



Morrison Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church

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Epiphany 1

Acts 16:25-34

Pastor Randy Ott

First Lesson: Isaiah 49:1-6

Psalm of the Day: Psalm 2

Second Lesson: Acts 16:25-34

Gospel: Mark 1:4-11

Jailhouse Miracles

Broken doors

Loosed chains

Jailhouse conversions – we're kind of skeptical of them as a nation I think, aren't we? When someone professes that they've found religion or found God or found Jesus while they are incarcerated behind bars, we kind of think it's just a put on, an act so that maybe they will get paroled sooner or whatever the case may be. We are a skeptical lot, aren't we? But jailhouse conversions do still happen today.

I met a man who was in prison in Waupun. His cell was right next to a man who was in prison for life for murder that had gone through one of our area Lutheran high schools. This guy that was next to the guy that went through our area Lutheran high school did not know anything about God before he came to jail, but in jail, through the WELS Prison Ministry he came to know Jesus as his Savior and confessed it as such. He told us that these guys, every morning when they got up (their cells were right next to each other); they didn't say good morning to each other. They greeted each other with "Are you ready?" The question being, "if Christ comes back today, are you ready to meet him?"

It's kind of interesting how jail changes your perspective, right? When's the last time you woke up and thought to yourself "if Christ comes today, am I ready?" You probably thought about what's for breakfast, or what's for lunch, or what do I have to do between breakfast and lunch, right? Perspectives can change depending on circumstances, right?

We see a jailhouse conversion in what we read from the Book of Acts this morning, and as we see it, we probably think to ourselves, with all those miracles that took place – chains loosened, bars broken, doors broken down – it makes sense that there was a jailhouse conversion. But let's really consider closely the jailhouse miracles that we see today as we consider these words that the Holy Spirit had Luke write in the Book of Acts.

This takes place in Philippi. Philippi was in Greece. It was a Roman Colony, so it was ruled by Roman law, settled by a lot of former Roman soldiers even. Paul and Silas had been there for awhile, a time, and as they were going about what they normally did; which was proclaiming the Law and the Gospel, proclaiming Christ as the only answer

to sin and the only way to enter into heaven through faith in his life and death; they had something different happen to them in Philippi that hadn't happened in other places. They had a slave girl follow them around who was possessed by an evil spirit. This slave girl kept saying to anyone that was around, "Listen to these guys. They're prophets of the Most High." Well, this slave girl was known for foretelling the future. She made her masters a lot of money, because people were drawn to this slave girl. In any case, it was hampering their work of proclaiming the Gospel. So finally Paul says to her, "In the name of Christ, tell the demon to come out," and he cast the demon out.

It sounds like it would be kind of nice to have a demon out of you; except if you owned the slave girl that earned you money by foretelling the future through this demon, now you have a problem. Your source of income is down and you're upset. You're beyond upset. You're really irritated because Paul hits you where you live; in the pocketbook. We can relate to that.

So the owners of this slave girl get pretty upset and accuse Paul and Silas of causing all kind of trouble, stirring up all kinds of torment. They get a mob going and they have Paul (who is a Roman citizen and should not be beaten), beaten. They have Paul (who is a Roman citizen who should be receiving a trial before he's beaten or thrown into prison), beaten and thrown into prison. Put yourself in Paul and Silas' shoes. That's what you've been doing the last week. You're in prison now. How are you feeling? What are you thinking about? You have open wounds. You have blood running down or blood caked on you. I'm guessing that Philippian prisons weren't the most sanitary place in the world. They probably didn't even get a wet-nap to clean up with I'm assuming.

Are you a little bitter? Are you a little angry? Are you inwardly shaking your fist at God and saying, "God, how could you let this happen? Here we are serving you and you let us get beaten, bloodied and thrown into prison. Were you sleeping? What's going on, God?" Is there in your mind a hint of anger towards God that he would have let this happen to you? Is there a hint of bitterness in your heart if you were in their situation? I have to believe I would be a little bit ornery.

