

Resurrection Witness: Liberation from Captivity

Acts 16: 16-34

John 8: 27-37

In my Monday night class at the prison, one of the first videos that I show my students is a TED Talk from a New Zealander named Paul Wood who had spent 10 years in prison for a violent crime. He describes his journey, from drug abusing and drug dealing, to a violent encounter one night with a man intent on sexually abusing him, ending with that man dead.

Once in prison, he resisted where he was, learned the system inside, did drugs, and ended up in solitary. He learned how to use Glad wrap and a toothbrush as a deadly weapon, and was learning how to pick locks and safes from an expert mentor.

One day in the prison yard, his mentor held up a heavy glass ashtray in one hand and a tennis ball in the other and asked him which of these would hit the ground first if he dropped them at the same time. He thought this was the most foolish thing he had ever heard, Of course, the heavy object would fall faster than the lighter one. When they both hit the ground at the same time, he was in utter shock. He had this sudden insight that shook his world, that rattled everything he thought he knew, being a smart guy, a tough guy, always striving to have the upper hand. Instead, he discovered what he didn't know. He realized how he was held captive by his past, by his assumptions, and by his expectations. It started him on a journey of learning that would see him complete a bachelors degree, then improbably a masters degree, and finally, miraculously a doctorate.

He notes the irony of learning that he was imprisoned by his own mind and beliefs by having to go to an actual physical prison to figure this out. He discovered that he had already been in a prison of his own making long before he ever got to a maximum security facility. He ends his TED Talk by asking the audience of high powered types, "What's your prison?"

It's a question that everyone should ask themselves.

One way of coming to realize how programmed your life can become is by having something quite unusual happen. Another TED Talk describes a man who founded an improvisational comedy group called Comedy Everywhere. By taking something exceptional into the real world, it could be quite surprising.

If you've ever lived in a big city and taken a train or subway or bus, then you know that you may see some unusual things regularly. So, for something to really get your attention, it may need to be repeated or magnified. The group got this idea of using the New York City subway for a gag. A man would get on a train stop in the middle of winter wearing a coat and shirt, socks and shoes, boxer shorts, but no pants. The first man drew some looks, but, hey, it's the New York City subway. Whatever. They repeated this, having a man with boxer shorts and no pants enter the train at each one of the next seven stops. Soon, people realized that something unusual was happening. On the

eighth stop, a woman gets on the train carrying a duffel bag. She announces to the train car that she is selling pants for \$1 each. One by one, each man without pants comes up to her and buys a pair of pants, saying, “You know, this is just what I was looking for.”

In another gag, responding to a suggestion from someone outside their group, they decided to get about 20 people to wear blue shorts and khaki pants, which happens to be the colors worn by staff at Best Buy, like Target with their red shirts and khaki pants. The group entered a Best Buy and simply stood around. They didn’t shop, they didn’t do anything except stand around. The floor staff thought it was immediately hilarious, getting their pictures taken with the group, making jokes, etc. However, the managers and security staff, in yellow shirts and black shirts, went from concern to panic. They called 911. The police showed up and had to explain to the managers that there was no law against wearing a blue shirt and khaki pants inside a store.

That’s a light-hearted way of realizing how conventional our expectations are, how well defined our reality is, and on a darker side, how trapped we can become in our thinking, our expectations, and our attitudes. Throw in something totally out of the ordinary, and we might panic like the Best Buy managers. Indeed, it seems our society has done just that lately on a variety of fronts. We can literally lose our minds.

Captivity and imprisonment takes several forms in our scriptures.

As we rejoin the apostle Paul in Acts 16, they’ve set up shop in Philippi in Macedonia/upper Greece. In their movement around the city, they’ve picked up a follower of sorts, a spirit-possessed slave girl who does fortune-telling. As they would go along, she would shout out, “These men are slaves [not simply servants, a lame rendering by the translators] of the most high God who are telling you the way to be saved.” Every time they went anywhere, there she was, saying the same thing, “These men are slaves of the most high God who are telling you the way to be saved.”

This continued day after day. What she was saying about them may have been true, but it may have been delivered in a mocking tone. We really don’t know anything more, except that Paul was quite annoyed by her. Her spirit *seems* contemptuous, defiant of the power of this Most High God and God’s slaves or servants. Whatever the case, this slave girl and her spirit’s pronouncement had become a major irritation.

Our Bible translation is weak when it says she has a “spirit to predict the future.” The Greek text simply says she has *pneuma pythona* – “**spirit of the snake.**” That’s very different, very specific. This “spirit of the snake” refers to the Pythia, the prophetess at the Temple of Apollo in Delphi. The Delphic oracle was a big deal in that era. This slave girl was apparently a prophetess aligned with the Temple of Apollo who made her owners a great deal of money. Considered a valued source of information for people’s lives, her services were in demand, and her insights commanded a high price.

