

8.29.2021 Trinity 13 (Acts 16:16-34)

Light shines brightest in the darkness. When I was about ten years old our family went on a trip to Sequoia National Park, and while we were there one of the sites we toured was named the Crystal Cave. I can remember park rangers leading us into the cave on a path strung with lights. Along the way they pointed out stalactites, stalagmites, flowstone, and beautiful underground springs. The entire experience was fascinating, but from my perspective the highlight of the tour was when they led our group into a part of the cave that was completely cut off from any outside light source. It's been forty years, but I can still remember what it was like when they shut the lights off. It sounds cliché, but it was so dark that you literally couldn't see your hand in front of your face, and then, after we had all experienced a few moments of complete darkness, one of the park rangers lit a match. Never would I have imagined that a single match could give off so much light.

Light shines brightest in the darkness, and what was true about the effect of a single match lit in complete darkness is also true of what occurs when we let the light that God has placed in us, the Light of Christ, shine in the darkest places and most difficult circumstances. In our New Testament lesson this morning we see that truth revealed. The passage we read today is an account of Paul and Silas preaching in Philippi, and over the course of their travels they come across a girl who was possessed with a spirit by which she predicted the future. After this girl heard Paul and Silas preach, she followed them, constantly shouting, "*These men are the servants of the most high God, which show unto us the way of Salvation*" (Acts 16:17). She spoke the truth, and her persistence in doing so, annoyed St. Paul to the point where the truth set her free. After many days, we're told that her continual shouting irritated St. Paul, who turned to the girl and in the name of Jesus commanded the spirit to leave her, which it did.

With the spirit gone, however, her ability to predict the future was gone as well, and this infuriated the men who were profiting from her abilities. These men dragged Paul and Silas to the public square, to the center of town, where they were stripped, beaten, and thrown into prison. The text tells us that at midnight, in this damp, dark, cavern-like first century prison cell, with their

feet fastened in the stocks (a device used to not only secure a prisoner, but torture them as well), at midnight, in this miserable condition, *“Paul and Silas prayed, and sang praises unto God: and the prisoners heard them”* (Acts 16:25).

The prisoners heard them. They heard them because light shines brightest in the darkness. Outside the Crystal Cave few people would recognize any light emanating from a single match, but inside that cave, in complete darkness, every eye was fixed on that source of light. Likewise, as Paul and Silas preached in Philippi, one girl, and perhaps a few others, recognized that these men were *servants of the most high God, which show unto us the way of Salvation*, while all the others were too distracted to even notice and allowed them to be stripped, beaten, and thrown into prison, yet once they were locked inside the darkness of that prison, with their feet fastened in the stocks, the way these saints prayed and sang praises unto God couldn't be ignored. Every eye in that dark prison was fixed on the Light of Christ as it emanated from Paul and Silas.

The prisoners heard them, and they weren't the only ones. As Paul and Silas prayed and praised God in the darkness, *“suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken: and immediately all the doors were opened, and every one's bands were loosed. And the keeper of the prison awaking out of his sleep, and seeing the prison doors open, he drew out his sword, and would have killed himself, supposing that the prisoners had been fled. But Paul cried with a loud voice, saying, Do thyself no harm: for we are all here. Then he called for a light, and sprang in, and came trembling, and fell down before Paul and Silas, And brought them out, and said, Sirs, what must I do to be saved? And they said, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved...”* (Acts 16:25-31).

The Philippian jailer, and all who lived in his house, were saved because light shines brightest in the darkness. After the earth quaked and the prison doors were opened, the darkness that closed in on this man was the thought of his own death. The jailer was about to kill himself because he knew that he'd soon be killed for allowing these prisoners to escape, but when he heard Paul cry out with a loud voice, *“Do thyself no harm: for we are all here,”* he saw

a light shining in that darkness. He knew that Paul had saved his life. Can you imagine the miracle this man witnessed? The earthquake. The prison doors open. Every prisoner's chains loosed. Yet, these criminals who would've had a long history of looking out for their own best interests, chose to put his needs before their own. They all remained in prison, and saved his life instead of their own.

By the grace of God, this light in the darkness revealed to the jailer that what the girl couldn't stop saying about Paul and Silas was true: *"These men are the servants of the most high God, which show unto us the way of Salvation."* In the darkness of that prison, as the Light of Christ emanated from these holy men, the jailer began to see the depth of his fall, and trembling at the thought, he fell down in front of them and asked, *"Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"* To which they replied, *"Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved..."*

The passage we read today from the book of Acts could be described as a lesson in early Church history. On Sunday morning we often read from the Scriptures about Church history, but I wonder how often we stop to consider the fact that we are the Christians who are currently writing our own chapter of Church history. How many of us have stopped to consider that for the last 18 months we've been writing a chapter unlike any other. It would serve us well to think for a moment about what this chapter will say about us when it's read by future generations of Christians.

When they read our story, will we be remembered in the same way that we remember Paul and Silas? When future generations of Christians look back will they see people who, in the darkest places and most difficult circumstances, let the Light of Christ shine for the world to see? Will they see us as a people who *prayed, and sang praises unto God* in the darkness of divisive politics, devastating wildfires, and a global pandemic?

Light shines brightest in the darkness. By the grace of God may we be that Light, to the end that the world will see us as the girl saw Paul and Silas, as *the servants of the most high God, which show unto us the way of Salvation*. By the grace of God may we be that Light, to the end that the world will hear

us praying and praising God in the darkness, in the same way Paul and Silas did so. By the grace of God may we be that Light, to the end that the world will ask us the same question the Philippian jailer asked Paul and Silas, “Christians, *What must I do to be saved.*” And by God’s grace may we proclaim this answer until the whole world hears: “*Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved.*”