

## Acts of the Apostles 16.16-40

<sup>16</sup>One day, as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune telling. <sup>17</sup>While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, "These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation." <sup>18</sup>She kept doing this for many days. But 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 that very hour. <sup>19</sup>But when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the authorities. <sup>20</sup>When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, "These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews <sup>21</sup>and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe." <sup>22</sup>The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. <sup>23</sup>After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. <sup>24</sup>Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

<sup>25</sup>About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. <sup>26</sup>Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened. <sup>27</sup>When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open; he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped. <sup>28</sup>But Paul shouted in a loud voice "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." <sup>29</sup>The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. <sup>30</sup>Then he brought them outside and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" <sup>31</sup>They answered, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." <sup>32</sup>They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. <sup>33</sup>At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. <sup>34</sup>He brought them up into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.

<sup>35</sup>When morning came, the magistrates sent the police, saying, "Let those men go." <sup>36</sup>And the jailer reported the message to Paul, saying, "The magistrates sent word to let you go; therefore come out now and go in peace." <sup>37</sup>But Paul replied, "They have beaten us in public, uncondemned, men who are Roman citizens, and have thrown us into prison; and now are they going to discharge us in secret? Certainly not! Let them come and take us out themselves." <sup>38</sup>The police reported these words to the magistrates, and they were afraid when they heard that they were Roman citizens; <sup>39</sup>so they came and apologized to them. And they took them out and asked them to leave the city. <sup>40</sup>After leaving the prison they went to Lydia's home; and when they had seen and encouraged the brothers and sisters there, they departed.

<sup>20</sup>The one who testifies to these things says, "Surely I am coming soon." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! <sup>21</sup>The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen.

### **John 17:20-26**

<sup>20</sup>"I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, <sup>21</sup>that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. <sup>22</sup>The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, <sup>23</sup>I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

<sup>24</sup>Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. <sup>25</sup>"Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. <sup>26</sup>I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them."

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The Great Escape

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We've been talking about Acts since Easter. We've been focusing on the invention of Christianity and the spread of the beliefs that have been tested and tried from the day of Jesus' resurrection until now. The story Acts provides truly IS an amazing story and seems to be BOUT 40% stories about Paul. The Apostles and Paul, though enemies at the beginning of the book of Acts, by midway through have reconciled and all have the very same interest. Paul is so passionate about Jesus Christ that he can not keep the news to himself and everywhere he goes he spreads Jesus' story; it is a story the people the apostles speak with need to hear. The people of the Roman Empire have been down-trodden for as long as the Empire has been in existence to lord it over them, and they need to hear about Jesus, Jesus' grace and how Jesus was resurrected and how they also can

be resurrected. Jesus taught them to BE grace; to be kind and care for everyone. That they would all be one.

And so our story today puts us once again into close quarters with Paul. This time we are in a small prison cell- very much like an enclosed cave.

Frederick Buechner wrote this of Paul:

"Paul's mads were madder and his blues bluer, his pride prouder and his humbleness humbler, his strengths stronger and his weaknesses weaker than almost anybody else's you'd be apt to think of; and the splash he made when he fell for Christ is audible still. It is little wonder that from the start he was a genius at making enemies.

As his own Letters indicate, his contemporaries accused him of being insincere, crooked, yellow, physically repulsive, unclean, bumbling, and off his rocker. Since then the charges against him have tended to narrow down to one; that is, that he took the simple and beautiful gospel of Jesus and loused it up with obscure, divisive, and unnecessary theological subtleties.

Anybody who thinks the gospel of Jesus is simple should go back and take a look at it. "Love your neighbor." "Be ye perfect." "Resist not evil." "I and the Father are one." "Follow me." The only thing that's simple about the gospel is the language.

Jesus exploded on the scene like a bomb and blew the world in general and the world of Judaism in particular sky-high. It was left to Paul to try to sort out the pieces.

So he went his way and wrote his marvelous punch-drunk, Christ-drunk Letters. Jesus lit the fire, and Paul used it to forge for him a church.<sup>1</sup>

The church, our church, truly was built by Paul. Paul was very special. After his conversion on the road to Damascus, he was so passionate about Jesus that he didn't care at all what happened to him as he told everyone he met about Jesus. Imprisonment, a stoning, beatings; Paul stood up to all of it in the very same non-violent way that his teacher, Jesus had done. He was imprisoned many times. It seemed that he had something offensive to say every place he went!

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Buechner. Wishful Thinking and later in Beyond Words.

If you love to travel you can visit a few of the prisons Paul occupied. In Rome there is a prison called Mamartine. (show slide) It is cave-like and underground. I'm sure it was pitch black when Paul was in it. And there is also the prison he and Silas may have been confined in, in Philippi. (show slide) And even though the prison doors were opened and their shackles fell away, Paul and Silas stayed, and in doing that they managed to lead yet another person to Christ who loves each and everyone of us. (show slide of Paul and Silas)

In the UCC our motto comes straight from John 17:20-21. <sup>20</sup>"I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, <sup>21</sup>that they may all be one.

And this is what Christ has asked of us- that we love one another. That we may all be one in our love of God. It sounds so easy!

The Church of the Holy Sepulchre is located in Jerusalem. It is a shrine that many go to visit. Work is to start soon on repairing the shrine at the heart of the complex, in which is supposedly located the tomb of Jesus. The renovation will cost \$3.4 million and will essentially be rebuilt.

But while the renovation is technically challenging, a far greater challenge was getting agreement over the need for the work. Responsibility for the Holy Sepulchre is divided between six Churches – the other three are the Coptic, Ethiopian and Syriac Orthodox – each of which jealously guards the privileges and territory granted to it by the Ottoman rulers in 1853. Any infringement of these is bitterly resented and the 'Status Quo' established then is rigidly enforced.

In 1995 the six denominations finally came to an agreement on painting a section of the central dome. It had taken them 17 years of debate and illustrates just why the building is in such a state.

Just how far the monks and priests are prepared to go is illustrated by a ladder. It is an ordinary ladder made of cedar wood and propped up against one of the exterior windows of the church. It has been there since at least 1757, because the various Churches all need to agree whose responsibility it is to move it and they haven't been able to do so.

The Ethiopians and Copts – poor and less influential, have space on the roof of the church. One section is disputed; during Easter prayers in 1970, Coptic monks briefly left their rooftop monastery, which allowed the Ethiopian monks to change the locks and take it

for their own. Since then a Coptic monk has sat on a chair there all the time to stake his church's claim. On a hot summer day in 2002 he moved his chair a few centimetres into the shade; this was interpreted as an act of aggression and the fight that followed saw 11 monks hospitalized.

On another occasion, in 2004, a door to the Franciscan chapel was left open during the Orthodox celebrations of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross. This was taken as a sign of disrespect by the Orthodox and a fistfight broke out.<sup>2</sup>

We Christians may have disagreements and we may see ourselves as very different from one another but we certainly do have a lot in common in our love for and understanding of Jesus' call for us to love each other and our neighbors. We do the things we do inside of and outside of the church, for the love of Christ. And it is good to remember that we all believe and teach as Jesus did- that we may all be one.

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<sup>2</sup> Christian News from Christians Today. [www.Christiantoday.com](http://www.Christiantoday.com) July 2016.