

Sermon – June 2, 2024
“Slaves of the Most High God?”
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Acts 16:14-34

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come and visit, filling open hearts and anointing the sharing of these words. Make these words a blessing for your people. May these words ignite our continuing transformation into Christ's image and lead us to fruitful labor as those sent into Jesus' mission right here, right now. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen

When the believers in Philippi gathered for a time of fellowship and to share in a common meal this past evening, I heard the news that Paul had died. At last, Paul has set aside the labors for Jesus in this world and claimed the victory of everlasting life with Jesus. I will never forget him and the love he and Silas shared with me. I will never forget how we met and what Jesus did through those two disciples for me. It has been many years now but as they say, “I remember it just like it was yesterday.”

It started as just another day in Philippi. The jail was full. It had been a busy week so far, but there was no one who was terribly violent to deal with, mostly people who could not pay their debts who had been brought to me until they paid. There were kids playing in the street and the community was going about its normal rhythm of life. The job of a jailer could have its challenging moments, but most of the time it was a good place for an old, tired foot soldier in the Roman army to work. I thought I might be able to go home early and spend some time with my

family as I would not be needed to help keep watch over anyone who might be an issue. But that changed pretty quickly. One of the workers came from the marketplace midafternoon with the news that the whole town was there and in an uproar and were dragging a couple of men to the magistrates. The uproar seemed to have something to do with a slave girl who told fortunes and one of these guys had taken away that ability from her. That seemed pretty farfetched, and I wondered how a man could do something like that—take away a spirit? It wasn't long until the crowd arrived at the jail with these two men. They were thrown into the jail, and I was ordered by the town leaders to keep them secure in prison. These guys were Jews; you could tell from their dress. I had spent time with Jews when I was placed in Israel for a while with the Roman occupation force. Jerusalem was not a great place for a Roman soldier to live. There was a lot of tension and danger for a soldier in that place. The people of Israel did not want Romans present and they had all kinds of laws that we had to try not to break that got in the way of normal Roman living. I wondered why these two men were in Philippi. Another of my workers had been in town and shared with me that the whole thing had started over a slave girl who was following the Jews around day after day, yelling at the top of her lungs that they were slaves of the Most High God and proclaimed a way of salvation. Evidently, the one they call Paul got tired of her actions and drove out the spirit. My worker was impressed that when Paul told the spirit to leave in the name of this Jesus guy that the spirit left. They knew the spirit was gone because someone asked her to tell their fortune right after Paul's command and the girl could not. The owners became really mad, grabbed Paul and the other one, the one they called Silas, took them to the marketplace, and got the magistrates to give them a flogging. That explained the bloody clothes and bruises. I thought, "Well, I guess they got what they deserved, messing with another man's property." The town leaders were trying to teach them a lesson, not to mess with the people of their town.

But with their arrival went my plans for an early evening and some time off. I guess I would be staying at the jail again this evening to make sure these two special prisoners who could command spirits did not get away. I was less than happy about having to spend another night away from my wife and family so I was pretty harsh with the two Jews. It was obvious from the blood on their clothes that they had both been flogged and beaten by the crowds in town. I was less compassionate with them than normal and took them into the inner cell that had no windows and locked their feet into stocks. I adjusted the stocks outward as far apart as they

could go to make their legs cramp and increase their pain. I figured that should cut down on the odds that they could get away and cause me issues as they would not be able to walk for a while. That was all the care I gave them, no food or water. That was my part in helping their stay in jail teach them to be better citizens when they got out of jail. I sent word to my wife that I would not be home, and she sent me a meal. I do love that woman. I settled down to a small feast and then got as comfortable as I could while keeping one eye and ear on these notorious spirit-commanding prisoners.

