

The Accidental Witness

Acts 16:16-34

One day, as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a slave-girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling. While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, "These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation." 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. 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. When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, "These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe." The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks. About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. 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. 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. But Paul shouted in a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them outside and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" They answered, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. 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.

There are no stairs at UW Hospital. Or so the rumor goes. The elevators are very clearly marked, because the layout of the hospital can be very confusing. But I heard a staff member once explain that the stairs are hidden because they get even more puzzling. There are half-stories between each floor of the hospital to allow for all the mechanicals, electronics, wiring, etc. So once in the stairwell, it's hard to figure out where to get out. I, of course, then took this as a personal challenge. After much searching, I finally found a set of stairs – nowhere near the elevator, I might add. When I came to the main floor and exited the stairs, I found myself not in another hallway, but instead in a staff lounge!

Have you ever been somewhere you weren't supposed to be? That's what happens to Paul and Silas this morning. They were never really supposed to be in jail. And the events that lead up to their incarceration make a pretty good story.

Paul and Silas were in and around the city of Philippi, in Greece. They would go each day to a place they called “the place of prayer.” At the time, it was illegal to try to convert people to a non-Roman religion inside the city limits, so the early Christians probably met together somewhere just outside the city gates to gather for prayer, and song, and worship. One day as they were walking there, they met a young woman. The text says she was a slave girl possessed by a spirit – one that allowed her to accurately predict the future. As you can imagine, such an ability was highly prized in the Greco-Roman world, so this young woman had been enslaved. Instead of acting as a servant, which was common in this culture, her job was to make money for her owners by acting as a fortune-teller. And she was good at what she did, bringing in lots of wealth.

But then she crossed paths with Paul and Silas. Upon seeing them, she cried out, “These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.” In this setting, “Most High God” could refer to the God we know as the Jewish God, or it could refer to Zeus. And ironically, the woman’s owners probably saw her ability to tell the future as a sign that she was a slave to Zeus. Either way, Paul and Silas didn’t really care to have this woman making proclamations about them.

After several days of this, Paul was downright annoyed. Imagine how you’d feel, if just going about your business, someone followed you shouting things about you to the crowd. Even if those things were true, it would be annoying and bothersome. So just to make her stop, Paul exorcizes the spirit from her, demanding it leave her. Problem solved, right? Not exactly.

It turns out, without her spirit, the slave girl was no longer profitable to her owners. Which made them quite angry. So they do the equivalent of taking Paul into small-claims court. However, Paul hasn’t actually done anything wrong. It turns out you can’t charge someone with

casting out demons. So instead they claim that he's disturbing the peace, by advocating unlawful Jewish customs. But recall that Paul and Silas only met these folks on their way to the place of prayer, outside of town.

So what happens in the marketplace, where the small-claims are settled? After the gathered crowd turns into an angry mob, the court officials decide to have Paul and Silas beaten. Normally, this would serve to teach trouble-makers a lesson, and would be followed by throwing them out of the city. Sort of a "get out and stay out" kind of justice. No one would have expected what came next – Paul and Silas were actually thrown into jail. Remember, they haven't actually done anything illegal. They haven't even had a trial – they've just been accused, beaten, and locked up. To make matters worse, the jailer doesn't just toss them into any old cell. He puts them in the highest security part of the jail – the center room – and has them locked up in the stocks.

As the story unfolds, we learn there's another reason Paul and Silas are not supposed to be there. They are both Roman citizens. Remember that although the Roman Empire was huge, citizenship was severely limited and greatly coveted. It came with lots of benefits, including the right to a trial and even the right to appeal your case all the way up to the Emperor. There's no reason they should have ended up in jail. But one act out of frustration and annoyance led to a chain of events that got out of control, and here they are.

Try for one moment to put this into our modern context. Paul and Silas were just taken to small-claims court, and they ended up in a maximum security facility. It's almost too bizarre to be real. This is one of those situations where you really have to either cry or laugh. And it seems like Paul and Silas decided they weren't going to let this get them down. Feet shackled in the stocks, they begin to worship God, praying and singing.

But then their worship was interrupted with a great earthquake. Now this was one heck of an earthquake. It not only shook the foundations and opened the locked doors, it unlocked everyone's shackles! The jailer comes running to check on the inmates. Imagine his surprise to discover that though they all could have just walked away, no one did.

Who knows why everyone else stayed, but we know why Paul and Silas stayed. They didn't stay because God told them to. They didn't stay because it would be a great chance to witness to the jailer. They stayed because Paul was mad. His rights as a Roman citizen had been violated, and he wanted the city officials to know it. He wanted them to pay for it. He wanted to shame them into publicly admitting that they had been wrong, and Paul was right.

So far in our story this morning, Paul acts out of annoyance and carries a grudge. Some churches may call him St. Paul now, but I doubt Silas ever thought of him as a saint. Paul is just an ordinary guy, reacting to the world around him in very normal ways. If this is the kind of guy Paul was, though, why is it that he's considered to be so great?

It's because of what Paul said and did, even in his moments of being completely ordinary. There Paul sits, no more stocks or handcuffs, waiting patiently for his chance to shame the local officials. When the jailer comes in and appears to be ready to take his own life rather than face the consequences of a jail break, Paul tells him to stop. No one has left, so you don't have to worry. You might think the jailer would respond with a question about why no one left, or with a word of thanks for staying. But instead, the jailer asks a surprising question.

"What must I do to be saved?" he asks. This seems to kind of come out of the blue. But the jailer knows what Paul and Silas were accused of, he knows they were praying and singing all night, and he knows that some mysterious earthquake unlocked everyone's handcuffs. The jailer can sense that there is something extraordinary about this seemingly ordinary man. And

what makes Paul extraordinary is that given this opportunity to share his faith, he steps up. He doesn't make things more complicated than they have to be, he doesn't try to coerce the jailer, he simply explains his faith.

When it comes to sharing our faith with others, Methodists are terrible. In general, most of us have been raised with the idea of "I'll have my faith, you have yours, and we'll agree not to talk about it at the dinner table." Instead of being taught ways that we can engage in conversation about our faith, we weren't taught anything. And the most vocal people who share their faith seem to many of us to do so in ways that are abrasive and obnoxious.

Admit it – some of you have pretended to not be home when the Jehovah's Witnesses knocked on your door. When I lived in Denver and went to the downtown pedestrian mall, I crossed the street when passing that crazy religious guy yelling with his bullhorn. We don't want to be like that, because we find it uncomfortable.

But look at what Paul does this morning. He doesn't set out to convert anyone. In fact, in the very beginning of this story, he's just trying to get to worship without being hassled. But Paul witnesses to God in subtle ways all the time. When going to worship, he doesn't skulk around back alleys; he walks through the middle of town. People probably know where he's headed. When thrown in jail, on trumped up religious charges, he doesn't hide his faith. He holds a worship service in the middle of the jail. And because of how he lives his life, how he witnesses to God in small ways every day, he has an opportunity to respond to the jailer's inquiry, "What must I do to be saved?"

This is the model for Methodist witnessing. Witness to God's presence and power in your life with every moment of your life. By the choices you make. Two weeks ago we talked about Jesus' statement that people will know we are his disciples if we have love for one another. If

people see that in you, like Paul, you might have a chance to then share your faith with words.

I'm not asking you to knock on doors, or to convince an atheist that God is real. But if someone you know came to you this week and asked "What does it mean to really be a Christian?" or "Why is your faith important to you?" or "What do I have to do to be saved," how would you answer? Would you be prepared to witness to your faith? Amen and amen.