

**Shaken to the Foundations**  
**Acts 16:16-24**  
**Ann Hatfield**

What is your favorite prison break story?

For some, it might be the film version of *The Shawshank Redemption*. This award-winning movie is based on Stephen King's novel, in which the protagonist Andy played by Tim Robbins plots his escape from a state prison, after being falsely arrested. (*This is a spoiler alert for anyone who has NOT seen this movie yet.*) Over his 19-year imprisonment, Andy digs a tunnel providing access to the prison sewage pipe, and he trudges his way through filth to freedom. It's a fabulous story of friendship, hope, redemption, and freedom.

My favorite prison break story is *The Count of Monte Christo*, written by Alexandre Dumas – also the author of other classics like *The Three Musketeers* and *The Man in the Iron Mask*. *The Count of Monte Christo* recounts the heart-stopping escape of Edmond Dantes from an island fortress. Set in Europe in the 1800's, Edmond also is jailed on false charges. During his 14-year confinement, Edmond is befriended by an elderly priest in a neighboring cell. When the priest dies, Edmond escapes by exchanging places with the priest's body, which has been sewn into a burial sack. Thinking the body inside the sack is the deceased priest, the jailers throw the bag into the sea. Edmond frees himself from the sack, is rescued by a smuggling ship, discovers a vast treasure, and the adventure begins! Again, another excellent tale of friendship, hope, redemption, and freedom.

Numerous books, movies, and television shows have immortalized the necessary determination, risk, and luck involved in a successful prison escape. In contrast to the efforts displayed by Andy and Edmond, the Apostle Paul's prison break may be THE WORST in history! At midnight, Paul is NOT plotting his escape from jail. Instead, Paul and Silas are praying and singing hymns to God. And Paul is not using the prayers and harmonies to camouflage the sounds of tunnel digging!!

I suppose Paul should be given some credit, because he is following the advice he shared with the Colossians: Sing songs to God, about Christ, for one another. Even at midnight . . . even from a jail cell.

Today's text in the Book of Acts, picks up right after the passage Pastor Don preached on a couple weeks ago. From Don's sermon, you may remember that Paul and his friends travel into Europe, to Philippi, a thriving city on the coast of Macedonia. There they encounter Lydia, a wealthy, prominent businesswoman. After sharing the gospel message with her, Lydia is baptized and becomes the first European Christian. Lydia prevails on Paul and his friends to stay with her, and her home becomes an outpost for the wider expansion of the gospel into Europe. Paul and Silas are still enjoying Lydia's hospitality, as they continue to encounter more Philippian citizens.

In today's account, we discover how Paul can go from preaching the gospel – TO SINGING IN PRISON – in no time at all!!

During his stay in Philippi, Paul encounters a girl enslaved by a spirit. If everyone knows Lydia because of her wealth, spirituality, and hospitality, they likely know this girl because of her unique and strange abilities. If you ask her a question, she always provides an answer. Her ability to make predictions is similar to what we might consider palm reading; she's a fortuneteller. Recognizing the profitability of her predictions, some unscrupulous people exploit her to satisfy their own greed. This is a very lucrative arrangement for the owners . . . . until Paul and Silas show up.

The girl begins to follow Paul around shouting, interrupting, and distracting from the gospel message he is preaching. Apparently – more out of annoyance than compassion – Paul drives the spirit out of the girl in the name of Jesus Christ. The girl is freed from the enslavement to the spirit AND the people who exploited her. Her owners, however – enraged at the loss of easy income – drag Paul and Silas to the magistrates, who orders them arrested, beaten, and thrown into jail. This is how Paul and Silas find themselves singing hymns at midnight; and this is when their adventure REALLY gets interesting!

*“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.” (vs. 26-28)*

The prison doors fly open, everyone's chains are unfastened, including the shackles restraining Paul and Silas. BUT THEY DON'T TRY TO ESCAPE.

On the contrary, Paul reassures the jailer all the prisoners remain. Discovering this to be true, the jailer refrains from ending his own life, and asks Paul and Silas, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”

What must I do to be saved? Some of us may be inclined to treat a question like this the way a young minister handled it. When someone accosted him on a street corner to demand, “Have you found Jesus?” the minister responded, “I didn't know he'd been lost.”<sup>1</sup>

What must I do to be saved? For the jailer, this may not be a deep, theological question. It may instead be a plea for rescue, release, and liberation from his current employment situation. In Philippi at this time, a Roman jailer whose prisoner escaped was expected to forfeit his life, since it was considered a dereliction of duty.

