

Freed for Hope

The Rev. Dr. Paul S. Nancarrow

Our lesson from Acts this morning tells a wonderful story about how God's grace can be revealed, God's liberating power can be made manifest, even in the most difficult, dangerous, *hopeless* situations that we can imagine. This story of Paul and Silas and their misadventure in the town of Philippi in Macedonia is full of action, and it's full of drama, and it's full of surprises, as God takes the bleakest circumstances and transforms them into new possibilities for hope and joy and salvation and communion.

In the story, Paul and Silas are in jail. They are in jail because they have done a good deed for a slave girl who was possessed by a demon that could foresee the future. You know the saying "no good deed goes unpunished"—in this story in Acts that seems to be true. Paul cast the demon out of the slave girl and set her free from spiritual bondage—but her earthly masters, who still held her in economic bondage, were angry, because once the forecasting demon was gone, they couldn't use the slave girl to make money telling fortunes anymore. So they hauled Paul and Silas before the town judges, on trumped-up charges that they were preaching an illegal religion, that they were trying to convert Roman citizens to the worship of the One God, rather than worshipping the Spirit of the Emperor, which was the official state religion that all Roman citizens were legally bound to observe. And when the town judges saw there was a mob forming, they sentenced Paul and Silas to the standard punishment for that crime: they had their clothes stripped off, and their backs exposed, and then they had Paul and Silas beaten with canes, until the skin on their backs was torn and bloodied, and their muscles and nerves and very bones ached with the pain of the beating. And then the magistrates had Paul and Silas thrown into jail, and locked in the innermost cell—and just to make sure they knew how much trouble they were in, Paul and Silas were chained, and the chains fastened to the wall, and they had their feet put in the stocks, which meant that their ankles were fastened to a piece of wood so that their legs were spread apart and forced into what we nowadays would call a "stress position." And there the jailer left them, in the dark, in the cold, with their wounds untended, with no food and no water, with no mercy and no hope.

And then, the story goes, at about midnight, when everything seemed darkest and bleakest and most hopeless, then Paul and Silas started singing. They started praying to God, and giving thanks and praise, and singing hymns of hope and joy and resurrection. Instead of complaining and moaning and being afraid, they looked for God's presence in the dark, and they were confident that they would see it, so confident that they sang their faith out loud. And all the other prisoners were listening—they weren't shouting, "Hey, it's late! You're making too much noise! Shut up!"—they were listening, maybe they were even hearing Good News, maybe they were even hearing a promise of hope for themselves. I suspect even the jailer, out in his watchroom outside the cellblock, could hear Paul and Silas singing away, and he wondered what in the world they had to be so hopeful about.

And then, the story goes, something remarkable happened: there was an earthquake. An earthquake so violent that the foundations of the jail were shaken, and all the doorframes of the cells were joggled so that locks were loosed and the doors swung open. An earthquake so violent that the chains fell off their hooks in the walls and burst open the manacles on the prisoners' wrists. And at about this point we begin to realize this is no ordinary earthquake—this is an extraordinary instrument of God's grace, a physical manifestation of God's will to set his people free. And Paul and Silas and all the others *are* set free—set free with a freedom not just to run away, not just to escape the dark and the hurt and the fear; but set free with a freedom to stay, a freedom to face the dark and the hurt and the fear, and by God's grace to transform it into light and healing and hope.

And the jailer runs out, and he sees Paul and Silas still there, and he recognizes the courage and faith and abundant life that is in them, and he realizes he wants that too, and he says to them, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" And they tell him the Good News, and he washes their wounds with compassion, and they wash

away his sins in baptism, and they sit down to a meal together which is a feast of friendship *and* a communion in Christ. Out of this bleak situation of injustice and beating and imprisonment and oppression, God brings a new possibility, God brings a new *reality*, of connection and right relationship and healing and hope. That is the Good News of God's grace revealed in this lesson from Acts today.

And that is the Good News for us, too. For us, too, the promise is that God's grace can be revealed, God's liberating power can be made manifest, even in the most difficult, dangerous, *hopeless* situations that we can imagine. For us, too, the invitation is to be like Paul and Silas, to look for God even in the most unexpected places, and to be confident that we will see God there, so confident that we too are willing to sing out our faith.

A few years ago, when I was going through my divorce, I fell into some pretty hopeless moods sometimes. One night I found myself sitting in my living room, in a big empty house, all alone, in the dark, with all kinds of nasty, negative voices roiling all around in my head. Negative thoughts saying things like, "You know you're always going to feel this bad; you know it's never going to get any better; you know there's really no reason to try to go on; you know nobody really cares about you; you know you're a failure now and you're always going to fail at everything you ever do." Negative voices over and over in my head. Maybe some of you have heard voices like that in your minds, too. Way back in the back of my mind was one little voice of reason that kept saying, "Don't listen to all that negative stuff, it's just exaggeration, it's just depression-talk, you know it's not true." But the voice of reason kept getting drowned out by all those negative things. Until finally I thought, "I can't just sit here like this; I've got to go out and get some air."

So I went out for a walk. The night was very dark and cloudy—but as I was walking, the moon came out from behind a cloud, and suddenly I was surrounded by this beautiful silver-white light. It seemed like everything along the pathway where I was walking suddenly jumped out of the shadows in bright relief. And I turned and looked up at where the moon was shining clear, and I saw the edge of the cloud that had just been hiding the moon, and the edge of the cloud was this amazing translucent brilliant silver color. The whole scene was filled with such an unexpected sudden beauty that I just stopped in my tracks and stared. And I thought of a verse from the Bible—"the same God who said, 'Out of darkness, let light shine' has caused his light to shine in our hearts"—and suddenly it seemed like it was not just ordinary moonlight, but it was light that *meant* something, and it was light that *meant* something *for me*. And in that moment of beauty, all those negative thoughts and voices and feelings that had been roiling in my head went silent and still and quiet, and for a moment all I knew was joy and beauty and light and grace—and that moment was enough.

Now seeing the moon come out from behind a cloud certainly wasn't as dramatic as an earthquake that shakes the foundations of the jail and sets the prisoners free. But for me, it felt exactly like a prison door had swung open; for me it felt exactly like chains had been let loose. Suddenly, instead of being bound by the circular depression of my thoughts, I was set free—free not just to run away and try to escape the sad and scary things, but free to face the dark and the hurt and the fear, and by God's grace to transform it into light and healing and hope. That one moment of moonlight on a walk was for me a moment to witness how God's grace can be revealed, how God's liberating power can be made manifest, even in the most difficult, most depressing, most *hopeless* situations we can imagine. All we have to do is be like Paul and Silas, ready to see God in anything, ready to lift up our hearts in prayer and song to God for everything.

That's the Good News for us today. That is the Good News we've been celebrating all this Easter Season: that God can bring light out of darkness, joy out of sorrow, life out of death. That is the Good News that fills us with courage and hope and life, because Christ is in us and we are in Christ and all is in God and the whole world may know that God loves us. Let that be our prayer today, and let that be our life always. Amen.