

Sermon preached by Pastor Ben Kuerth on August 7, 2016 at Victory of the Lamb on Acts 16:22-34.

“Joy—Pass it On!”

Today, friends, on a day when we have so much to celebrate we’re going to take a break from our 1 Corinthians series to enjoy one of my favorite Bible stories which I believe can have a profound impact on our church because it’s a story about the joy we have thanks to Jesus. It’s a story about the joy that’s shared between pastors and people. It’s a story about the joy we can’t help but pass on which is what Pastor Bill is all about.

So I’m going to read to you today from the book of Acts, 16:22-34. The book of Acts of course is full of missionary stories. This one just happens to be the impact that two missionary teammates, Paul and Silas, have on one person whose story of a changed heart had a ripple effect throughout his entire household.

22 The crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas, and the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten with rods. 23 After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. 24 When he received these orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

25 About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. 26 Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everyone’s chains came loose. 27 The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. 28 But Paul shouted, “Don’t harm yourself! We are all here!”

29 The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. 30 He then brought them out and asked, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”

31 They replied, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household.” 32 Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. 33 At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his household were baptized. 34 The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole household.

Let me ask you, friends...what gives you great joy? What inspires you? What gets you excited? When I was a kid and it came time to open up presents on Christmas Eve...oh I’d get excited about that. Actually I think I’m almost as excited now as a dad to watch my kids open up their presents on Christmas or their birthday. Today on this extra special day, in addition to the party after church in honor of Pastor Bill, I’m looking forward to watching my youngest daughter Haylee open up a couple gifts for her 3rd birthday today. That’s pretty exciting for me as a dad. What’s exciting to you? What inspires you? What gives you great joy?

Well maybe you don’t have a ready answer to that question today. Perhaps you feel like whatever used to give you joy is gone. Perhaps you’re watching online because the thought of coming to a celebration today just made you feel sadder to the point you felt you should stay home. Perhaps you’re going through a rough season of life where a joyful future doesn’t seem like a sure thing. Or perhaps simply “joyful” isn’t exactly how you would describe your every-day-walking-around-working life. Maybe you kind of feel like the jailer at Philippi did. I mean I don’t know if anything gave the jailer at Philippi great joy but he was a man who certainly knew what his

priorities were in life. He was a man whose top priority was to do his job and do it well to preserve his life. Work. Work. Work. Here's what I mean. Being a jailor was a nice job overall. It paid well. You could support a family, have a nice house, maybe even have some servants. But your only life insurance policy was to make sure that you did your job perfectly. No prisoners can escape. If a prisoner escaped it was your life for his. So priority #1 was to do your job to preserve your life. Not a lot of joy in that I suppose.

That's why when the local magistrates come along one day and drop off some out-of-towners named Paul and Silas who were allegedly causing trouble, this jailor is given the special order to **"guard them carefully"** (Acts 16:23). Which he does. In fact in his zeal to do his job well, maybe even this is how he found some measure of joy on the job—inflicting pain on others, the jailor went a bit overboard. We're told **"When he received these orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks"** (Acts 16:24). He wasn't told specifically to do this, but again he wanted to do his job well to preserve his life. That was his top priority.

How different though was the top priority of Paul and Silas! Of course they too wanted to do their job well except that their highest priority was not to save their own skin but to share the message of a Savior who died for sins and conquered death for all. To give clear witness to the grace of God through Jesus Christ was their top priority even if it caused them to be stripped and beaten and placed in a dungeon.

Contrast this for a moment with the jailor. Here you've got this jailor living for his work to preserve his own life and on the surface of things his life looks ok. On the other hand you've got Paul and Silas who've been living to share their Savior and on the surface of things their lives initially look pretty bad. But who's got more joy? The jailor working to preserve his earthly life or the Christians working to give eternal life to others?

What do you think? We're told that 'round midnight Paul and Silas were **"praying and singing hymns to God."** And what about the other prisoners? They **"were listening to them."** Here you've got these two men, Paul and Silas, stripped, beaten, and placed in the dungeon and they're not complaining, they're praising God and praying for deliverance! This is striking, isn't it? With such lullabies the prisoners dozed off to sleep, one by one, locked securely behind their bars. And the jailor's life was preserved. He was doing his job. His life seemed secure.

Except, let's be real, there is no such permanent security apart from the one true God, is there?! I mean the government can't give it. Presidential candidates can't give it. Medicine can't give it. Technology can't give it. The stock market can't give it. Olympic gold medals can't give it. Nothing on this earth can provide us with absolutely security. And so there was an earthquake that rocks the foundations of the prison with such supernatural force that the prison doors fly open and the prisoners' chains fly off. And when the jailor wakes up and sees the doors open his first thought is for himself. He thinks, "My world has been shaken. I'm a goner for sure. I've failed. Better to fall on my own sword." So he pulls out his dagger. This is a job he thinks he has to do.

