



Roanoke, Virginia

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“Speak Up”

Acts 16:16-34

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¹⁶One 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. ¹⁷While 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." ¹⁸She 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.

¹⁹But 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. ²⁰When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, "These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews ²¹and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe." ²²The crowd joined in attacking them and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. ²³After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. ²⁴Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

²⁵About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. ²⁶Suddenly 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. ²⁷When 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. ²⁸But Paul shouted in a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." ²⁹The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. ³⁰Then he brought them outside and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" ³¹They answered, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and



your household." ³²They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. ³³At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. ³⁴He 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.

This is a busy chapter, a busy time in Philippi for Paul and Silas.

The story that precedes is a story of sweet salvation. A light, feel-good story. Lydia, is an independent Greek businesswoman, and a worshipper of the God of Israel, and she is open, kind, generous, and beloved by all. She welcomes the gospel message gladly, and then welcomes the preachers into her home following baptism...and we just heard the jailer welcomed them into his home following baptism... so please note, preachers still love to be invited to your home after baptism to continue this ancient tradition...

But our story today is a story of a different color and tone. It is full of paganism, oppression, and slavery, complete with evil spirits, exploitation, and Anti-Semitism, topped off with violence, abuse, and imprisonment.

Yet, even in the deepest, darkest, dungeons of life, the Gospel can save. If we listen to the spirit-possessed slave girl's announcement and take the jailer's question to heart, this passage is about salvation. The girl announces that Paul and Silas "are slaves to the Most High God who proclaim a way to salvation." The jailer following his attempted suicide asks the question, "What must I do to be saved?" This passage begins with an evil-spirit-inspired slave girl freed and ends with a Holy-Spirit-converted jailer. All of which speak to God's salvific character made known in Jesus Christ.

In their encounter with the spirit-possessed slave girl, Paul and Silas are confronted with a woman of no status, no power, no freedom, being bound as a slave girl to the cartel of human masters and bound as a slave by an evil spirit. The Greek word here for the evil spirit is *python*; yes, that sounds a lot like the snake that squeezes life out of its victim. Well, that is precisely what is going on here. This young girl, enslaved by a spirit, seen as if she is literally out of her mind, being taking advantage of by her two human masters, exploiting her gift of prophecy for profit alone; she is gripped by the *python*, having her life squeezed from her. She follows Paul and Silas for several days yelling the same thing: "These men are slaves to the Most High God, who proclaim a way to salvation." For whatever reason Paul gets fed up. As one commentator puts it: "Perhaps even the truth, when proclaimed through abusive systems, can be distorted and misguided."¹ Annoyed, Paul turns and in the name of Jesus Christ exorcises her, setting her free from the *python's* grip. But the focus doesn't stay on her. There is no mention of her at all after this. Her human masters simply complain that their main source of income has been taken away.

They take Paul and Silas to the magistrates. And the crowds, who you may think would respond in awe after witnessing the exorcism, join in on attacking them. I would think there would

¹ Brian Peterson commentary on Acts 16:16-34 published May 12, 2013 on *Working Preacher*

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/seventh-sunday-of-easter-3/commentary-on-acts-1616-34-4>



have been a turn to faith that at Jesus' name only she is released from the grips of divination, but no. Instead, the turn is toward greed, toward bigotry, to pointing the blame at Paul and Silas who are "outsiders" who came into their city and disrupted what they call peace.

Frist, Paul and Silas are confronted with an evil spirit. Now, they are confronted with maybe an even bigger evil, a system of oppression. How often in our world today has the exploitation of those who are "lesser than" been used only to serve the more powerful? How often in our world have those in positions of privilege taken center stage, while the oppressed are pushed out of the spotlight? The slave-girl is now free, but she is still shackled by the system.

And then Paul and Silas become the focus of the system, a system that labels the "other" as different. First comes the anti-Semitic attack "These men are Jews" who are disturbing the "status quo" and who advocate a new way of thinking and living that goes against our Roman customs. Paul and Silas are then stripped, beaten, and thrown in jail. They are put into solitary confinement, with shackles around their legs.

Far too often in the world today, those who are labeled different, or those perceived different become the objects of blame. Fingers are pointed at "those people" as the source of all that is wrong in the world. They aren't like us, so they must be the problem. And we get them out of the way.

