

Seventh Sunday of Easter

June 2, 2019

Acts 16:16-34

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Acts 16:16-34

16One 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. 17While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, "These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation." 18She 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. 19But when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the authorities. 20When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, "These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews 21and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe." 22The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. 23After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. 24Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

25About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. 26Suddenly 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. 27When 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. 28But Paul shouted in a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." 29The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. 30Then he brought them outside and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" 31They answered, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." 32They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. 33At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. 34He 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.

On February 21st, 1973, when I was fourteen years old, I woke up too early in the morning. I woke up at 6:46 am and my alarm wasn't supposed to go off until 7:00. But I woke up early because my bedroom was shaking, in fact the whole house was shaking. It took me a minute to realize that I lived in Southern California now and that we were having an earthquake. For a year my family had relocated to the Santa Barbara area and that February the Point Magu struck with a force of 5.3 on the Richter

scale. That's not terrible, but it's strong enough to knock cans off of grocery shelves, break a few pipes, cause a few thousand people to lose power and to scare one fourteen year old boy. Have you ever been in an earthquake? It's upsetting. And I don't think it's just the physical danger, but it's something else.

When there's an earthquake it is disconcerting in a fundamental way. Something that you have always considered to be solid, dependable, reliable, all of a sudden isn't. Something as solid as the earth itself can shake and move and become treacherous. If you can't trust the ground underneath your feet, what can you trust?

The Philippian jailer must have felt this same thing, but even worse. We don't know who this man was, his name is not given in scripture, but he is a servant of the local authorities and since we know that Philippi was a Roman colony, we can assume that he was under Roman authority. And so when he is commanded to put these two men into jail, but also to chain them and put their feet in the stocks, he does what he is told. And then comes the earthquake. Actually then comes two earthquakes. When the first earthquake happens, he is thrown for a loop because he knows that he is in big trouble. He's responsible for the prisoners in his jail and since the earthquake has broken all the chains and opened all the doors he knows that the prisoners are gone. So he draws his sword to kill himself because he has let down the Roman authority. But then comes the second earthquake, more of a spiritual earthquake, when he realizes that they have not escaped, this Paul and Silas. They could have run away, but they don't. Earthquake! How could that happen? That makes no sense to all that he knows as a jailer.

Our friend Murray Cooper, who served this church in many ways for many years, passed away a year ago this week. The flowers on the altar are in memory of Murray from his loving wife. Murray loved moments like this one that the Philippian jailer has. He called them moments of cognitive dissonance. He loved that term. Cognitive dissonance. When something that you have always assumed to be true all of a sudden turns out not to be true. What do you do? For the Philippian jailer it is a moment of cognitive dissonance not only when there is an earthquake, but when he encounters Paul and Silas. For

the Roman authority which he has served has turned out not to be the ultimate authority. For the men who had been making a living off of the slave who has now been set free from what tormented her, they also have a moment of cognitive dissonance, the religious faith that they knew and exploited for their own gain has turned out not to be so powerful after all.

So what do you do when there is a moment like that? What do you do when the earth shakes? What do you do when something that you have thought to be solid and true turns out not to be? Maybe it's a person that you had always depended on, all of a sudden disappoints you. Maybe it's the physical health that you had take for granted, after all you exercise, you eat right, you take your vitamins, but that doesn't change what the doctor says in the office one day. Maybe it's the church or the political party that you have always taken for granted that they stood for the right things, when all of a sudden they make a change that you never thought they'd make. The marriage you always assumed was solid and strong until one day she decides that it's over. The teenager upon whom you'd placed a lot of hopes who tells you one day that they are not going to be the person that you counted on, that they are gay or trans or just different than what your assumptions said they would be. What do you do when the ground underneath you shakes?

The Buddhists say that when everything around you is changing and upset, it is the universe's way of distracting you so that something extraordinary and beautiful can be born into the world. When we have a moment of cognitive dissonance, we can double down on what we always have thought or we can look around us and see if there is something new happening. When the earth shakes around us, instead of panicking that what we had assumed is no longer true, we can look to the creator of the earth and ask what is God doing? Behold, what new thing is happening? Or in the words of the jailer, "What must I do to be saved?" We turn to the one who is the same yesterday, today and forever—we build on the rock that doesn't move, our Lord Jesus Christ, who walks with us into any uncertain future. The hymn that we will sing to close the service today is a kind of crazy one but it fits with the idea of cognitive dissonance, called "Make Me a Captive Lord." Make me a captive and I shall be free. That

seems to be the opposite of what we assume to be true, but the ultimate truth that we eventually discover is that when we give ourselves totally to Christ, we become the person that God intended. The author of this hymn, George Matheson, was pastor at St. Bernard's Church in Edinburgh, in Scotland. But he was also totally blind. Sometime it is those who are blind who see most clearly. What new thing is God bringing into the world? What is happening that cause you to cast yourself on Christ?