

Acts 16:16-34 & John 8:36

**“Free Indeed!”**

The Rev. Dr. Jean Halligan Vandergrift  
Roslindale Congregational Church, UCC, Roslindale, MA  
Seventh Sunday of Easter, May 29, 2022

*The Readings: Acts 16:16-34*

*<sup>16</sup> One day, as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a slave-girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling. <sup>17</sup> While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, ‘These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you<sup>[a]</sup> a way of salvation.’ <sup>18</sup> She kept doing this for many days. But Paul, very much annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, ‘I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.’ And it came out that very hour.*

*<sup>19</sup> But when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the market-place before the authorities. <sup>20</sup> When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, ‘These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews <sup>21</sup> and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe.’ <sup>22</sup> The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. <sup>23</sup> After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. <sup>24</sup> Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.*

*<sup>25</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<sup>[b]</sup> 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<sup>[c]</sup> 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.*

*John 8:36*

*If Christ has set you free, then you will be free indeed!*

Freedom is an important topic in our country. We use the word frequently, especially between Memorial Day and July 4. It is part of our corporate identity as we

sing about “the land of the free and the home of the brave” and pledge ourselves to “freedom and justice for all.” It is also part of our national debates. For example, how far should the freedom to bear arms go? It is a part of our economic model, as well, making it possible to be free and terribly driven to make money, terribly lonely, and terribly burdened by things. I heard that last Sunday, Rev. Harmeling rightly cautioned listeners about being “prisoners of our own clutter.”

What do *you* mean by freedom? How do *you* long to be free?

**As Christians, we claim that Jesus Christ makes us free.** We believe that he makes us free *indeed*, as John 8:36 says. “Indeed” is an important modifier, as with the liturgical phrase: “Christ is risen *indeed*. It means *for real, actually, truly, completely* free, spiritually and in the social realm. This is also a verse that implies that some calls to freedom may be false and some kinds of freedom fake. Granted, it’s not always easy to tell the difference. This morning, however, we turn again to the story from Acts about the start of the church in Philippi in order to search for *authenticity* around the important topic of freedom.

**First, in the story, we come across the working girl.** It may have been that she had been captured and enslaved at a young age, or later became indebted to her handlers like those today that are trafficked, but her owners exploited her sensitivity and her intuition about people – her gifts – for gain. Given the Roman market for superstition, she made them lots of money as a fortuneteller.

It irritated Paul when she associated him and Silas with “the Most High God.” I wondered why this would irritate him, but in this place and time, this phrase was a reference to Zeus and the pagan pantheon.<sup>1</sup> So Paul cast out the unclean spirit from her in Jesus’ name. The exorcism made room for the *Holy* Spirit to fill her instead. She was healed and liberated.

At first, you and I may have been inclined to see her enslavers as the free ones. They had control over her and could do what they wanted in Philippi. They held sway over the city magistrates too. Commentator, William Willimon writes: “Nation, race, tradition all stepped into line behind the dollar.”<sup>2</sup> But these people were *not* free *indeed!*

Take note, then, young people, when you feel out of place, different from everyone else, or as if there is no way out. Take note, graduates and those of you wearing “the golden handcuffs.” **When *Christ* sets you free, as with this young woman, he empowers you to be yourself, to discover and use your gifts for *God’s* good! *That* is one way you can tell *true* freedom from false.**

**Next, in the story, there are the missionaries.** Paul and Silas came to Macedonia to help and to spread the news of Jesus. Lydia responded affirmatively and believed in Christ, but Philippi as a whole was not favorable to “these Jews,” as the owners of the young woman referred to Paul and Silas. This was an anti-Semitic slur.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Robert W. Wall, *The Acts of the Apostles, The New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. X* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 232.

<sup>2</sup>William H. Willimon, *Acts* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), 139.

<sup>3</sup>Wall, 233.

Plus, the magistrates supported the enslavers in their charge against Paul and Silas. So without due process, the town leaders beat these men and locked them up – not for being Jews – for disturbing the peace, interrupting commerce, freeing the young woman, questioning Rome, and basically, telling the truth.

Nelson Mandela once asked in Apartheid South Africa: “Why is it that in this courtroom I face a white magistrate, am confronted by a white prosecutor and am escorted into the dock by a white orderly? Can anyone honestly and seriously suggest that in this type of atmosphere the scales of justice are evenly balanced?”

So at first, we might have had the impression that Philippi’s governing leaders were the free ones, but once again they were not free *indeed!* By contrast, Paul and Silas were able to sing hymns after their beating and while they were in chains; *they* survived a surprise earthquake, but didn’t use it as a means of easy escape.

**Therefore, a second way you can tell true freedom from false is that when Christ sets you free, you are empowered to make the moral choice and act for Good, in spite of pressures to succumb to lesser values.**

In his book *Profiles in Courage*, John F. Kennedy acknowledged what I think is presently the case for those in Congress, facing urgent issues like that of gun violence. In 1955 he wrote that political leaders are constantly under three kinds of pressure: to be liked, to be re-elected, and to do what their constituency and special interest groups want.<sup>4</sup> It takes *courage* to make the moral choice for the common good! To do so, you have to be genuinely free. Profile in Courage awards *this* year will be presented to: President Volodymyr Zelensky, U.S. Representative Liz Cheney, Michigan Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson, Arizona Representative Russell Bowers, and Wandrea’ ArShaye Moss.

**Finally, in this story, we meet the jailer** – a regular guy, doing his job as a civic functionary, a man who followed orders and didn’t ask too many questions. He locked up Paul and Silas. But the earthquake plunged him into darkness and confusion. He may have thought that the gods were punishing him. The jailer also assumed that all the prisoners had escaped and that he would be held responsible.

At first it looked like he was one of the free ones, but he was feeling pushed around and captive to the forces of evil that were built into his job, and he saw no way out but to draw his sword on himself. Valuing his life as much as their own, Silas and Paul stopped him, and totally in awe of their faith, the jailer believed on the Lord Jesus and he too was liberated!

You see, in Christ, sin and evil are no longer able to bully us. The Resurrected One defeated these forces of darkness. Jesus Christ knows the way and leads the way to freedom! **When Christ sets us free, we become able to commit to a worthy ruler and to his inclusive community of liberation. This is the third way to tell true freedom from false.**

The jailer quit his job, extended hospitality to the missionaries, and treated their wounds. He was baptized and joined the newly-formed Philippian church, so diverse and counter-cultural, that now he sat around Christ’s table with the formerly enslaved woman,

---

<sup>4</sup>John F. Kennedy, *Profiles in Courage* (New York: Harper Brothers, 1956), 4ff.

Paul and Silas, wealthy Lydia, and you and me. **Together we can live in the world as people who are free indeed!**