So, while the earthquake's aftershocks still rattle the walls, the jailer knows he needs saving. The foundations of his life are shaken, and the threat to his well-being seems to be a clear and present danger.<sup>2</sup>

Tomorrow, our country will observe Memorial Day. It's a national holiday in honor of our military personnel. It's a day to remember those who died – giving the ultimate sacrifice – while serving in the armed forces.

Memorial Day is an important occasion to commemorate and mourn, as we collectively mark the tragic costs and consequences of war – wars men and women have bravely

fought to defend our freedoms: freedom of speech and freedom of religion; freedom to gather, think, and publish; freedom from tyranny. Freedom.

In a country that highly values freedom, and safeguards our rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, I wonder about the freedom to live without constant fear. No one should feel at risk of harm in our daily activities. Going to school, shopping in a store, and attending a place of worship should not be occasions in which we experience clear and present dangers.

In the wake of the mass shooting in a grocery store in Buffalo, New York, and this week's elementary school shooting in Uvalde, Texas, has America finally been shaken to its foundations? At what point will we say, "ENOUGH!" Enough death and violence from firearms. Enough children murdered by assault weapons. Enough pain, funerals, and grief. Enough.

What must our country do to be saved? Saved from our apparent willingness to sacrifice our children to a culture of hate, violence, and affinity for firearms. Are there ways to balance the freedom for private citizens to own firearms WITH the freedom for private citizens, and communities at large, to find freedom from fear? How do we liberate our children from bulletproof backpacks? Can we rescue them from the necessity of active shooter drills in their classrooms?

As a country – as Christians – have we become too numb and imprisoned by despair to address – not only the mass shootings that get all the media attention – but also the horrifying statistics on homicides, suicides, and accidental shootings in America? We need rescue, liberation, and freedom from what has become an all-too-familiar pattern of violent trauma, and feelings of helplessness and hopelessness.

What must I do to be saved? Paul answers the jailer, "Believe in the Lord Jesus."

One biblical scholar noted,

"In its simplest form, Paul's answer seems terribly inadequate, as if what the jailer (and all of us) really need is some carefully worded strategic plan or some tested method of self-improvement. Might we not complain that Paul's answer to the question of salvation seems to encourage passivity?"<sup>3</sup>

But in truth, it doesn't. Because our faith – our belief in Jesus Christ as Lord – PROPELS us to action.

In a daily devotional shared by Catholic priest Richard Rohr this week, he encourages Christians to LIVE our faith in all circumstances. As disciples of Jesus, we are called to follow the instructions offered by the Prophet Micah: "*What does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?*" (vs. 6:8)

At the very least, our faith should come alive in acts of justice, kindness, and humility.

The prison break stories of Andy, Edmond, and even the Apostle Paul are ones of friendship, hope, redemption, and freedom. Thankfully, as people of faith, we are invited into God's larger salvation story. As part of God's story, we discover God is our sure foundation. Even after earthquakes, violence, and destruction, God remains our Rock and Christ our Cornerstone.

Violence is just one of many problems we need to solve. Our country and world also struggle with poverty, hunger, racism, mental health issues, affordable housing, and diseases. This is why Westminster is actively engaging the world as a Matthew 25 congregation. Hospitality needs to be shared and wounds need to be washed; those who hunger need to be fed and those exploited by others need to be liberated.

Our faith comes alive and the gospel is fearlessly proclaimed, when we demonstrate CONCRETE acts of justice, peace, and love.

Thankfully, the accounts from the Book of Acts are not just stories of conversion and escape, but actually a glimpse into the transformational power of the gospel and God's grace to bring friendship, hope, redemption, and freedom. Be assured, no matter what happens as the plot line unfolds, God – our sure Foundation – IS WITH US – with you and me. If we remember this truth, we too can sing with Paul even when the night seems darkest. May it be so. Amen.

<sup>1</sup>Adapted from John Killinger, "What Must I Do to Be Saved – Intelligently?" Sermon from September 26, 1982, First Presbyterian Church, Lynchburg, VA.

<sup>2</sup>Ronald Cole-Turner, *Feasting on the Word*, Acts 16:16-34, Seventh Sunday in Easter, p. 524.

<sup>3</sup>Ronald Cole-Turner, *Feasting on the Word*, Acts 16:16-34, Seventh Sunday in Easter, p. 526