

Paul, Silas, and the Resurrection Road

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Acts 16:16-40

I want to start with verse 27: *“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.”* I’ve read this story many times, but this week for the first time this detail struck me. Why was the jailer going to kill himself? Why did the jailer feel as though the prisoners’ escape was sufficient reason to take his own life? After all, how could he blame himself? There was an earthquake, for Pete’s sake!! If the ground shook so hard the prison doors blew open and the chains fell off the prisoners, that wasn’t his fault. He couldn’t stop an earthquake. And yet, when he found the prison doors open he was ready to take his own life. Why?

Probably because he knew who he was working for. He was working for Rome. And Rome was merciless. Even though this wasn’t his fault, it would be the end of his career and probably the end of his life. The Roman army and Roman society in general, did not tolerate failure. You can see that Roman ruthlessness in our passage. Paul and Silas do something kind and good, they cast a demon out of a slave girl. But people are angry because they will lose money, and the town is in an uproar and the magistrates come down HARD on the two men for their kindness. They are ruthless. You can see that Roman ruthlessness in other parts of Acts. Check out Acts chapter 12. That’s the story of Peter’s miraculous escape from prison. Herod has Peter thrown in prison but then, in the middle of the night, an angel shows up and the chains fall off Peter’s wrists, and he walks out of the prison a free man. You probably remember that part of the story; do you remember what Herod did to the guards after the escape? He kills them. Acts 12:19. *“Herod cross-examined the guards and ordered that they be executed.”* Rome is merciless and it does not tolerate failure. One more example, this time from extra-Biblical sources: you’ve probably heard the word ‘decimate,’ right? It means to devastate, to utterly destroy. As in: the cities of medieval Europe were decimated by the plague. That word comes from a disciplinary measure used among the Roman legions. If a group of soldiers failed in battle, if they lost their nerve and fled in the face of danger, the whole cohort of 480 soldiers would be decimated. They would divide up into groups of ten and those ten would draw lots so that one of the ten was chosen. That unlucky tenth soldier would be beaten to death by the others. Rome is merciless and it does not tolerate weakness or failure. The Philippian guard knew how things worked. Failure was not an option. That’s why he was planning to take his own life. He felt trapped.

Feeling trapped in a system that does not tolerate weakness or failure.

We know something about that. We don’t practice decimation anymore, but we live in a society that demands success and productivity. We feel constant pressure to succeed. There is always someone looking over our shoulder, watching us and measuring us to make sure that we are succeeding. If we achieve success we are promised great reward. But if we fail...if you can’t produce the numbers, if you can’t meet your sales quotas, if you aren’t bringing in the clients, if your department isn’t attracting students, if the enrollment numbers are dropping in your school, if profits are trending down, if giving is off, if your division isn’t showing a profit, if you didn’t meet your goals for the year, if your intonation is not what it used to be, if your productivity is down, if the team hasn’t been winning...well...we won’t decimate you, but we might terminate you, or give you the axe. It’s nothing personal, it’s just business. But it feels merciless.

Truthfully, even the successful people, even the people who look like they are winning the success game can feel trapped by the pressure to succeed. Consider Mark Spitz, for example. Do you remember that name? He was the original Michael Phelps. Before Phelps, Mark Spitz was the most decorated athlete in Olympic history. He won 7 gold medals at the 1972 Olympics in Munich. If anyone seemed to be winning the success game it was him. Surely he wouldn't feel trapped by need to succeed. Right before his 7th race of the Olympics, after he had already won 6 gold medals and was about to swim for his seventh, Mark Spitz was interviewed by ABC's Donna de Varona. He told de Varona he didn't really want to swim. "*If I swim six and win six, I'll be a hero. If I swim seven and win six, I'll be a failure.*" That's how much pressure he felt to succeed.

Or more recently, consider the story of Rhonda Rousey. Rousey was a mixed martial arts fighter. I'm not an MMA person at all, but Rousey's story is interesting. She had amazing success and she rocketed to fame as a female fighter. Based on her television ratings, Fox sports said that she had the endorsement potential of LeBron James. The god of success was smiling upon her. But then, in 2016, she fought Holly Holm. She was heavily favored, but she lost and her world came apart. Rousey later admitted that in the hours following the upset loss, she was so distraught, she contemplated suicide, just like the prison guard in our story. "*Honestly, my thought in the medical room, I was sitting in the corner and was like, 'What am I anymore if I'm not this? Literally sitting there thinking about killing myself. In that exact second, I'm like, 'I'm nothing. What do I do anymore? No one [cares] about me anymore without this.'*" The ruthless power of Rome. The ruthless power of success. They're both merciless. They both leave people feeling like there's no way out.

