

Suttons Bay Congregational Church
Acts 16:23-34 *The Jailhouse Rocked*

June 2, 2019
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What are some things you love about living in, or visiting, Northern Michigan?

One of things I love about living here, because I am a generally anxious and safety-conscious person, is that Northern Michigan is one of the least-earthquake prone regions of the continental United States. When things are grim and gray in late February and I'm weary of hazardous road conditions and sick of being cold and come home after a long day of work only to find that I have shovel the driveway, while I shovel I remind myself of the good parts of living here—we don't have hurricanes, the Massasaugua rattlesnake, the only venomous snake native to parts of Michigan, is only active March 15th through October 31st, and we're not located on a major tectonic fault line and so my chances of experiencing a damaging earthquake while here at home in Leelanau County are slim.

The same is not true for the region of what was called Philippi in the Bible, a city located in the northeastern portion of modern day Greece. Greece lies on a major fault line and is hit by earthquakes on a regular basis. Our scripture reading for this morning tells us of just such a seismic event that happened nearly 2000 years ago.

At the time, the Apostle Paul and his disciple Silas were visiting the region. Judy just read to us the story of the offense they committed that landed them in jail—they rid a young slave woman of an evil spirit. In doing so, they left her owners without the income she gained for them with her fortune telling. To retaliate for their lost income, the group roughed up Paul and Silas and accused them of disturbing the peace. Mob mentality took hold. Paul and Silas became targets of the groups' frustration and anger. They were taken to court and that's where we pick up with the rest of the story, as we find it in Eugene Peterson's *The Message*.

The judges went along with the mob, had Paul and Silas's clothes ripped off and ordered a public beating. After beating them black-and-blue, they threw them into jail, telling the jailkeeper to put them under heavy guard so there would be no chance of escape. He did just that—threw them into the maximum security cell in the jail and clamped leg irons on them.

Along about midnight, Paul and Silas were at prayer and singing a robust hymn to God. The other prisoners couldn't believe their ears. Then, without warning, a huge earthquake! The jailhouse rocked, every door flew open, all the prisoners were loose.

Can you imagine such a thing? Prisoners on the loose, hoots and hollers of celebration, people in chains being set free and running out into the streets to return to their families and friends—talk about a party in the county jail!

Except, that's not what happened.

Startled from sleep, the jailer saw all the doors swinging loose on their hinges. Assuming that all the prisoners had escaped, he pulled out his sword and was about to do himself in, figuring he was as good as dead anyway, when Paul stopped him: "Don't do that! We're all still here! Nobody's run away!"

The jailer got a torch and ran inside. Badly shaken, he collapsed in front of Paul and Silas. He led them out of the jail and asked, "Sirs, what do I have to do to be saved, to really live?" They said, "Put your entire trust in the Master Jesus. Then you'll live as you were meant to live—and everyone in your house included!"

The text tells us the jailer was badly shaken—it seems there were plenty of reasons why. The earthquake, thoughts of his narrowly-averted suicide, and the simple disbelief that those same two men he had stood by and watched be flogged and beaten just hours before, those same two men who had spent the night singing and praying and, quite frankly, driving everyone in the whole place nuts with their carrying on, those same two men, who had done nothing more than rid a slave girl of an evil spirit, those same two men had saved his life, choosing to stick around and risk their own lives so that the jailer’s life would be spared. Is it any wonder that he was badly shaken and collapsed at the feet of Paul and Silas?

The earthquake freed Paul and Silas from their physical captivity. But, it was Paul and Silas’ spiritual freedom, a kind of freedom that cannot be taken or shaken away, that ended up truly freeing the jailer and his whole household. Indeed, the man couldn’t wait to get home and tell his family about all that had happened. And after they covered the details of that night, Paul and Silas were given the opportunity to tell the stories of Jesus, the one who came that we might have life and have it abundantly; the one who came that we would finally be free.

