

**Easter People: Assuredly Free**  
A sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt  
At Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA  
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*Acts 16:16-34*

Today we continue our sermon series based on passages from the book of the Acts of the Apostles which help us get a glimpse of the characteristics of Easter People. By Easter People, I mean people whose lives are shaped by the power and priorities of the risen Christ. As you hear the passage I'm about to read, pay attention to what the slave girl says about Paul and his companions and how her owners react after Paul sets her free from what is controlling her. Then notice what happens after they are imprisoned and what they do when their chains are loosed. Listen now for God's word to us as God's people:

*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 market-place 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.*

What does it mean to be free?

I'm not talking about political liberty, that precious gift that allows us the right to vote for the candidates of our choice, and freedom of speech and assembly, among other things. Nor am I talking about the independence that I seem to remember longing for 35 years ago this month, when I was a graduating high school senior, like some of you. You know, the freedom to get out of my hometown, to strike out on a new course in life as I headed off to college in the fall, out from under

the eyes of my parents and the way people had always looked at me. The opportunity to define myself the way however **I** wanted to define myself and to do whatever **I** wanted to do with my life without too much constraint.

I think today's passage from Acts gives us a window into a different sort of freedom—a liberation of the soul that frees us from the sorts of things that hold our hearts and minds in bondage, a freedom that allows us to live more fully into who have been created and redeemed to be as Easter people, a soul freedom that can be present even in those who do not enjoy political liberty and may even be quite literally enslaved or imprisoned.

It is fitting then, that today's text begins with Paul and his companions encountering a slave-girl, a young woman who is in bondage both to human owners and also to a spirit of divination that possesses her and makes her particularly useful to her owners, who profit from her fortune-telling. She is not the first, nor would she be the last, human being to be exploited for someone else's gain. She knew perhaps better than anyone else in the story what it meant to lack freedom, to be enslaved both to something and someone.

Apparently drawn to something in Paul and Silas after she meets them on their way to prayer, the young woman follows them around, providing them free, if unwanted, publicity. Day after day, she tags along after them like an annoying kid sister. What she, or the evil spirit in her, keeps crying out about Paul and Silas is true. They ARE servants of the most high God, who are indeed telling people the way of salvation—the way to know soul freedom.

Nevertheless, she starts to get on Paul's last nerve. Which goes to show you that you can be annoying and still be right, and you can be right and not be all that helpful to the cause. Finally Paul has enough and just to shut her up he casts the spirit of divination out of her, which sets her free from one of the things controlling her but at the same time sets her up for incurring the wrath of her owners, who have now lost what made her valuable to them. The author of Acts knows that if you take away somebody's source of profit (whether it's Jesus putting casting a demon into some pigs who run headlong over a cliff in the land of the Gerasenes, or upsetting the silver trade in Ephesus by taking on idols, or removing a slave girls fortune-telling ability), there's going to be hell to pay.

Sadly, we don't know what happens to the young woman next, but we do know that her owners feel like they have to make somebody pay for their loss of future income. So they haul Paul and Silas before the town authorities, and stir up a mob against them for interfering with their customs, and before you know it, Paul and Silas have been beaten and thrown into jail. Ironically, it is after that, after they've been put in the *innermost cell* of a jail with their feet *fastened securely* in stocks with their freedom of movement severely impinged, that their soul freedom, their freedom in Christ, begins to really shine. This soul freedom comes out in three ways—and we do well to learn from each of them in our own lives.

First, they **exhibit the freedom to sing even when their bodies are in chains and their feet are in stocks.** God willing, none of us will ever experience literally having our feet fastened securely in stocks, and few of us will ever be literally imprisoned. That being said, there is not one of us here who hasn't felt in bondage to something or other, whether its feeling trapped in or by some circumstance or pattern; knotted up in resentment, grief, worry, fear, or anger; or just locked up inside a body that doesn't move or work the way it once did. The wonder of what happens with Paul and Silas in that jail cell in Philippi is that they sing, regardless of their circumstance. They lift

songs of praise and gratitude to God even when, given the situation, it doesn't seem like they have a lot for which to be grateful.

Notice. They don't start singing songs of praise to God **after** the earthquake comes and breaks their chains and gives them freedom of mobility again. They are singing before that happens.

In the 12 step rooms I spend several hours a week in, we talk about taking life on life's terms. We can rail at what is, we can lament what is, we can and should even work to change what is in so far as it depends upon us, but it is what it is. Life always comes to us as it does. That's what we have to work with. There is a freedom in knowing that, and dealing with it, and looking to be grateful for what we can be grateful for anyway.

