

# An Ironic Escape

Part 6 of Sermon Series:

*Surprise! The Unexpected Acts of God*

a sermon based on

Acts 16:16-34

and delivered on

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Let's start with a question, today. Do you value freedom? Let me be more specific? Do you value your freedom? I do. But what exactly does that mean? Can you imagine any context where freedom might feel like imprisonment? I'm not just talking about that paralysis that ensues when we're given too many choices, so many in fact that sometimes we just stick to the "same," so that freedom keeps you in a rut. (Now I might be projecting myself here. But I know that when I go to a restaurant, I almost always order the same thing, even when there are other appetizing options. I get overwhelmed and effectively abandon my freedom to experience a new pleasure.) Any of you get that? Maybe not with food, but something else?

But what about something more serious? Freedom as in not being locked up in prison? Can you imagine that as a burden? How many of you have seen *The Shawshank Redemption*? Until yesterday, I thought it was only a movie; I didn't realize it was an adaptation from a Stephen King novel. Maybe I'll read it... when I get time. {aside} You know how that is, right?

The main character in that story Andrew Dufresne spends years, tediously and carefully planning his escape. If you haven't seen it and don't want it spoiled, cover your ears and count to ten. Then he does it! He escapes and attains his freedom. Of course now he's a fugitive. [Signal to anyone covering ears, that it's okay to listen] But there's another character, I'd like us to consider.

When all the prisoners are shuffling around the prison yard yearning for release or plotting escape, there's Brooks. Brooks is old. As Red says, Brooks is institutionalized, having spent most of his life in prison. Whereas everyone else looks forward to release, Brooks gets nervous as the end of his sentence nears. When he finally achieves freedom by my definition and probably yours, what does he do? He carves his name into a beam in his boarding house room, and then hangs himself. It was the only way that he knew to escape "freedom."

He'd grown so accustomed to the structure and routine of prison, that freedom was anything but liberating, it trapped him in despair. Ironic isn't it?

In the story we hear in Acts, today, Paul and Silas have been thrown into prison. They'd been thrown into prison for releasing a slave girl from possession – possession by an evil spirit and possession by her slave masters when she was no longer useful to them. Before we give them too much credit, let's acknowledge that it seems like they were more annoyed by her than feeling mercy. But still they are thrown into prison, for freeing a girl and freeing her spirit.

When they find themselves locked up, what happened? An earthquake happened! The doors of the prison opened and the prisoners' chains fell to the floor! As Aretha Franklin would say, ♪"Freedom, Oh Freedom, Yeah Freedom"♪ But no. They stay put. They stay put not because they've been "institutionalized" and fear release, they stay put because they understand that there is freedom that goes beyond mere liberty of movement. They understand that by God's grace they are not defined by their status as a prisoner or freeman, they are not defined by what they accumulate or lack in worldly possessions, but that they are free to choose good even when it seems foolish. And look at what happened?

The jailer, we'd say he was free, looking into the cells from the outside. But he was a captive to his job and responsibilities. When he saw the cell doors open, scripture says that he drew his sword and was about to kill himself... Until Paul cried out, "Stop! We're all here."

I imagine there was this immediate sense of relief. But then what? Foolishness? What's wrong with these people for not seizing this opportunity for escape? For freedom?

I'm assuming that if any of you have been in jail, you've not had the doors just pop open. Am I right? What would you do if that did happen? Would you make a break for it? Would you think about it, but stop because it might be a set up? Would you be content to stay? As a proof of your good character?

I think that last one is why Paul and Silas stayed. They had done nothing wrong in freeing that girl from possession. They had done nothing wrong in essentially procuring her release from slavery. Did they break the law? I don't know. The text doesn't say that they did, but we do know that men and women working the Underground Railroad did. For that they were beaten, imprisoned and killed. Did they do anything wrong?

How many people called them foolish for risking their own freedom for the sake of some negro slaves? But those who worked as conductors and station masters, so many of them Christians would not allow fear of reprisal to imprison them and to keep them from claiming the freedom to do something right. Some who agreed with their motives disagreed with their methods. Even Frederick Douglass wondered if they were serving more to enlighten slave owners so that they became more watchful making it more difficult for others to escape.<sup>1</sup> But who was free? Was it those who kept themselves safe from worldly powers while shamefully allowing what was evil to continue? Or was it maybe those whose virtue was on full display even if in a prison cell?

I've never quite got myself into that sort of situation. I've been hauled off by authorities during demonstrations, but not that. Most of us (if not all of us) haven't. But what about those little places where the freedom we find in Jesus Christ allows us to do the right thing just because it is the right thing even though we may be mocked or ridiculed.

Have you ever received too much change from the cashier; and then received – instead of gratitude – a snide look or comment? Have you ever said, “I didn't pay for this.”? Things that simple: that's freedom. It's freedom from greed and avarice. It does something for the other person, even if they don't realize it. It could keep them from losing their job; it could serve as a life changing witness.

That's what happened for Paul and Silas. The jailer so relieved by their presence; and probably befuddled started to talk to them, and got a sense of the virtues that guided them. Then he took them to his home, and found freedom for himself and his family through salvation in Jesus Christ.

Paul and Silas were already free before he did that. They were free to do what was right even when it might bring suffering into their own lives because they knew God's love so deeply and lived it. Maybe that's why the slave girl called them “slaves of the Most High God.” (Acts 16:17) She just couldn't comprehend freedom in that context. And yet we clergy wear these “dog collars” reminiscent of a slave's collar to remind us that we have freely chosen to submit ourselves to God's will, while acknowledging it is a choice and that God compels no one. He can be persuasive; and he can be persuasive; but he doesn't compel us. Instead he offers us a promise of life, a promise that when we allow present ourselves with virtue and righteousness that we can make a difference for others, and to sense the true freedom that comes from living with out fear: whether it be fear of consequences or fear of missing out. Ironically, it's that freedom to claim that promise over liberty, that leads to our escape. AMEN.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Underground\\_Railroad#Structure](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Underground_Railroad#Structure)