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Acts 16: 25- 35
Luke 1: 67 – 80

**Life Changing Questions:
“What Must I Do To Be Saved?”**

Our life changing question for today is “What must I do to be saved?” I remember asking that exact question in an entirely different context.

When Kim was in graduate school at Notre Dame in Indiana, we purchased our very first computer. Kim finally convinced me to start using a computer to write my sermons. I was still quite new to the computer when, push had come to shove and here I was writing my sermon on a late Saturday night. Well, we had a thunder storm and the electricity went out. And you know what happened! The computer went off and I thought I’d lost everything!

Fortunately, my husband had set the computer to automatically save data entered every 15 minutes! So I only lost like a couple paragraphs.

My relief was so immense I remembered saying out loud, with heart felt gratitude, “Thank you, Jesus!” Which reminds me of a joke that’s made the internet rounds—many of you will know this one:

Jesus and Satan have a discussion as to who is the better computer programmer. This goes on for a few hours until they come to an agreement to hold a contest, with God as the judge.

They sit themselves at their computers and begin. They type furiously, lines of code streaming up the screen, for several hours straight.

Seconds before the end of the competition, a bolt of lightning strikes, taking out the electricity. Moments later, the power is restored, and God announces that the contest is over.

He asks Satan to show what he has come up with. Satan, visibly upset, cries, "I have nothing. I lost it all when the power went out."

"Very well, then," says God, "Let's see if Jesus fared any better."

Jesus enters a command, and the screen comes to life in vivid display, the voices of an angelic choir pour forth from the speakers. Satan is astonished.

He stutters, "B-b-but how? I lost everything, yet Jesus' program is intact. How did he do it?"

God smiled all-knowingly and said, "Jesus saves."

Today's story about Paul and Silas in Acts 16 is funny. It doesn't read like that in English, so lets see if we can't recapture some of its comedic, almost Shakespearian quality of irony and word play.

During the night, Paul has had a vision: “there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” Paul was convinced that God was calling them to take the message of the good news into Macedonia and so they set out.

There they met a God-fearing woman in the business of dying purple cloth. Her name was Lydia. She and her whole household are soon converted by Paul's preaching and she provides them with a place to stay while they continue their work.

This one day they are out in the city and they meet a slave girl who has a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by telling fortunes. She begins

to follow Paul and Silas and to cry out, "These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation!"

But after a while of this constant disturbance, 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.

Naturally, her owners weren't too happy now that their source of money making is gone, and they set hands on Paul and Silas and drag them into the marketplace before the magistrates to whom they self-righteously charge,

"These men are disturbing our city, they are Jews, and advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe."

How interesting that the men practicing divination through this spirit possessed child who is causing quite a disturbance with her shouting, are pompously bringing charges that smack of improper or unethical behavior, and disturbance of the peace!

How ironic! Who is the real public menace here? The God fearing Jews who free this child of a possessing spirit or the shysters who are using her? Justice is swift if anti-Semitic:

The magistrates order Paul and Silas to be stripped and *severely* beaten with rods and then thrown into prison, ordering the jailer to fasten their feet in the stocks.

Now if you had been unjustly dragged, stripped, badly beaten and then jailed in the Phillipian Big House without benefit of due process—how would you react? What would

you be shouting? Most likely I would guess not prayers and hymns of faith.

Paul and Silas were up until midnight serenading all the jail house birds with hymns and praising God. Are they crazy? No, just incorrigible missionaries!¹

Suddenly there is an earthquake, so violent the very foundations of the jail are shaken—and all the doors of the cells are opened—ALL THE DOORS—not just Paul and Silas' cell door—but miraculously, none of the walls cave in and no one is injured or killed.

The jailer on seeing the situation immediately draws his sword intent on killing himself! Killing himself?? Yes! Himself, not the prisoners. But before he can do this he hears Paul shouting, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here!" We are ALL here. No one has run away—all the prisoners chose to stay put.

The jailer calls for lights, and rushing in, he falls down, trembling—(now get this picture—the jailer with the sword falls down trembling before the *unarmed prisoners---* who *have refused to escape*. Whose on first?)

