

Be free! Unchained Melody¹

Sunday after the Ascension

Acts 16:16-34

Rev Graham Austin, Scots International Church, Rotterdam, June 1 2025

This morning, we find ourselves in Acts 16. We discover that a community of believers has been established in Philippi, thanks to the conversion of Lydia. This small band of believers would meet for worship and prayer down by the riverside, and Paul and his companions would join them. I suppose to begin with Paul and Paul's group would move through the town to the meeting with no problem and probably unnoticed – for the most part. We'll come back to that.

One scholar² points out that Luke, the author of the Gospel and this second instalment, the Book of Acts, loves to tell stories in pairs. For example, The Pharisee and the tax collector praying in the temple, little children and the rich ruler, the rich man and Lazarus, the younger and elder brother, and so on. In our reading today we come across another pairing of two people separated by gender and status: a girl, a slave – a man, a trusted prison guard. Both, however, are under the authority of people who would do them harm should they not live up to expectations.

These two people, who in their ordinary lives would not have anything to do with each other, will have a connection that finds its focus in Jesus.

The slave girl

She is said to have the power of divination. She seems to have the ability to see things that are not obvious to others. That being the case, Paul's group can no longer walk unnoticed and undisturbed to their place of prayer. Suddenly, day after day, a voice, a cry from her own personal wilderness follows them, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved."

This is a voice that is doubly trapped, securely bound by chains seen and unseen, a voice over which she has no control, and a life enslaved by the greed of others. Chained spiritually and chained by profiteers.

Let's just note that sadly this accepted slavery is still happening today. We will be familiar with the term "traffick", or "trafficking". People walking among us who are bound to inscrutable people who regard them as property and a commodity. Enslaved for the money they bring in and who live in fear of failure if they do not live up to expectations.

Paul does not react at first. Why? We just don't know. Perhaps it seemed harmless at first. We could spend hours in conjecture and theories but Luke, our writer, decided not to dwell on it. But we do know it started to annoy Paul, and perhaps he began to see that not all was well, and that a deeper, darker, demonic work was behind all these words even though they were true.

He was a servant of the Most High God, who was telling the way to be saved.

¹ With a nod to the Righteous Brothers

² Meg Jenista, <https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2025-05-26/acts-1616-34-4/>

That salvation is light against the darkness, love against hate, and freedom to the prisoner. It was the essence of the kingdom Jesus proclaimed. He outlined it in Luke 4:

*“The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.”*

The girl was a prisoner and Paul proclaimed freedom. Notice that he speaks to the evil spirit. The word of Jesus is given, the spirit is vanquished, and the girl is freed.

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The girl disappears from the story that Luke continues to tell. We just do not know what direction her life took after this event. However, we do know what happened next to Paul and Silas.

The broken chains released more the slave girl; it released the owner’s anger. They were livid. Their livelihood had been taken from them, and they were looking for payback.

Of course, they kept the real reason quiet, their greed for money at the expense of the exploited, trafficked girl.

No, these men chose an altogether different route. One commentator puts it like this, ‘First came the anti-Semitic attack. “These men are Jews....” And not only that, they are disturbing the peace, “throwing our city into an uproar....” And worse than that, they are doing that by preaching an illicit religion, “advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice.”’³

The owners were successful in their arguments, the crowds are suitably enraged, and the magistrates feel justified in dispensing summary judgement, beatings and imprisonment – which all turned out to be illegal, as we read in the next few verses.

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The jailer

Paul and Silas are cast into the deepest, darkest, dungeon and shackled, by their feet, to the stocks. They are entrusted to the care of our second main character, the jailer.

Here is a man of power and responsibility, or so you might think. You see when all things are considered he is in as many chains as the slave girl. He is under the authority of people who would do him harm if he fails to live up to expectations.

³ Stan Mast, <https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2019-05-27/acts-1616-34-2/>

So, what of Paul and Silas bound in their literal chains that are heavy, secure and cut the skin?

They sing, they praise, “Christ triumphant, every reigning, Saviour, Master, King.” (CH4 436)

As one commentator says, ‘In the midst of their suffering they displayed their trust in God and their joy by praying and singing praise to God.’⁴ It brought the house down!

An earthquake shook the foundations, and the chains that bound fell off. The jailer is asleep, through an earthquake, which eventually awakens him, and he discovers his living nightmare. All the doors are wide open. Surely no one is going to miss the opportunity to make good their escape. He has failed in his duty of care.

Full of shame and knowing the consequences, if Acts 12:19 is anything to go by, the jailer plans to cut out the middle-man and draws his sword to take his own life.

Then a voice calls out from the wilderness of the deepest, darkest, dungeon, “Don’t harm yourself! We are all here!”

I have no idea how Paul managed to persuade prisoners with “get out of jail free cards” to remain.

Regardless, something “clicked” for the jailer. Perhaps he was aware of a troubled girl made well. Perhaps he heard her proclamation, “These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved.”

Add to that an earthquake and a prison full of open doors yet still full. It shook him to his foundations and opened the door to the question, ‘Sirs, what must I do to be saved?’

We might ask, what was it about Paul and Silas that caused such a question? There was something in their demeanour even as their ankles bled. Something in their voices as they praised and cried out, ‘Don’t do it. We are still here.’

Whatever it was, the jailer knew that his deepest longings would find their answer in the God Paul proclaimed. Paul saw the jailer’s words as a spiritual question, because this jailer with his own invisible chains knew that he had to face up to the Most High God. He knew the answer to his question, ‘Sirs, what must I do to be saved?’ had to do with Paul’s message.

Paul, as he did with the imprisoned girl, directs the jailer to Jesus. There is, actually, nothing for the jailer to do, save trusting in Jesus who breaks the chains of darkness and death.

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You see we all fail. None of us live up to expectations. As Paul wrote, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” (*Romans* 3:23) We are in chains we cannot see that keep us from God. We all deserve the harm that should come to us as a result. But, as we remember, especially on a communion Sunday: We are saved, rescued, and released, because Jesus takes upon himself our deepest, darkest, deeds and sets the prisoners free. *Amen*.

⁴ I Howard Marshall, *Acts* (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries), 1980, 271