But now she seems to have some strange thing for the new ‘Jesus people’ in town. When Paul finally couldn’t take it anymore, he summoned the power of God and ordered the spirit to come out of her ... and it did.

This is our first instance of one in bondage, being controlled either by the spirit within her, or by her slave owners, or both, being freed by the action of the *apostles*. That which had always defined her life was no longer in control. The power of the living God, the spiritual strength of the Christian witness, brought her freedom and new life.

Now, she probably lost her job as a Delphic diviner, but she was free to be the child of God **that God intended**. New life was now hers. Problem solved, right?

No, there was more. Since the slave girl's owners were now deprived of a good source of income, they were really ticked off. They brought charges against Paul and his companion Silas for inciting social unrest. They were accused of being Jews (note: not "Christians" yet) advocating strange and illegal practices "unlawful" for Romans. We don't know more than that, but it was enough for the boys to get thrown in jail.

It's loaded with irony since Paul and Silas freed the slave girl from her bondage, and end up in bondage themselves, following the requisite flogging of course.

Set deep in the jail, Paul and Silas were singing and praying – making a bit of a ruckus in other words – all of which entertained the other prisoners, and presumably the guard, too. Suddenly, the whole place is in chaos as an **earthquake** strikes and the cell walls are skewed and cell doors fly open. Prisoners bolt in an instant and the jailer is certain that his career, his honor, and his life are now over.

Here is another pinch of irony; we see that **the jailer** is dependent on the bondage of others for his life – in other words, the jailer is defined by the bondage of others. As they all seem to have been liberated to freedom, his life is rendered meaningless and he intends to commit suicide. Then Paul shouts to him, "Don't do that! We're all here."

The jailer is saved because Paul and Silas remain dutifully in their cell despite being able to escape. Don't ask why; they simply **didn't** escape.

So the jailer is saved, right? No, the jailer realizes how close he came to ending his life, realizing also that **his life** is *as much in bondage* as his inmates. He was **imprisoned**, held captive *with them*. The jailer knew that *he* was not yet free. And *he* longed for liberation, to receive new life. Perhaps the jailer had heard about the slave girl and the spirit cast out of her. Perhaps he had heard Paul and Silas praying and singing earlier and it awakened an awareness in him. Whatever the case, the jailer seeks that source of new life from Paul and Silas who teach him about Jesus and his way of faith and new life.

In the end, they *all* leave the jail – the jail is holding nobody – and **go to the jailer's house**. The boys are given treatment for their whipping wounds and share a meal together as the jailer's whole household is converted to faith in the way of Jesus. In this profession of faith, the jailer finds his true freedom and his new life. No, he doesn't

lose his job, but now he can return to the jail without being bound to it. He has new life in Christ.

Turning to the passage from John's gospel, Jesus is addressing Jews and trying to explain how God is Jesus' heavenly Father. The talk isn't going well. In effect, he is telling them how he does only what he has been *told to do*, and says only what he has been *told to say*. It sounds an awful lot like a slave. Jesus says: *I do **nothing** on my own but speak just what the Father taught me.*

Jesus urged the Jewish believers to abide in his word; *then you will know the truth and the truth shall set you free.* The Jews pick up on this imagery right away, complaining that they have *never* been slaves of *anyone*. How could they need to be set free if they weren't in bondage?

He reminds them that all are **slaves to sin**. He goes further to explain: **slaves** have no real place in the family, sharing none of its benefits, not entitled to anything. A slave is really a **property** attached to the family, like a field or a cow or a wagon. A slave is a thing, not really a person.

Jesus says: *So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.* Others claim to offer freedom, new life, incredible blessing, spiritual powers, prosperity, healing, but they're little more than snake oil salesmen. You'll still be bound by the **old, weak spirits** until you attain true freedom. Only in Jesus does the sinful mortal discover real freedom and obtain new life as God intended his creatures should have it.

Those faithful to God and Christ become bound to the work of the Kingdom, sharing in the family of God, and committed in service to the Lord.

Recognize once again the witnessing role of the disciples in sharing this life-transforming work of Jesus. Liberation for the slave girl and the unshackling of the jailer come when faithful witnesses are encountered, when faithful witnesses call upon the power of God and reveal the way to new life in Jesus Christ. Now slaves to the Most High God, their Lord and Master, disciples display a new spiritual power to transform and bring new life.

May we see ourselves as walking in the shoes of these disciples, working to bring liberation from bondage to unworthy values, priorities, and powers. May our faithful witness bear the light of hope and new life to those held captive in darkness, despair, doubt, and disillusionment. May we be faithful witnesses to the freedom and new life of our Savior Jesus.