

Sermon for Easter 7C

Text: Acts 16:16-34

No fear: No escape

What a story of these two fearless men of God being who they are in the middle of hostile but so fulfilling circumstances. They display such staying power.

Most of us wish we could display more staying power sometimes.

We wish we could be a real “stayer” when it comes to keeping fit, watching what we eat and drink, and supporting our team and our friends. We wish we could show more staying power in my treatment of others and our ability to stay the course when life gets a little rough.

Here we have a story about real staying power for Christians in challenging moments. What a story...

The band of travelling witnesses to Jesus' resurrection and ascension are on the road. They come to Gentile cities, seek out any spark of Christian community they can find, either in the Jewish synagogue or in this case, in Philippi, down by the river!

They meet this remarkable lady, Lydia, a maker of purple cloth for the many retired military families in Philippi. She becomes the host and leader of the beginnings of the first European church community.

As Paul and Silas stay in the city to plant a Christian community, they come across another woman. She is in trouble. She is trapped in some sort of slavery. Whatever slavery it is, she is a money spinner for her “owners”. It sounds like this woman is locked into the slavery of prostitution by greedy and heartless minders.

But it is her entrapment to evil that Paul and Silas recognise. She has some kind of evil spirit wreaking havoc in her relationships, her health and well-being.

In some strange way she is aware of these men who are obviously not like her minders. She will not stop following them around. She was being a very loud advertisement for who they represent and what they are doing. “These men are servants of God and they are telling you how to be saved”, she repeatedly yells.

After days of this constant noise, even though good and true, Paul gets annoyed. So annoyed that he speaks directly to the evil in this woman enslaved. This woman is now released from this oppressive spirit. We don't hear what happens to her after this.

Greed is all consuming. The owners of this now freed girl are angry. Their evil scheme of money making is now ended by the gospel Paul and Silas are peddling.

It gets racial now. That old chestnut of human intolerance and bigotry come out to play. "These JEWS are upsetting our fine city!" call the greedy users of women.

In their rage and their greed they gather a lynch mob against the foreigners and manage to do a deal with the authorities to imprison Paul and Silas – after a severe flogging that is. The very worst of human behaviour is on show here. Greed, violence, oppression, manipulation, injustice...

But if we think that these will win the day, we are wrong.

Has it struck you that this is a classic escape story without an escape!?

There is no escape because there is no fear.

What would you do if you were physically assaulted and imprisoned in the highest security wing of a prison? Maybe we would actually do what Paul and Silas did – pray in words and songs.

When all else fails, when our plans come to nothing, when we are severely challenged by someone or something, maybe that is when we finally realise on who our life really depends – Jesus?

The rest of the time we find it very easy to forget about praying and get on with everything else we think we have to do.

Bigotry and racism have surely inflicted their wounds on these men of God. But they still seem to have no fear. They pray, they sing, they speak of Jesus in the presence of anyone in earshot. They triumph.

Then the miraculous happens as has happened in jail cell before, remember Peter back in Acts 12. Somehow the chains fall and freedom beckons.

The jailer, who has been specifically ordered to guard these men with his life, is at the point of death. In the confusion, he believes they have escaped. He pulls his sword to do himself in – a much better fate than having the Roman military do this for you.

To his relief and amazement, there has not been a break out. These two men are right there with him – but without chains.

The loaded question comes – "What must I do to be saved?". Is the soldier fearful of these men and their divine powers he has just witnessed? Probably. Is he fearful of what they now could inflict on him in their obvious divine power? Probably. Is he still scared of what his colleagues and the system will do to him? Probably. He has every reason to fear for his very life. But Paul and Silas don't. The great escape never happens – not for them anyway. There is no fear and so there is no need for escape.

"Believe on the Lord Jesus the Messiah, and you will be saved", they declare.

In his fear and need, the jailor says, "yes" to this gospel call.

Wounds are washed and bandaged by this jailor and his family. The good news is welcomed into their home and their lives. Paul and Silas do what they always do. They preach and teach the gospel of Jesus – his imprisonment, his treatment at the hands of

greedy and unjust men, his compassion for the sick, the oppressed, his ability and will to free and love and save.....

As is usually the case in the book of Acts and the whole New Testament, Baptism accompanies the proclaiming of the gospel to hungry believers.

This jailor and his whole family are baptised. Gladness has come to this city. Joy has come to this family. The church is planted and the gospel is taking root in this pagan city.

It is happening here too – both the fearful stuff of life and the faith-filled living that the gospel brings.

Are you fearful? What of? Who? We all carry varying levels of fear about various things and situations and people.

But these things are not the last word or the controlling factor in our lives – or at least they do not need to be for us who have been “gospel-ised” or evangelised like this jailor and his whole family and that young woman and like Lydia.

In the fearful moment when powerful people, powerful forces, prejudice, intolerance, even violence threaten us, we have the real option of praying and singing and being together in the moment.

Because fear is not the last word and all fear is driven away by the love of Jesus coming to us in his word, his gifts, his people, we have no need to escape fear or fearful situations.

When our health is under attack, we don't need to escape it.

When our hearts and minds are under attack, we have no need of desperate escape.

When our emotions and sense of wellbeing are under threat by a conflict with another person, we don't need to escape at all costs. We can stay in these things as we stay the course of praying to the Lord about it and even singing our prayers and our faith in Jesus alone or with others.

Friends, stay in your day, your week with all its challenges and with all that you feel is threatening you, and let the love of Jesus cast out your fear. He is in the chains, in the prison, in the situation. He is active in love. Our calling is to stay, not escape. Our calling is to sing, pray and speak, not stay silent or cower in the corner.

As we continue to be who he had created us to be, as we continue to quietly and sometimes noisily confess the gospel faith by how we live together in love we will resist the temptation to flee our troubles and our fears through lack of faith in Jesus' power and love, and instead proudly bear witness to him in all circumstances and in front of all people.

As we do, we may see what Paul and Silas and many others who have stayed the course have seen – sinners being glad that they have been found, included, loved.

Amen.