Now prisoners, Paul and Silas do the only thing they can think to do. Pray to God and praise God. Then an earthquake comes and breaks open the prison doors, shakes free the shackles that bind the prisoners! The jailer sees the doors open and is now gripped by a python of a different source: fear, shame, and dishonor. Ashamed by what happened on his watch, fearful of what the Roman Empire may do to him, he takes his sword ready to end it all.

The mental health crisis we face today is one of the most pressing issues of our time. Nearly 1 in 5 adults have a diagnosable health condition, and 46% of Americans will meet criteria sometime in their lifetime, and these numbers are growing as a result of the pandemic.²

There are both external and internal factors that play a role in our mental health. There are many of us who battle long-term mental illnesses that, like the spirit-possessed-girl, leave us feeling helpless, out of control, or perhaps even enslaved to that condition. And others of us have those moments, like the jailer, moments that change everything, moments that grip us into thinking we are alone and there is only one way out. And still there are some of us who experience both.

But many mental health issues still go unnoticed because we do not want to disrupt our way of living, we don't want to change how we live to confront the *pythons* in our lives. And like the crowd that was "disrupted" by Paul and Silas, sometimes we don't speak up in concern for someone we know or love. Sometimes it is our conveniences that we don't want bothered. So, we ignore the signs. We shrug off comments that cause us to question if we heard correctly. We simply accept a response of "I'm fine" when we ask someone "How are you doing?"

Speaking up is a courageous thing to do. It takes courage and it takes vulnerability. It's a risk but it is a risk that when made with love and compassion is a risk we must take.

² Quick facts from <https://mhanational.org/mentalhealthfacts>



Brene' Brown says that empathy is the driver. Empathy differs from sympathy, in that sympathy is understanding from your perspective. You relate someone's feelings to an experience of your own. Empathy, on the other hand, is putting yourself in the other person's shoes, hoping to understand more of their feelings and the cause of their feelings, hoping to understand WHY they feel this way. Brown uses the analogy of a friend in a hole. Sympathy will let down a ladder and say something like, "Yeah I was in hole once, it is scary." And wait above ground for the friend to come out. Empathy, climbs down the ladder, sits with the friend in the hole, hoping to understand more fully how they got down there, what is causing them to be there, and what they may need while they are there.³ Empathy is not searching for a solution. Empathy is being present with them.

And unfortunately, there are moments that, like the jailer experienced, bring shame or guilt, and sometimes those moments are so traumatic, they make us question if our life is worth living. Brown refers to 'shame' as the unspoken epidemic in our culture. Comparing shame and guilt, she says "shame is 'I am bad' while guilt is 'I did something bad.' Guilt can keep us accountable to face and correct our mistakes with courage. Shame is the feeling that our whole self is a mistake."⁴ Shame and guilt both may have seized the jailer, forcing him to turn to what he thought was the only way out.

Beloved, I am here to tell you, just like Paul told the jailer, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all still here!" You are loved! You are valued! I will stand with you in the dark dungeons of life. I will stay there beside you in whatever cave you are in. You are not alone!

And I know there are people in your life that will be there no matter what. Those who will stay by your side, even though the doors are open, to help you get the care that is needed.

Our salvation is a communal act. Paul and Silas' worship did not lead to their release alone, but all the chains fell to the ground. Their prayers made a way for all prisoners to find freedom. The earthquake was the manifestation of God's liberation and salvation for all. Everyone's chains were broken, not just a select few.

Now is the time to be honest with ourselves and with others. To speak up about what is going in our lives and speak up in concern and care and compassion for others. We have been through quite a lot as a world, nation, and community. If not now, when?

Whatever you are feeling it is ok! And if you don't know how or what to feel, that's ok too! Give yourself time and permission to feel our feelings. To talk about what is going on inside of us, no matter how small, no matter how inconvenient.

Friends, we are an Easter-people, and we are still in Easter. Christ died and went to the depths of death for you, and Christ is with you in your deep! Yet Christ overcame death, so we don't have to fight it alone! There is hope because the tomb is empty! No matter where we find ourselves, the Gospel can save!

"Do not harm yourself, for we are all here!"

"What must I do to be saved?"

³ From Brene' Brown's short on Empathy found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Ewgu369Jw>

⁴ From a blog entry by Robert T. Muller titled "Listening to Shame" published in *The Trauma & Mental Health Report*, August 25, 2020. <https://trauma.blog.yorku.ca/2020/08/listening-to-shame/>



“Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ!”
May it be so. Amen.