They went on to spell out in detail the story of the Master—the entire family got in on this part. They never did get to bed that night. The jailer made them feel at home, dressed their wounds, and then—he couldn’t wait till morning!—was baptized, he and everyone in his family. There in his home, he had food set out for a festive meal. It was a night to remember: He and his entire family had put their trust in God; everyone in the house was in on the celebration.

Of all the outcomes that might have come from Paul and Silas being thrown in jail, the conversion of the jailer and his entire household was surely among the most unlikely. Their conversions were only made possible by a series of unfortunate events that would lead many to expect the story to end in tragedy, not glory.

And isn’t that just the way when it comes to the ways of God? It is sometimes when we are in the midst of quite challenging circumstances that God enters our lives, shakes us up, and in doing so, strengthens our faith and empowers us to act on our faith in service—just as Paul and Silas did.

Jesse and I started watching a gardening show on Netflix called *Big Dreams, Small Spaces*. Couples in the UK wishing to create new garden spaces at their homes are assisted by the show’s host, Monty Don, an expert on gardening and landscaping. Together they work to design a garden and then the show traces their progress over the course of about a year with the host visiting them periodically to offer praise and suggestions. I find the show strangely compelling, even intriguing at times, though I am not a gardener myself.

The first episode featured a couple who wished to grow their own fruits and vegetables to make jams and chutneys. Part of their garden plan included a back yard green house. They built the green house and stored a few flats of germinating pepper plants inside. By the time the show’s host made a follow-up visit, the pepper plants were sprouting up out of their pots. The host recommended that, instead of leaving the greenhouse shut up tight both night and day, the couple leave the door of it open to encourage air to move through—air that would blow the plants around a bit providing movement that would force the base of the plants to strengthen in order to survive. Without some agitation and stress, the plants would grow leggy and bear little fruit. As the host said, “You don’t want a hot house if you’re trying to grow something that will bear fruit.”

From what we learn from the journeys, suffering, and triumphs of Paul and Silas, the same is true of followers of Christ. We’re not intended to be delicate orchids grown in a temperature controlled hot house only to meet utter failure upon being exposed to the “real” environment around us. Rather, we Christians are meant to be a hearty stock, salt of the earth, fruit bearing, that kind of thing. The sufferings, trials, and tribulations that shake us to our core also, in time, are often the very things that make us strong and able to weather the storms of life. Often it is because of our sufferings that our lives bear fruit—wisdom, insight, and compassion that we can then share with others.

Indeed, the night of the earthquake in the prison in Philippi was not Paul's first rodeo when it came to being imprisoned. The scars that would result when that night's beatings healed were added to those from previous beatings and imprisonments and would be added to under future persecutions.

But for Paul, the suffering was worth it. Once known as Saul, Paul had been the persecutor, not the persecuted. But then, after a glorious encounter with the power of the Risen Christ on the road to Damascus, Paul became a follower of Jesus Christ and likely the most influential of all Christian missionaries. Over the course of his life, he traveled over 10,000 miles and wrote thirteen of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament, all in an earnest effort to share and spread the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. That Good News, no matter the bad he had to experience in order to witness to it, was Paul's first priority. He had set aside comfort and security long ago for God's sake.

I'm not sure we have to be intentional about setting aside safety and security in order to suffer. Indeed, I manage to suffer regardless of how much I try to avoid it. I'm guessing the same is true for you. But the hope to be gleaned from this story about Paul and Silas in prison is that God is with us even in our suffering. God abides with us, sustains us, and sometimes even surprises us. God shakes things us, startles us out of our complacency and despair, loosens the chains of regret that held us in place, and creates new opportunities for us to lean into trusting Jesus Christ—in the good times and the bad times and the utterly horrible times.

And so it is that we may not live in a region prone to earthquakes. But, that doesn't mean our lives don't sometimes get shaken up, turned around, and maybe even feel like they are collapsing around us. The Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is that even in those times, the love of God, the peace of Christ, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit are with us . . . in those times and now and always. Thanks be to God.