

The First Mennonite Church  
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April 26, 2026

Craig Janzen Neufeld

Scripture: Acts 16:16-34

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You would be right to feel like we've jumped ahead in our story. Given that the purpose of the Narrative Lectionary is to guide the church through God's story, jumping from Easter to Paul and Silas in Philippi does feel somewhat jarring. Over the last few weeks of scripture reading, if we'd followed our lectionary, we would have had a series of stories in which Jesus is seen and recognized. Starting with Easter Sunday, when Mary fails to notice Jesus in the garden, to Thomas, unwilling to believe unless he sees for himself, and concluding with the story of the Apostle Paul's conversion on the Damascus road, where, after seeing the risen Jesus, he is struck blind, regains his sight, and becomes a zealous follower of Jesus. We shift this week from passages about the blind being given sight to another sign of God's dream, setting prisoners free.

We see this promise originally mentioned in Isaiah 61 and then referenced by Jesus in Luke 4, when he preaches in the Synagogue, stating that he was sent to “bring good news to the poor, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim release for captives, and liberation for prisoners.” As I looked at this passage this week, I couldn't help but notice how the themes of liberation (intended and unintended) emerge.

Summoned to Phillippi by a vision, Paul and Silas are following the leading of God's Spirit, one of many themes of this half of the book of Acts. While in the city, they are met by a slave woman, in some translations, referred to as an Oracle. This slave had been possessed by a 'spirit' that enabled her to predict the future. She was, for all intents and purposes, a fortune teller. Used and exploited, she was a lucrative business venture for her owners. For many days, this slave followed Paul and Silas around, proclaiming who they were and what their mission was. And, we are told, this annoyed Paul.

Presently, I would liken it to trying to go anywhere, do anything, with a very vocal toddler on your heels, with their volume turned up to 11. I imagine it was very grating, frustrating, and wearing. And reaching the end of his patience, Paul snaps. We are told that Paul was so annoyed that he finally turned to the slave, addressed the Spirit and cast it out.

Now, I'll admit that there are some problematic bits of this passage. And if we don't attend to them, they can be distracting. In our passage, I think there are some things that the writer of

Acts handles poorly from the perspective of gender. For one, this slave girl is not named; she is effectively a persona non grata in that she is never directly talked to, nor does she directly communicate with Paul or Silas; she is a prop used to move the story forward. And in the ancient world, slaves had virtually no legal standing, their bodies were property, and their voices carried no weight in public discourse. To be fair, this wasn't an oversight by the author —it's reflected social reality at the time. It still doesn't make it right. The writer of Acts, the one who is supposed to be describing the reign of God, doesn't exactly reflect what we have come to understand about what God's dream looks like.

Second, this slave doesn't have any agency. She is used to make money for her owners, and she is used to carry the story forward. When she is 'freed' from her possession, she doesn't get a say in the matter. Paul forces the exorcism on this slave without her consent. She is liberated in one way, but she is still possessed. She may no longer be possessed by a spirit; there is nothing to suggest that she has been freed from being a possession, a slave. She leaves this story as fast as she appears, and we do not know what happens to her afterwards. I don't know what kind of future there is for a slave that is no longer useful, at least one that does not make money.

I'll admit these problems with the text. This being said, this slave, this person, was freed; she was liberated from the spirit that held her in one kind captivity.

Predictably enough, the slaves' owners were upset. Their source of easy money was gone. Paul and Silas are arrested, accosted and abused. They are attacked by the angry crowd and assaulted by the authorities. The author of Acts then makes a point to articulate just how much they were incarcerated. They were abandoned in the innermost cell, with their feet anchored in stocks. To prevent any movement or any chance of escape. Paul and Silas were well and truly imprisoned. This was not to last.

Around midnight, we're told, while Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns, worshipping insofar as they were able. All at once, there was a violent earthquake that shook the prison, right down to its foundations. The doors burst open, and the chains were loosened, not just for Paul and Silas, but for everyone.

Unlike the earlier freeing of the slave girl from their possession, which was specific and imposed, this act of liberation is indiscriminate. Every prisoner is freed. And yet, surprisingly, none of them escapes. Not a single one runs for the gate. They may be free to go, but they

choose to remain. Why? Is it fear? Is it loyalty? Or maybe it's shock. In the face of such a radical display of power, they simply cannot bring themselves to leave?

Terrified, the jailor wakes up. Seeing the prison doors wide open, he immediately draws the only possible conclusion: while he was sleeping, everyone has escaped. In the Roman world, a guard who lost his prisoners faced execution. He isn't just worried; he is terrified. His inattentiveness has cost him his life. He is now held hostage by the knowledge that his life is, likely over before the sun rises.

