

## Sermon Manuscript: Acts 16:25-34

### The Greatest Escape

First Sunday after Epiphany – January 10, 2021

*About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everybody's chains came loose. The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. But Paul shouted, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!"*

*The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. He then brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"*

*They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved--you and your household." Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized. The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God--he and his whole family. [NIV]*

Back in 1963 a classic war movie was made called "The Great Escape." It told the story about a Second World War German POW camp. In 1944 the prisoners in the camp planned an escape. 75 of them were able to escape from the prison camp before they were discovered. After about two weeks almost all were recaptured and 50 of them were brutally shot by the Gestapo. It was the greatest escape of World War 2 because more prisoners got out than in any other attempt.

In the movie, while they are planning the escape the prisoners were looking out through the wire fence that surrounded the camp. Some yards beyond the fence, there was a thick forest. In the scene, the leaders of the escape talk about how they have no idea what is 500 yards beyond those trees.

Prisoners want to get out of the prison and on the other side of its fence. But in order to be truly free they need to know what is on the other side of the trees so that they can find their way to freedom. It's one thing to escape from the prison but quite another thing to be truly free.

In our lesson for tonight we have an escape from a prison. But the prisoner who escapes was not one that was locked up in a cell. Instead he was the jailer. As we study his story tonight, we will see how Jesus, working through the apostle Paul and his companion Silas, was able to provide **THE GREATEST ESCAPE**.

#### 1. Breakout!

The story of this escape takes place in the Macedonian city of Philippi. This was the first city that Paul and Silas visited when they crossed into Europe from Asia. It was different than any of the other cities they had visited. It was a Roman colony. That meant that it was a place where veterans of the Roman legions were given land as a place for them to retire. Much of the population was such old soldiers. They spoke more Latin than Greek. And unlike many of the other places Paul and Silas visited, there was no Jewish synagogue in Philippi. There weren't enough Jews in the city to be able to organize one. It was here that Paul and Silas met a woman named Lydia who is gathered with other Jews along the river north of the city for worship.

How did Paul and Silas come to be in prison? After meeting with Lydia and the others, they encountered a young girl who was possessed by a demon. This demon would tell fortunes and predict the future for people. The girl was owned as a slave and when Paul cast out the demon in Jesus' name, her owners lost their source of income. Because of this they drummed up some charges and had Paul and Silas thrown into prison. This is where our story begins.

In the middle of the night while Paul and Silas sat in prison, they were praying to God, singing hymns and telling the other prisoners about Jesus. That's when a miracle occurred. There was an exceptional earthquake. It shook the jail so violently that all the cell doors burst open. We know it was a miracle because not only did the cells open but the shackles on the prisoners' hands and feet fell off! The way was clear for all of the prisoners to escape.

The jailer thought he was in terrible trouble. He feared a brutal death because of his failure. He was desperate for a solution. He needed to escape from his problem. Like the prisoners in the German camp he just wanted to get outside of the fence. He wasn't really interested in what was behind the trees.

Haven't we found ourselves in the same kind of desperate situations? Trouble breaks out for us. All we want is a solution. Take your pick of problems. We have a problem with a relationship or our job. There are money problems. There are health problems. There are the fears we have in our personal lives or the anxiety that's caused just by the turmoil and struggle in the world. We would like nothing better than to escape from the prison of trouble.

A logical place to turn is to cry out to God. He has the power to help us. He loves us and so he also has a desire to help us. In addition he's given us the mighty tool of prayer. We think, "Surely he will provide our escape!" Our cry to God is: "Get me out of this!" We want God to stage a breakout from the jail of our problems. But when it comes to our escape, is it possible that we might be short changing God?

## **2. Doing Hard Time**

There was a second miracle that happened that night. That miracle was the fact that none of the prisoners escaped. This took away the jailer's reason to be afraid of punishment. It was also a powerful sign pointing to an even greater escape.

Try to imagine what it must've been like to ride the emotional rollercoaster that the jailer found himself on. It was the middle of the night and suddenly he was awakened from a sound sleep.

Someone brought him the news that there was a break out at his prison. He had the realization that he could die for allowing the escape. He stumbles into a dark prison not knowing what to expect there.

Then a voice shouts out in the dark as he draws his sword for suicide, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!" He suddenly realized that no one had actually escaped.

This leads to his question as he falls at the feet of Paul and Silas. "What must I do to be saved?" I don't know about you but whenever I read this account I wonder just what exactly the jailer wanted to be saved from. Did he mean to be saved from the headman's ax or from the agony of a cross? Or had he heard enough from Paul and Silas to know about damnation? Or was his question about something else? Whatever the case the answer he got must have been something different than what he expected.

What is our expectation when we find ourselves in a mess? Do we only want to get outside of the prison fence? Do we only see God has the answer to our short-term problems? Do we say, “Fix what’s wrong now, God!”