These two were different from any other prisoners I had ever had in the jail. Instead of staying quiet and nursing their wounds like most prisoners who had been flogged would do or yelling at me in anger for the treatment they had been given, they started singing hymns about their God and how he had died for them. They prayed for each other and for those who had treated them poorly and beaten them. They prayed for the other prisoners, and when they were not praying, they sang praises to someone named Jesus. Not long before midnight I got pretty sleepy but all those years of training as a Roman soldier would keep me safe. If anything unusual happened, I would be up and ready to deal with it. I nodded off. Then it happened. I was awakened by shaking. The ground and building were shaking. It was an earthquake! I got under a table until things stopped moving and then checked on the prisoners. In the low light I could see the doors to the cells had come open and that meant the chains were free and the prisoners would be gone. Standing in the doorway to the cells and looking into the darkness of the jail, I knew that the prisoners would all be gone and I would have to face the consequences, as would my family, of failing to keep those in my trust in jail. Being a jailer was a good job but the consequences of failure were also high. I pulled my sword and prepared to end my life. I could think of no way to survive my failure of trust and the punishment it would bring. Just as I was about to drive my blade into my chest, a voice from within the jail called out to me from the darkness. It was Paul, one of the two men who had been flogged. He said, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here."

I thought maybe I was hearing a spirit lying to me from the dark but called for others to bring lights and went into the jail. All of the doors were open. All of the chains that held the prisoners were off. All of the prisoners were free, but they were all still there. What could hold prisoners in jail when their chains were off and the doors were open? Something I had never experienced was at work here. Could it be this God these two men prayed and sang to? I needed

to know who this God with real power was. Who was Jesus? I rushed in and fell down before Paul and Silas in great fear and my whole body was trembling. I did not understand why they were not gone. I brought these two strange Jewish men whom the townspeople and I had mistreated to the room outside of the cells and, in fear of my life before this God of power whom they served, asked them, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" They told me to believe on the Lord Jesus and I will be saved, me and all in my household. I did not understand what they were saying. I guess they could tell by the look of confusion on my face, and they began to tell me the most incredible story I had ever heard. I had my family brought into the outer room of the jail so they could hear this story too. Paul and Silas told us about Jesus. They told us that all of humanity was evil, lost in their sin that separated them from the Most High God, and that people would die in their sin and be separated from the Most High God for all eternity. I had witnessed evil people in jail, and I could see sin in my own life. They told us that God loves everyone and wants to bring people back into a loving relationship with Him. They started telling us about Jesus, whom they claimed was born to a woman named Mary and was God's Son. They told us about signs and wonders that Jesus did among the people of Israel as he taught his disciples for three years. They told us how he taught love for God and love for others and lived a sinless life yet was killed on a Roman cross, not because of his own sin but so that he might bear the sins of all people for all time, ours included. They told us of the empty tomb where Jesus' lifeless body was laid, how the tomb was found empty and Jesus was resurrected and appeared to his disciples and hundreds of witnesses. They told us that Jesus was in heaven and had sent his Spirit to live in people who believed in him to help them live as he lived. Paul told us how he had met Jesus and had been forgiven of his sins and that we too could receive forgiveness, not just for what we had done that day or in our whole life but for all our sins and that our sinful nature could be changed and healed so we also could be forgiven and have eternal life reconciled to the steadfast love of the Most High God. I heard his words and those in my house. My family, friends, and slaves, all heard his words, and we believed in Jesus. I took Paul and Silas and washed their wounds and treated them gently with love. That was something I had never done for a prisoner or enemy before. And then they baptized me, my family, old and young, all in my house. After we were all baptized, I took everyone up into my house and gave them a meal and all in the house rejoiced that I was a believer in the Most High God. I have never known such joy, joy that continues to this day.

The joy that I experienced that day has never gone away. I live in a new freedom as a believer in Jesus. Since that day, I have sought to follow Jesus. I try to learn as much as I can about him and what he taught. I seek to treat all those who come into my care as a jailer with the love that I have experienced. The day I met Paul was a day that I have never forgotten; it was the day I met Jesus, and he came and filled my heart with his love. Thanks be to God for the joy of the risen Lord. Now, I seek to live as the disciples of Jesus shared with us how we should live as followers of Jesus. I always am ready to love others and tell whoever will listen what I have learned about following Jesus, and I seek to help them receive the everlasting, steadfast love of the Most High God, to find forgiveness of sin, and to be transformed through belief in Jesus Christ.

Pray with me. Jesus, thank you for dying so that we might live transformed lives and be those who follow you and are always ready to pray and sing hymns of joy no matter our circumstances. Come, Holy Spirit, and transform us into those who are filled with new life. We pray in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen

The Spirit of the Lord is upon us, because he has anointed us to bring good news to the poor. He has sent us to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. Amen