And notice: while the prisoners are physically free, it is now the jailor who is imprisoned. His prison, however, isn't made of stone or iron bars; it is, instead, he is trapped by the system he serves. He is a prisoner because of his duty. He cannot run. Instead, he reaches for his sword, not to kill the prisoners, but to kill himself, because he cannot escape this prison of shame.

It is then, in this moment of despair, that this jailor also receives his freedom. Not from chains, but from the fear that held him captive. A lone voice loudly shouts from the prison cells, "Don't harm yourself! We're all here!" The jailer is freed from the shadow of death.

In these three vignettes, scripture gives us three examples of how the leading and moving of God's Spirit leads to liberation. We're told the story of the Oracle, the slave girl whose spirit is liberated from a possessing spirit. In the case of Paul and Silas, they are physically freed from their imprisonment, and in the case of the unnamed jailer, their minds are freed from the oppressive system, which leads them to contemplate suicide as a response to their charges escaping. They are each freed, in either spirit, body or mind.

This is the work of God's Spirit, fulfilling the promise made by God that in the time of God's reign, in God's dream, when God's intentions are brought to fruition, the captives are freed, and the prisoners are liberated. And it doesn't matter if it's a prison of our spirits, a prison of our minds, or a prison for our bodies, God's Spirit breaks in and breaks through, and liberates. The liberating work of the Spirit isn't finished yet, continues to this day.

While we may not feel the oppression of a literal imprisonment, we are still bound by the powers and principalities of today. Jesus tells us to love God with our whole selves, heart, soul, mind and strength. And sometimes it feels like we are held hostage and imprisoned.

For some, our bodies, meant to be vibrant vessels for the Gospel, often feel like prisons when confronted with the stark reality of physical limits. This captivity extends to the exhaustion of economies that treat us as instruments of productivity rather than sacred temples, making rest impossible even when our bones cry out. We are further bound by the pressures of materialism and appearance, forced to maintain a curated image, while a deep-seated fear of vulnerability causes us to withdraw, isolating ourselves in a cage of our own making.

For others, our minds are confined not by a lack of opportunity, but by the sheer weight of duties and responsibilities that crowd the quiet spaces of our day. For those managing complex lives, the mind becomes a fortress of logistics, preoccupied with the next meeting or deadline, driven by a sincere desire for stewardship yet losing the capacity to simply be present. The noise of these obligations drowns out the quiet voice of the Spirit, leaving us mentally exhausted and unable to fully engage with the world or God, as if our thoughts are forever running on a treadmill we cannot step off.

Or maybe it your heart and soul, weighed down heavily with the hurt of the world, troubled by the deep aches of injustice we witness unfolding around us. Even from a place of safety and comfort, we cannot escape the burden of suffering, inequality, and division. Our spirits are bound by the grief of a broken world, feeling the weight of a pain that cuts deep because we know we cannot fix it alone. We are held hostage by the fear that our comfort is complicit and the sorrow of knowing that the peace we enjoy is fragile.

The Good News is that the very powers that hold us hostage—the systems of greed, the idols of status, the fear of mortality, and the weight of injustice—have already been defeated by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Christ has disarmed the principalities that seek to define our worth, silence our voices, and limit our love. The freedom we seek is not a distant hope, but a present reality as we join in the work and ministry of Jesus.

By joining in with the work and ministry of Jesus, our spirits are liberated from the fear of complicity, restored to a posture of radical trust and grace; our minds are freed from the treadmill of endless management, invited into the stillness of contemplative presence embracing the simplicity of the Gospel; and our bodies are released from the tyranny of perfection and exhaustion, reclaimed to become instruments of peace and service.

We are no longer held captive by the powers of this age; Christ has broken the bonds that bind us. The earthquake that shook the prison of Paul and Silas was not unlike the quake that

shook the earth on Good Friday; the open gates of that dungeon are not unlike the stone rolled away from Jesus' tomb. The freedom blessed upon the slave, the apostle, and the jailor is offered to us, too.

The prisons we experience in contemporary life are many and varied. They are real and can be very powerful. But they do not have the ultimate word over our lives. That is reserved for God to whom we pray and worship in the good times and in the bad; the God who is revealed to us in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus; the God whose Spirit moves and works in, over, under and around us, shaking the very foundations of the earth; reminding us of our calling, to love God with our whole selves, and to love our neighbours, which includes the enemies and those who might keep us captive, as ourselves.

Amen.