Isn't it amazing what we see Paul and Silas doing about midnight? Praying and singing hymns. The jailer, we are told, was already asleep. You wonder if he went to sleep with the sound of their prayers and their hymns ringing in his ears. How many times in his life do you think that jailer was ever sung to sleep? But Paul and Silas, instead of bitterness and anger, pray to God, sing his praises; not just "God, wake up and get me out of this." They sing hymns that praise God as they are going through all of this.

Can you begin to imagine that? Here are two guys living their faith and expressing their trust in God to such a degree that bloodied and beaten, they are praying and singing. It doesn't sound like bitterness. It doesn't sound like anger. It sounds like faith being put into action, faith being lived where others can see it, faith being lived and letting your light shine in such a way that someone else is going to say "Why? This isn't usual. This isn't the norm."

And when you think about it, as Christians we shouldn't be usual and shouldn't be the norm. We have been changed drastically and absolutely. We have been changed from being like everyone else in the world to people who know that heaven is open to us; not because we are good and not because we've tried hard, but because God has revealed himself to us and the Spirit has worked faith in our hearts so heaven is open. No matter what happens in this world, I have a prepared heavenly home. That is a message that changes people drastically. It sure changed Paul and Silas.

So then this earthquake comes. The doors burst open. The chains break loose. I don't know, I've never been through an earthquake, but I can't see earthquakes actually breaking chains all that often. It sounds to me like God's hand, doesn't it?

The jailer wakes up and sees the doors are open. Remember, it's a Roman Colony, ruled by Roman rules. One of the Roman laws was that if you are a jailer and a prisoner escapes while you're taking care of them, you get to serve their sentence. So evidently, quite possibly, someone in that jail had the death penalty because the jailer decides, "I'm cutting out the middleman. I'm not waiting around." He takes out his sword and is about to kill himself.

Now picture yourself as that jailer. There's dust everywhere. The doors are open. You're in fear of your life. You're in such fear of your life that you decide to pull out a sword and you are about ready to plunge it into your innards. This isn't a pierced ear. This is pierced entrails. Then there's Paul's voice. "Don't harm yourself. We're all here."

This guy just had to be shaking his head at Paul and Silas inwardly. They sing him to sleep with hymns and with prayers. Now when they have the chance to escape, they stay there. It's no surprise really that he falls at their feet and he asks a question since evidently he had heard them talking about salvation, because he said, "What must I do to be saved?" It's a question that kind of is a foolish question that you and I know, because you and I know that we don't do anything to be saved. God does the work. God has done the saving. God took our place, beginning I suppose you would say, at his baptism in the Jordan. He stood in the waters that we would stand in, identified with us, and then carried all of our sins to the cross and perfectly lived holy under the Law in our place. It's not what we do. It's what he did for us.

And even faith, believing in the Lord Jesus, isn't something that we do. It's something that God does for us through the Holy Spirit. Perhaps for most of us, it is through our baptism. Maybe for others of us, it was hearing the Gospel like this man did and having the Gospel work at our hearts.

In any case, this guy got to know Jesus a lot better because he took them to his house. He washed their wounds and then immediately he and his family were baptized after they had spoken the Word of God to them. They told them the Gospel. Then you

notice the Gospel changes people, right? This guy puts a meal before them and he is filled with joy because he now knows the doors of heaven are open for him also.

It's an incredible miracle you see of broken doors and loose chains, but they're not the physical ones. They're the ones on this man's heart. He was bound to Satan. He was a slave of Satan. The door to heaven was closed to him, but God came through Paul and Silas by having them in prison and having them live their faith. They earned the right to have this guy ask them the question, "What must I do to be saved?" Then they got to share the Gospel, and God did the work and broke the doors and loosed the chains and heaven was open to this man and to his family.