But the Holy Spirit shows us a better power than the power of Rome and the power of success in our passage. You can see that power when you ask this question: Who is free in this passage? Who is *really* free in this passage? You would think it would be the people with power, the people who have the keys to the cell doors. But it's not them. The guard's not free. I think we've already established he feels completely trapped. The magistrates aren't free. At the beginning of the passage they are first pushed around by the crowd, bowing to public pressure to imprison Paul and Silas. And at the end of the passage they're groveling before Paul and Silas when they realize that they've imprisoned a Roman citizen without due process. They are trapped in the system as much as the jailer. Who is really free in this passage? If you had to point to one picture of true freedom it would be Paul and Silas, sitting in the darkest part of the jail, their arms and legs in the stocks, singing joyful hymns while the rest of the prisoners listened. You would be hard-pressed to find a better picture of freedom in the entire Bible. How can two men chained in solitary confinement be a picture of freedom? Because these two men have the freedom of two people who are rooted in Christ. Paul and Silas are in Christ and they are walking the resurrection road. When you are in Christ and walking the resurrection road, even when you are in the darkest place, even when you are in chains, you are tied into a source of life and freedom that nothing on earth can take away.

When I say Paul and Silas are walking the resurrection road, I mean that literally. The path that Paul and Silas are walking in Philippi mirrors the path that Jesus walked in Jerusalem. Stick with me here and see the depth of this Scripture. At the beginning of the passage, Paul turns and rebukes this demon-possessed slave who keeps calling them servants of the most High God. Does that remind you of any other stories? How about Luke 4:35. When Jesus is preaching at Nazareth, a demon-possessed man keeps shouting that he is the Holy One of God. Jesus turns and says: "*Be quiet! Come out of him.*" Paul and Silas are arrested by the Roman powers. What

do the Romans do to him? Verse 22: They are stripped and beaten. Does that remind you of anyone? Jesus of course. Jesus who was stripped. Jesus who was beaten. Paul and Silas are thrown into the deepest darkest part of the jail and extra measures are taken to make sure that they will not escape from this place. Does that remind you of anything? Jesus in the tomb. Jesus in the tomb that the authorities made as secure as they could. In the middle of the night there is an earthquake. Does that remind you of anything? Matthew reports an earthquake at the crucifixion of Jesus: the earth shook and the rocks split. When Paul and Silas walk out of the grave the jailer says “sirs what must I do to be saved?” He recognizes the true Lord of this world. Any echoes there? How about the Roman centurion who said at the cross, “Surely this man was the Son of God!” Paul is literally walking the way of Jesus, the resurrection road.

Paul had already tried the road of success. He had been a very successful Pharisee. He went to the Harvard of pharisaical schools and graduated with honors and he was rising fast through the ranks of power. In Philippians 3 he tells us how he feels about the road of success. “It’s garbage!” he says. “*I want to walk a different road now! I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.*” In Acts 16 God puts Paul on that resurrection road. When you are on the resurrection road, you do participate in Christ’s sufferings. Bad things happen. You find yourself in dark places, in chains. But these chains cannot hold you because you are on the resurrection road. Christ is risen and so shall you.

Let me say this using a slightly different metaphor. Think of yourself as a tree. Like all trees, you are only as healthy as your roots. If you’re a tree rooted in the story of success, your roots won’t be very deep. Above the surface things may look pretty great. Above the surface, trees rooted in the soil of success are covered in ribbons and flowers, people might hang gold medals from your branches, and they might stand around and applaud. But the soil of success is really thin and unforgiving. You see, just below the surface there is this layer of solid rock, the ‘what have you done for me lately’ rock. So all it takes is one failure to blow through your branches and the whole tree comes down. Just ask Mark Spitz and Rhonda Rousey. But the soil of Christ and his resurrection is eternally deep. When you are rooted in him, your roots go down to eternal places where living waters flow. When you are a tree with deep, healthy roots, people can do terrible things to you and you will still survive. They could cut you down to nothing and you would still spring up again, new and green. When you have resurrection roots, they could throw you into the deepest, darkest prison and you might still sing.

In his book *Soul Keeping* John Ortberg tells the story of going to the funeral of the Mother of his childhood friend. Her name was Betty. By most standards, Betty was not an exceptional person. All she did is raise a family with four children while her husband wrestled with a manic depressive disorder. This was before they had effective medications to take care of such things. Betty never had a big professional job. She never owned a fancy car. She never traveled. She never had a fancy home. All she did was stay rooted in Christ and love her children, her husband and her neighbors well. All she did is stand in the middle of a dark place and sing. Even though she died at 90 years old, at her funeral the church was packed. I suppose you could say, it was filled with people who, like the other prisoners in our story, had heard her singing in the dark. They were listening. They wanted to hear more. Beloved children of God, you are deeply rooted in Jesus, go out there and sing your songs. The other prisoners are listening.