

Lucia Lloyd's sermon
Seventh Sunday of Easter
Acts 16:16-34

It is a dramatic scene that the Acts of the Apostles gives us in today's reading. Paul and Silas have been attacked by the crowds, stripped of their clothing, severely beaten with rods, and thrown into prison, where the jailer has put them into the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks. Being in the jail means that they are prisoners of the Roman Empire, which is not known for gentleness toward criminals. In fact, the criminal system tears away from them the most basic human needs: their physical well-being, their safety, their sense of belonging in the community, even the ordinary dignity of having clothes to cover their nakedness in public. The system shames them, wounds them, isolates them, and traps them. Paul and Silas are about as vulnerable as people can get, and the jailer represents the power they are under.

Most of us here this morning have never been sent to jail for the way we live our faith. I have an uncomfortable feeling that if I, or any of us, were truly living the Gospel in the radical way Jesus tells us to, we would probably get into trouble with our society pretty quickly. But I have not tested that theory in my own life in any way that would get me behind bars. At least, not yet.

So the situation Paul and Silas are in may seem pretty remote from our own lives, from our ordinary experience.

Except that we have all come across people who are jailers in one way or another. People who condemn. People who overpower. People who insult. People who intimidate or threaten us. People who tear off our protection to let everyone see our flaws. People who cause us pain.

There are jailers in families, jailers in businesses and schools, and jailers in churches. Sometimes the mission of a whole group of good people can be dragged down by the presence of one or two jailers. Maybe you have seen situations in which a whole group of nice people try to keep a volatile jailer happy. The jailer does not become happy. The jailer just becomes more intimidating, and a sense of discouragement, anxiety, anger, or powerlessness gradually infects the whole group.

And each of us has heard the voice of the jailer in our own heads. The voice that criticizes what we have done wrong, what we have done badly, in our work or in our relationships. The voice that brings up our past failures and the one that tells us we'll probably fail even before we begin. The one that makes us feel like there's no point in trying for real freedom.

Most jails do have more prisoners than jailers. What the jailers have on their side is the power to intimidate. The power of fear.

Paul and Silas are bleeding, naked, trapped, and in danger. The jailer has behind him the force of Roman law, a prison of stone and metal, weapons, the ability to humiliate and to inflict pain.

All Paul and Silas have is a song and a prayer.

So at midnight in the innermost cell of the prison, Paul and Silas sing and pray. And a miracle happens.

I believe in miracles. I believe that God is at work in human lives: sometimes in big spectacular ways, and sometimes in ways that are so subtle we don't know whether to call them miracles at all. I believe that faith itself is a miracle.

And I believe that the miracle of faith is the most important one here. The Roman magistrates, and the crowd, and the men with the rods, and the jailer have done everything in their power to intimidate Paul and Silas. But Paul and Silas have faith, and so they just simply refuse to be intimidated. Instead, they pray and sing hymns to God.

And suddenly, all the Romans' weapons become useless. There is nothing more the weapons can do to someone who is not afraid. Faith makes fear powerless. The full weight of the Empire cannot crush the song in their soul.

I have as many fears and insecurities as the next person. I know how huge the power of evil can be at times. But there have been moments in my life, in which, by God's grace, I have been able to act from faith, not fear. Sometimes they start as moments of acting from faith in the midst of fear, when my song started out a little shaky and my prayer sounded a little flimsy. But even a glimmer of faith pushes back the darkness, and then kindles more faith.

And even when my own jailers have seemed so powerful, God has sometimes given me a song and a prayer. And when I have sung a song of faith, the experience has

felt exactly like an earthquake that breaks my prison open and leaves me standing there amazed, suddenly...free. My wounds are still painful, but I am no longer under the power of a jailer. I am free.

And just like Paul and Silas's jailer, who is about to kill himself when his prisoners are set free, our jailer who had once seemed so powerful and frightening turns out to be someone who is himself scared to death of being condemned, overpowered, and punished. The jailers around us and the jailers within us, all turn out to be victims of the same fears they have been trying to inflict on us. Ironically, it is the freed prisoner who can save the life of the jailer.

When we are no longer living in fear of our jailers' power over us, we become free ourselves. And that miracle can save the jailers around us, and the jailers within us, from their own fear.

You will remember that Paul himself, before his conversion, was spending his life capturing Christians and putting them in jail. Then God stepped in, and turned his life around.

Now Paul does not respond to his jailer with hostility. Instead, he tells him about salvation, and speaks the word of the Lord to him. The jailer believes in the faith he has been trying to crush. The jailer starts singing the song he had been trying to silence. The jailer starts to show love, not punishment. Now the jailer does not harm or deprive his prisoner; instead, scripture tells us, he washes his prisoners' wounds and feeds them. It is by God's grace that the jailers we used to fear can heal us, cleanse us, and feed us.

The jailer and his entire household are baptized and rejoice. It is an even more dramatic scene than the jail scene. May each of us sing the song that is in our soul, and be freed from our jailers so that we can rejoice at their new life, and ours.