the gospel begins to transform people's lives. So Paul and Silas are thrown into prison and beaten - found guilty before they had a trial.

When Paul and Silas find themselves beaten and in prison – they have 2 choices to make: they can get bitter or they can get better. Mary and I have been at that jail cell and stockade. It was no pretty sight. Prison cells in those days were not pretty sights.

In **verse 25**, we see the key to Paul's work and witness. Here we observe Paul and Silas singing "Lord, help me make it through the night." Somehow they have the ability to sing and praise God when it is midnight. They refuse to allow cynicism and bitterness to have the last word and final authority in their lives.

You will never know how difficult it is to sing at night - until you find yourself immersed in the darkness - and frightened by it. You find out if that which you made the center of your life is a center that holds you. Can the center keep hope alive? Paul and Silas did not dwell on the injustice of the moment – but sought to fill their hearts with faith in the living God. So instead of lifting their voices in despair - they lifted their voices to the living God. As Dr. Charles Stanley teaches, "trusting God means looking beyond what we can see to what God sees."³

When I read this passage - I always remember a scene from the powerful movie **SHAWSHANK REDEMPTION**. The character Andy Dufresne is wrongly sent to prison.

The prison known as Shawshank is not exactly a slice of heaven. I remember the time when Andy Dufresne receives a recording of Mozart's music. He locks the doors to the warden's office.

He then plays over the prison loudspeaker one of Mozart's marvelous pieces. Into this ugly place - a moment of beauty comes. For a few moments each prisoner is transformed by the music. Andy is tossed into solitary confinement for a month. Andy shares with his friend Red how he survived. He said "**I had Mr. Mozart to keep me company.**" The music granted him a vision - that even prison walls could not confine. He reminds Red "Some birds are not meant to be caged."

While in prison Paul and Silas had great company - the presence and power of God. We saw that same power in the lives of Lech Walesa, Gandhi, Dr. King, and Nelson Mandela. They and their causes became more powerful when they were in prison - and eventually won the day. Yes, the ability to sing a song of victory at midnight comes only from the Holy Spirit at work in their lives. The power is not in the song or the words – but in the Holy Spirit filling their soul and spirit. I don't know the greatest place of pain or frustration in your life today – but are you willing to trust God in your circumstances? Do you believe that no problem is beyond his power? Will you – like Silas and Paul – lift up your voice in anticipation of the coming victory?

Remember, the Easter message also was felt like a mighty earthquake when God raised Jesus Christ from the dead. So Lydia, who was a pagan, and a slave girl possessed by demons, are now part of the church. The best is yet to come.

The Lord uses this catastrophic event to convert the jailer. Paul and Silas open the door to salvation for him. A great role reversal takes place. Paul and Silas become the jailer's deliverers.⁴

One of the things I am constantly reminded of in this story is that nobody comes to faith in Christ by themselves. The jailer did not come by his faith all alone.

He had Paul to help him. For all his willingness to trust Jesus Christ as Lord of his life - he would never have been able to do it unless there was a messenger. There is every possibility that unless Paul and Silas had been imprisoned, this jailer would have never heard the name of Jesus. Some events are locked away in the mystery and purposes of God.

What a comfort and challenge this text is for EUMC today! I am convinced that we have friends and acquaintances beyond the walls of our church - who would respond to the gospel IF WE BUT TOLD THEM. We can share with them the greatest discovery of our lives about the liberating and loving power of Jesus Christ. We can demonstrate how we sing at midnight when all is not well.

This story demonstrates to us the power of the gospel to penetrate every social barrier and class.⁵ Here we see the church at her best. Here the gospel takes root in a pagan and Gentile culture – and wins the day. We can win the day even though we live in a secular and hedonistic culture as well.

Paul would eventually write in **Galatians 3:28** – “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”⁶

Yes, at the cross – the ground is level for all of us. That message was revolutionary then – and it still is today. The message is just as needed in 2008 as it was then.

Remember, the birds don't sing because they know all the answers – they sing because they have a song to sing. So do we:

“Ye chosen seed of Israel's race
Ye ransomed from the fall.
Hail him – who saves you by his grace
and crown him – crown him – Lord of all.”⁷

Amen and Amen.

Reverend Eric S. Ritz
June 29, 2008 – Preached at both services
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ENDNOTES

¹ Eugene H. Peterson, **CONVERSATIONS: The Message Bible with its Translator**, NavPress, Colorado Springs, CO, 2007, page 1712.

² Peterson, *ibid*, page 1712.

³ Charles F. Stanley, **LIFE PRINCIPLES BIBLE**, NJKV, Thomas Nelson, Nashville, TN, 2005, page 1291.

⁴ Fred B. Craddock, [et. al], **Preaching Through the Christian Year, YEAR C,** Trinity Press International, Valley Forge, PA, first edition, 1994, page 267.

⁵ Craddock, *ibid*, page 267.

⁶ NIV Galatians 3:28.

⁷ Hymn, **“All Hail the Power of Jesus’ Name,”** second stanza.

Editor’s Note: Pastor Eric will not be preaching on July 6, 2008, but will return to the pulpit on July 13th. All of Pastor Eric’s sermons can be found at www.eumcnh.org and click on SERMONS in the Menu selection