Another word in praise of singing in the midst of circumstances beyond our control. Studies have shown that it actually helps change the molecular structure of the brain—and we all know that sometimes in changing us it, while gratitude doesn't change what has already happened, it can change the way future circumstances play out. It's a leap to say that Paul and Silas' singing and praying brought on the earthquake that broke their chains, but I've known people who have seen their lives change through the practice, the disciplined practice of gratitude—making a daily list of things to be grateful for, sharing a thank you with at least one person a day. They were free to sing even in the stocks.

Here's a second way Paul and Silas give us a glimpse into what spiritual freedom looks like. **They use their freedom to provide for someone else's freedom, to care about somebody else's suffering.** When the earthquake comes and the chains are unfastened and the prison doors fly open, they don't just make a break for it, hotfooting it out of there. They are aware of the pain and need of others, specifically their own jailer! What kind of spiritual freedom do you have to show compassion to a person who has held you under lock and key? That's the kind of spiritual freedom they have. That is exactly what they do.

The jailer, thinking that all of the prisoners have escaped—and knowing how the Empire treats those who fail at their appointed tasks of keeping people in their place, draws his sword and is ready to kill himself. That's when Paul and Silas yell out, "Don't do it! We're all here." They put themselves at risk for the sake of caring about him and his future, letting the jailer know that they care about his life. When we have been set free, how do we use our freedom?

Yesterday, I read a remarkable article from the *Washington Post* that Dana Pratt shared. Peggy Wehmeyer<sup>1</sup>, the writer of the piece, wrote about how years ago she and a neighbor were locked in a battle over her neighbor's dog and how it yapped all night. Finally Wehmeyer started to fantasize about doing away with the dog. Thank goodness she didn't do that. Then her neighbor lured her cat over the fence and had her picked up by the pound, and finally, Wehmeyer says, she took her neighbor to court. On Christmas Eve. Though she didn't use this language, the woman was in bondage to her own anger and resentment. Her father in law, who had been a prisoner of war in Japan, told her, "If you're going to be a follower of Jesus, you'll love your enemy, not sue her."

Hearing a former prisoner of war talk to her about forgiveness caused something to break through to Wehmeyer. The chains fell off and she went over to apologize to her neighbor "I came to apologize," she said. "I'm sorry I've ramped up this conflict by taking you to court on Christmas Eve. I don't want to fight anymore. If there's anything I can do to be a better neighbor, I hope you'll let me know."

Her neighbor looked at her with some skepticism, but began to let her in. She said, “Actually, we’re having a hard time making ends meet. Can you help us with the groceries this week.” She did.

After that initial conversation, Wehmeyer learned that her neighbor was wrestling with mental illness and that she had a little child she was taking care of as a single mom. It became the beginning of a life-long friendship, even after the neighbor moved to a different part of town.

A few weeks ago, Wehmeyer saw on Facebook that her neighbor was in the hospital and close to death. She called her neighbor’s daughter, by now a grown woman, and asked if she could come visit in the hospital. The daughter told her, “Yes. It would mean a lot to her. You were her only friend. Please come.” So she did.

If that sounds too good to be true, ask Peggy Wehmyer about it. She might tell you a little something about what spiritual freedom looks like.

Spiritually free people use their freedom to help others. On a small scale through forgiveness and on a larger scale through addressing big issues. Which is why we do talk about things and do things about racial injustice, and the rights of LGBTQ people, and mental illness, and Matthew 25 around here. Yesterday, at the Pride extravaganza that Liz and Billy put together to prepare us for our participation in the upcoming Pride parade next weekend, we learned about the efforts of the Rainbow Railroad. Did you see that piece on Sixty Minutes? It’s an effort that is enabling LGBTQ people in countries like Egypt and Jamaica where LGBTQ people are even more at risk than they are here to make it to countries like Canada and the US. When we got done watching that video clip, there wasn’t a single person in the circle who didn’t want to give money or otherwise volunteer to help the efforts of the Railroad.

Which brings us to the 3<sup>rd</sup> thing that we learn from Paul and Silas about spiritual freedom today. Spiritual freedom comes in knowing who you are and whose you are. Who are you and who do you belong to?

Martha Whitney talks about how her mother said to her and her sister. Know whose you are and who you are then be and circulate.

The sort of freedom that allowed Paul and Silas to sing while they were in stocks (and for other people to be grateful even in the midst of the worst circumstances), the sort of freedom that let Paul and Silas stay and be worried about that jailer, rather than running away, comes from knowing and being assured that you are a child of God.

Friends, that is exactly what each and every one of us here today is. That’s why when we honor our high school graduates, we don’t just send them off with a book that tells them all about the places they’ll go. We send them off with a blanket that tells them that they are children of God. Children of Immanuel.

This word is not just for graduates, it is for all of us. Spiritual freedom comes in knowing who you are and whose you are. You are a child of God.

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<sup>i</sup> Peggy Wehmyer, “I hated my neighbor. Then one lesson led to a life-changing friendship.” The Washington Post, May 31<sup>st</sup>, 2019.