Then the jailer beseeches Paul and Silas--- throwing himself on the mercy of his prisoners he implores, "*What must I do to be saved?*"

Everything in this picture is topsy turvey, and the opposite of what the reader expects. Reminds me a little of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer's Night's Dream*. We aren't sure what's real.

¹ See p. 235 , Reflections, Acts Commentary, NIB, Volume X

What’s real is the man who is the jailer is in fear of his life. That part is not funny. The quixotic turn of the tables is, of course God’s doing.

But not the fear this man feels. You see he lives in a pagan culture that puts more of a premium on the execution of duty than life; a culture in which life is expendable unless you belong to a certain class and status. It’s an honor/shame society. If one fails to do one’s duty then the last honorable act is to commit suicide.

The jailer’s cry, “What must I do to be saved?” is real, physical and literal. He isn’t asking about how to accept Jesus as the Christ of God. He just knows he doesn’t want to die!

And yet his cry functions on two levels. For believers hearing this story they know what is coming and the amazing surprise it will be for this poor man who can see no way out of his predicament and is facing the worst possible fate—one he intends to execute on himself—mind you.

Paul and Silas answer him, “Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.”

Then, scripture says, they proceed to teach him about the faith, baptize him and his household and to participate in a joyous meal together—in other words, the Eucharist.

This man and all in his house have been *re-housed!* They no longer abide in the pagan world of Rome. They are now children of God, received into the household of God. They are now Disciples of Jesus Christ with a new understanding of what life is all about. There in lies salvation—physical as well as spiritual.

Why? Because he has been set free from the life-denying cultural and social captivity of his society. Freed just like the spirit possessed girl. Freed just like Paul who believed with every fiber of his being he was doing God’s will in persecuting Christians before he met Christ in a blinding vision on the Damascus road. That freedom is a perspective as much as it is a physical saving from immediate death.

Only when the jailer heard Paul’s preaching did he come to understand there is a different way to direct his life. Here is the life transformation.

His question, “What must I do to be saved,” literally translated is “What must I do to survive?” People, *this* is the question seekers are asking today. “The church must answer the survival question for revival to take place.”²

The answer is the same: “*Jesus Christ, Today, Yesterday and Tomorrow!*” but its got to address a different context. The context today is basic *survival....on so many, many levels!*

Folks aren’t out there reflecting on the meaning of life—whether or not there is a God or some other question of basic belief. They don’t have time for that.

They are out their floundering—wondering if they can even make it through another day—is life even worth living? Is this relationship even worth saving? How do I relate to my kid?

They are out there afraid, baffled, caught up in the

² Richard P. Schowalter, *Igniting a New Generation of Believers* (Nashville: Abin

daily grind. Buying in to what culture tells them is the way to live.....Without enough time to sort out what they truly need to succeed in life.

They are in need of the most basic kinds of support systems, the most basic kinds of affirmation and understandings. Their heart cry is "*What must I do to survive?*"

YOU are their missionaries. Have we got the staying power of Paul and Silas? Is our perspective that of the household of God? If we were jailed, where would our trust be? In our lawyer or in the Lord? Will faith speak above our social context?

Only if we see ourselves as separated from it—in the world but not of the world. Only if we know we are re-housed—that we have the surprising answer that will unlock jail house doors! And open people's world view to a whole new understanding of what it means to be alive and human. It's a re-socialization. But are we socialized in our faith enough ourselves to know the difference? Are we incorrigible fools in the eyes of the world because we are strong in our faith, because we know first and foremost we are disciples for Christ? Or are we captives? As eager to run away from it all as any one else? Captive to what the world tells us is the way to live?

Notice that Paul's answer to the jailer, "Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved," was followed by instruction in the faith, baptism and the Lord's Supper.

Maturing in discipleship is a process. You, disciples, are called out to mature in your discipleship so that you can in turn free the captive and mentor them in the way that leads

to salvation.

Salvation: literal translation: rescue from danger in this life. Who can truly do that? On all levels? Jesus.

Our mission as a church is to "Show and Tell Jesus' Love Everywhere." That's what Paul and Silas were doing—and what Christ is calling us to do.