

## Jesus Means Freedom!<sup>1</sup>

*About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. <sup>26</sup>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. <sup>27</sup>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. <sup>28</sup>But Paul shouted in a loud voice, 'Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.' <sup>29</sup>The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. <sup>30</sup>Then he brought them outside and said, 'Sirs, what must I do to be saved?' <sup>31</sup>They answered, 'Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.' <sup>32</sup>They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. <sup>33</sup>At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. <sup>34</sup>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's amazing about this exciting story is that what I read isn't the only exciting part. Paul and Silas have been on a roller coaster ride for several days leading up to their imprisonment and miraculous liberation and the ride doesn't stop with the earthquake and conversion of the jailer.

So, how did Paul manage to get himself in prison—this time? First of all, we need to remember that Paul has just landed for the first time on European soil. He clearly feels God calling him to minister on European soil. He reaches Philippi and finds that there are practically no Jewish people—no synagogue there. There are a few Jewish women who gather by a river for Jewish prayer and Paul shares the Gospel of Jesus Christ with them. One day on their way to the riverside, Paul and Silas are followed by a mentally ill slave girl who speaks in strange voices. In a superstitious time, people were ready to believe that these voices could actually predict the future and were willing to pay to have their fortunes given. The slave girl had owners who were happy to collect money from people who wanted to have their fortunes given by the poor child. What happens is that Paul casts the demon out of the girl and suddenly, no more voices, no more fortunes, no more money. And someone's angry.

The girl's owners go to the city officials and the next thing you know there's a wild mob wanting to attack Paul and Silas and the officials are bound to throw them both into prison. Welcome to Europe.

Now, as I read this it begins to occur to me that every person who comes into contact with Paul and this drama is made to be a

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<sup>1</sup>Douglas DeCelle preached this sermon on October 24, 2010 at the First Presbyterian Church in LaGrange, Ga. Additional sermons and other resources can be found at [www.fpclagrangerange.org](http://www.fpclagrangerange.org)

freer human being. Everything gets stirred up and everyone's prison doors are flying open. The slave girl is certainly much more likely to live a normal life as a result of Paul coming through. Obviously, the other prisoners are made free. In the end the Philippian Jailer is released from the burdens of responsibility for the jail. He even becomes a disciple of Jesus together with his family. And if we read with the eyes of experience and insight, can't we also say that the slave girl's owners are released from the bondage of their exploitation. Customers who paid to listen to the girl, were no longer being swindled by the scam that she knew the future. And, most obviously, Paul and Silas are freed. They are so freed that they didn't even need to run away through the opened doors. If you read the narrative carefully you'll notice that Paul and Silas go to the jailer's home to have their wounds tended. And then, surprisingly enough, they go back to the jail where they wait for city officials to release them.

I've titled this sermon, "Jesus Means Freedom!" because I believe that what we're seeing in this vivid and exciting story is how faith in Jesus Christ has amazing power to open prison doors—not just literal prison doors but all limitations on people becoming their fullest and best selves. Isn't it a great principle of our faith that when God comes to properly reign in the world, people—you and I—can suddenly breathe freely and live fully.

We miss this if we hold onto the old idea that Jesus Christ came only to forgive us. He indeed came to forgive. Jesus' death on the cross has a kind of legal power to change your and my relationship with God in such a way that we find that our sinful nature and rebellious past no longer stands as a barrier separating us from God. And Jesus does more than this. He sets us free in a number of different dimensions, just as people are liberated in a variety of very tangible ways in this story. So we are liberated from the addictive power of sin. And we are also freed from ignorance. Jesus was a great and revolutionary teacher. We are set free from religious conformity. Consider how Paul goes on and on about our freedom from religious law. Ultimately, you and I are freed from the greatest of all oppressors, death itself. Jesus' rose from the dead which constituted the world's first defeat of the finality of death. The one who came back from the grave promises that his love is stronger than the destructive power of death itself. So when

you and I ponder the idea that Jesus Means Freedom we can do so knowing that we are on to a great truth in our faith.

Last week, on Wednesday night, we heard the personal stories of several young women who at an early age had been completely entangled in the degradation of drug and alcohol addiction. I'm referring to our guests from Hope Harbor who shared some of their experiences with us. I sat and listened to the young women who were about my daughters' ages thinking, how tragic it is in our time that kids can be so neglected and abused that by their mid-20's they are completely enslaved to chemicals, the sex objects of a variety of exploitative men, totally impoverished, and in profound legal trouble. The stories we heard resonated deeply with what this sermon is about. In each case, in the depths of despair, each of these young women cried out to God—who was their utter last hope in this world. They cried out as the Hebrews cried out in Egypt and as desperate people in the gospels cried out to Jesus. And they were rescued. One of the girls told of praying desperately while someone was strangling her. And do you know what happened? A dog came into the room and drove the man off. Their words were as eloquent as the earthquake we read about today. Jesus indeed means freedom.

If the idea that freedom is at the heart of our faith is somewhat a new idea, let me explain a bit how it works. Jesus' biggest message was that the Kingdom of God was making entrance into the world. The Kingdom. That means that a kind of regime change was underway and is underway. We all remember the cheers that went up from the citizens of Paris, France when the American GI's toward the end of WWII liberated their city and country. Drove the Nazis out.

That was a kind of regime change when the oppressor army is ousted and a new, just and loving authority takes over. Something like that is what is happening in the world right now. Now, when I talk about regime change I'm not talking about say the Republicans taking back the House of Representatives or president winning or not winning re-election. I'm talking about a deeper kind of regime change which is the displacement of a deeper kind of power. When Jesus says that the Kingdom of God is at hand, that means that the restricting powers of dictators, and monied interests, of class, ignorance, violence, addiction, and mysterious powers that can only be called evil, are replaced by the loving authority of Jesus Christ. That means we can all

exhale with relief knowing that the danger is over, the restrictions and compulsions the lies of, as the Bible puts it, the powers of this world are dethroned. The Kingdom of God is at hand.

I'm hoping that as we look at this story of the earthquake and the Philippian jailer that you're seeing just the kind of significance it is when you and I have a relationship with Jesus Christ. Paul was following him when he sailed over from Troas and wow! Look what transpires! When you and I go into the world and try to carry our faith to others, we can expect freedom breaking out in chaotic and unexpected ways. To have a walking talking friendship with Jesus is to have more than a religion. It's all of life. To apprentice with Jesus is to find that in every dimension of your life, be it in your finances, your deepest desires, your friendships, your social class, you will be breaking free of restrictive powers. Expect it. Enjoy it when it comes to you. It'll be messy—what regime change isn't? Finally, pray and work that it will come to those around you.