It's an incredible, incredible event that takes place. It's an incredible jailhouse miracle that takes place. But it's a miracle that has taken place in our hearts too, we who believe that Jesus is our Savior. Those same chains were around us. Those same doors were closed to us, but God has opened them through his Word and through his Sacraments, through our baptism and through the Lord's Supper. He forgives us for the times we have failed him and strengthens us so that we go forward.

Now he looks to you and me and he tells us, in a sense, that we are the Paul and Silas of where we live. He gives to us the privilege and the responsibility to live our life changed by his love so that we earn the right to have people ask us about our faith. That's what God has called every last Christian to do, right? Always be ready to give an answer for the hope that you have. Let your light shine so that people will see your good deeds and want to know about your Father in heaven. We've all been called to that. We all know that. I don't think any of us here this morning would say, "I'd like to just see other people go to hell."

The question I guess I would ask of myself and have you ask of yourself is, "do we always live in such a way that we earn the right to be heard?" Do we open our eyes to see those opportunities around us and live our faith so that these people who don't know Christ that we rub shoulders with every day would want to know more about him?

I've been told recently that our congregation doesn't do outreach very well, that we aren't real good at it and we aren't doing enough of it. I firmly believe outreach isn't just a program of a church. It's something that God has called every Christian to do; to live your faith so that you can earn the right to be heard, like Paul and Silas did. That's why, after coming here six-seven years ago, whatever it was, I offered a number of times Friendship Witnessing Workshops so we learn how to see the opportunities and seize the opportunities to earn the right to be heard. And then after doing those for a few years, I did God's Great Exchange Workshops so that we learn what to say when people ask us "What must I do to be saved;" so that we can present God's Law and Gospel in a clear and succinct way that's easily understood and to prepare us for those opportunities.

I've been told that our members don't know that many people that aren't believers. I don't buy that. If you go out to eat at the Evergreen, do you think everyone that is there

that you see and talk to and greet are all going to heaven? People you work with; do you think they're all on the way to heaven? People you go to school with; do you think they're all on the way to heaven? You take your children to sporting events in the summer; do you think all the other parents are on the way to heaven? You live in an apartment now, you've moved away from here, you live in an apartment in De Pere or something; do you think all those people that you see in the hallways day after day, they're all on the way to heaven?

Don't kid yourself. We're surrounded by people going to hell and if that's not it, well pretty much except for about 12-15 of us here, all of you are interrelated to each other, right? Do you know anybody in our congregation that isn't that active with Word and Sacrament that is in danger of losing their faith?

These Friendship Witnessing Workshops are there to teach us how to seize these opportunities like Paul and Silas did. I'm not telling you to go get thrown in prison and then start singing. But look for the other opportunities God puts in front of you day after day to live your faith. Then learn how to share that faith. Be ready to give that answer.

The other thing is; you might have noticed that we haven't had any of these workshops in awhile. Do you want to know why? We had a number of people come to them. We had a number of people actually come to them twice. But the last few times I did them, I would buy the muffins at Sam's Club. I'd buy orange juice. I'd buy pop and put it all on ice and then I'd watch the ice melt and sit there 15-30 minutes until no one came, and then I'd go home. My kids were happy. They got a lot of muffins and pop, but it got kind of frustrating sitting there and watching the ice melt. So we haven't had any for awhile.

I know you people. I know your hearts. You don't want to see people in hell. The question we have to ask ourselves is, "do our actions express the love we have for other souls?" Are there ways we can do better? The answer is always going to be "yes" because we are sinners and on this side of heaven, we aren't going to do things perfectly. That's why this morning it's so great that we get to come and kneel at our Lord's altar (or stand in front of our Lord's altar) and receive his body and blood to forgive us for the times we have failed him. Not only will we find forgiveness for our failures, we will find strength to go forward and grow and do better and serve God; not because we have to, not because we are shamed into doing it, but because we love our God and we want other people to have the joy of our salvation that we so often talk about.

Jailhouse miracles continue. They continue in our lives as God continually breaks down doors around us and uses us to break those bonds of sin as we proclaim the Gospel.