Until he hears a voice shouting from deep in the dungeon. "Don't do it. We're all here. Don't harm yourself." And he knows this voice. It's that guy, Paul. That guy he put in the dungeon along with his teammate, Silas. Those guys who were singing praise to their God. Those guys whose priorities seemed so different from his. And so the jailor thinks, "Aha, maybe there's still something I can do to preserve my life." So he runs down the hall. He throws himself at the feet of Paul and Silas. And he asks the big hundred million dollar question every one of us by nature has to ask, **"What must I do to be saved."**

In other words, what does he think? "There's got to be something religious that I can do to get God to look favorably on me." This is how people think, isn't it? It's the default setting of the human heart. And it's how

quite a few of the people living right here in southeastern, WI think, and honestly...it's how we so often think too, isn't it? "God rewards those who try hard to be good." "If I put some prayers into the divine vending machine, God is supposed to give me what I want and if he doesn't then I'm going to shake my fist at him because he owes me." These are all different versions of a sinful thought process which in theology is called the *opino legis*—a law based mindset—which hinks: "There's got to be something religious that I'm supposed to do to get God to look favorably on me."

This is why there are so many people who think that religion is all about trying to follow orders and rules and trying hard to do all the right things and saying the right prayers and just going through the motions of religious rituals. And how hopeless this would be if this were what it's really all about! We would absolutely have to despair because none of us has done of perfect job of keeping all the rules. Not by a longshot.

But what does Paul say? Does he say, "Here's a list of things you must do"? Does he say, "The first thing you must do is prove your sincerity"? No! I imagine him saying with a smile on his face, "Do? You don't do anything. It's all about what Jesus Christ has done for you. **Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved —you and your household.**" For that very invitation itself to believe has with it the power of God to create the faith to believe it just as God is reaching out to all of you today with the same invitation to believe. **Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.** He has done it all!

Friends, believe in Jesus... it gets even better! Listen to what happens next. **32 Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. 33 At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his household were baptized. 34 The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole household.**

Remember what the jailor's priorities were? Here was a man going through the motions of his job in order to preserve his earthly life. In the end this brought him to the brink of taking his own life and ending up with eternal death in hell. Yet when the jailor heard the word of the Lord, what happened? His life priorities changed! ...Because God had changed his heart. He wasn't full of "Here's what I have to do" anymore, but rather "Here's what God has done for me." And when he realized what Jesus had done for him, he finally had something he'd been missing in life. He had... *joy*.

Friends, how about you? Today I've got joy. I'm excited to get to officially welcome Pastor Bill to serve alongside me. I think we're going to make a great team. And not because he's such a great guy (which he is...and I can't wait for you all to get to know him!) but because he's got great joy thanks to Jesus. And like the first Bible lesson he read today... "**The joy of the LORD is our strength.**" He'll be the first to tell you he's not perfect, just like me. And I'm sure at some point Pastor Bill will probably say or do something or fail to say or do something that will frustrate or offend you just like I've done a hundred times over. The truth is even though Bill and I are both pastors we're also both sinners. We aren't perfect.

But together we're going to be a grace powered ministry tag team like Paul and Silas because we have a perfect Savior. And, friends, so do you. A Savior who lived his life serving others and showing them grace, a Savior who died to literally take upon the himself the punishment our sins deserved, a Savior who rose triumphant from the grave so that we could be declared guilt-free, so that everything we dread would lose its grip on us, so that he could pour out his Spirit into our hearts by means of his word and sacrament to supply us with joy.

There's a subtle difference between joy and happiness, isn't there? We aren't promised uninterrupted happiness here on this earth. I can't imagine Paul and Silas were happy in prison having been beaten up as their wounds caused them pain. And that's a good reminder too that everyone is hurting in different ways. No one is perfectly happy here. Some people are dealing with great pain in respect to their bodies. Some people are hurting emotionally or relationally, feeling slighted or scorned. And then there are people like the jailor. We don't know what all his hurts were but for sure he was hurting on the inside too. And some people are stuck in prison whether a literal prison with four walls around them or figurative prison of their own poor choices and guilt feelings related to their past. Where are you hurting?

Friends, whatever the source of your hurts, God wants you to know that even when happiness eludes you, you can still have joy. Joy unshakeable! You see joy is a bit different from happiness. Joy is not dependent on external circumstances but on eternal realities. We might not always have it happy in life. There are a lot of hurts in this life. That's just the way it is this side of heaven because of human sin. But we have a Savior who has won the victory over sin for us. Because of Jesus Christ we can have joy. Joy in knowing that our future is secure. That our sins are forgiven. That heaven is our home. The joy of the LORD is our greatest strength!

So what do you want to do with your joy? What's the first thing the jailor wants to do now as a believer in Jesus Christ? He wants his whole household to know about Jesus Christ too! He brings the missionaries to his house and he gathers his whole family around to hear. His wife, his kids, quite possibly his servants and their kids. And he doesn't wait. This news is too urgent. Who cares if it's the middle of the night?! He's got joy. He wants to pass it on!

And so on that very night the jailor and his entire household are baptized. Why? Because the jailor wanted them to be part of the family of God too. Because here again... baptism is not what we do for God. It's what God does for us! Through baptism God washes away our sins. Through baptism God adopts us into his family whether we're adults, children, or infants. Through baptism we are buried with Christ and raised to live a new life by the power of his Spirit.

Can you see why this is one of my favorite stories to share as a missionary? Try sharing it with someone you know who's missing the joy we have because of Jesus. Help them see that Jesus has done it all. He has won the victory. This is what gives us great joy. Today is a joyful day. Let's celebrate. We have joy here and then let's work together to pass it on! Amen.