We must remember the kind of prison in which we find ourselves by nature. Being born into sin, we are doing hard time in this world. God had told Adam, “*By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.*” [Genesis 3:19] Life in this world can be like breaking rocks at hard labor. This means that we will always be locked into some kind of problem or trouble. This world will never be a paradise. God give us no promise of freedom from all such troubles.

There is a sin that only looks for the quick escape. We live in a privileged society. We are influenced by an entitled culture. It makes us come to expect quick relief from everything. We are consumers who are customers that always expect to be right.

Often the religious message that we hear is tailored to such sensitivities. There is the prosperity message of the Joel Steens of the world that says God wants you to be rich and successful even though God’s Word never promises us that. There is a desire for a message that appeals to itching ears that makes us feel good about our sinful selves. All that’s wrong with us is that we have weaknesses. We only make human mistakes. There is nothing for us to repent. We can be filled with an inward-looking attitude that only cares about satisfying our wants. It leads to a prayer life that is focused on our immediate feelings and desires. We are led to a lack of concern for the greater needs that others might have. There is the expectation that God’s only purpose is to solve our temporary problems.

In reality it does no good to break free of the prison if we only allow ourselves to be captured again by the next trouble that comes along. It’s like those POWs. They might have made it outside of the fence but they never made it to true freedom. While we are still in this world. We are still doing hard time without Jesus. So what will our question be? “What must I do to be saved from my immediate problems? How can I get outside the fence?” Or will our question be, “What will save me and give me a true freedom?” Paul gives the jailer and us the answer we need to this question. It is the greatest escape in human history. By it, God offers us the true freedom of a full pardon.

### 3. A Full Pardon

Paul’s answer to the jailer was: “Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved.” What did Jesus come to save us from? He didn’t come primarily to heal our illnesses or say nice things to us. At his baptism that we read about, the Father wasn’t well pleased with him because he made people happy by giving them what they wanted. Jesus didn’t come to fix all those temporary things that discomfort us or bother us or hurt us. Instead Jesus came to break down the very gates of our prison and affect the greatest escape ever known in human history. Jesus came to be the world’s Savior. He came to be your Savior and mine! He came to set us free from sin’s prison by fulfilling God’s righteous requirements for us. In Matthew’s account of Jesus’ baptism, when Jesus came to be baptized by John, John declared that Jesus should be baptizing him. But Jesus replied, “*Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.*” [Matthew 3:14-15] Jesus’ mission was to provide the great escape for all of us from the prison of sin and death. Quoting from Isaiah as he read in his hometown synagogue at Nazareth, Jesus said of himself: “*The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed.*” [Luke 4:18/Isaiah 61:1]

Jesus refused to slip away from sin's prison and live us in its chains. Instead he offered himself so you and I could escape and be free forever. He allowed himself to be arrested and beaten, to be tortured and finally executed for the crimes you and I had committed. He not only got us outside of the walls of the prison. He destroyed that prison forever! We are prisoners of war who have not just escaped. For us the war is over. Those POWs received Red Cross care packages that brought them some temporary joy. But compare that to what it must've been like for the concentration camp prisoners when they saw the victorious troops liberate their camp and say, "You are now free!" There can be no comparison! Jesus has accomplished an even greater liberation for us.

The answer to the jailer's question couldn't be simpler. When he asked, "What must I do to be saved?" Paul's wonderful answer was, "Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved!" There is nothing for us to do. Jesus has set us free. We are truly free forever.

#### 4. The Joy of Being Free

What tries to lock us back into prison? There are going to be many things in this sinful world that want to lock us up like the fear that gripped the jailer when he drew his sword to end his life. Will it be a broken relationship? Will it be anxiety about making a living? We have worries about our health. There will be losses and things that make us afraid. This world has no end of trouble in its turmoil and churning. But let Jesus set you free by tearing down these prison walls! Jesus has given us a new life. And that life began when we were baptized. Paul said: *We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.* [Romans 6:4]

When troubles would lock us up again, look at those for whom Jesus worked the greatest escape here in our lesson. The jailer walked out of his prison to a new life of freedom. It wasn't the prison of cells and shackles where he worked. It was the prison of sin and unbelief that bound his heart. After he learned about Jesus and was baptized, he knew joy that bursts off the page here. It was joy for himself as well as for his family. Look at Paul and Silas. They were bound and locked up in prison. But they sang and prayed and witnessed. Chains didn't bother them because they knew that they were truly free. Later Paul would write to the congregation at Philippi and the jailer joyfully knew the meaning of Paul's words. Paul would say: *I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength.* [Philippians 4:11-13]

We have been set free to live this new life too. We believe in Jesus. The baptism he has given us has washed away our sin and set us free from its condemnation. The war is over and we are liberated from this prison camp. No matter what may come, we can do all things through Christ who gives us strength. We are forgiven when we sin. We can cry to him for help in all our needs. We can endure hardship through the strength that he gives us. And we are comforted by the hope of our life to come through him.

Jesus doesn't just get us outside the prison fence. He has liberated us forever and he is bringing us home. He is achieved the greatest escape for us. Amen.