

Freedom in Philippi, Acts 16:16-34

Easter VII, 2019

I am going to preach today on that remarkable story of Paul in prison at Philippi and the earthquake that set him free – but first for something completely different.

Nearly twenty years ago, the cognitive psychologist Daniel Simons ran a fascinating experiment. He produced a video showing two teams of three people each: one team wearing black shirts, one team wearing white. Each team had a ball which they had to pass to each other. Not complicated. Equally uncomplicated was the part of the people who Dr. Simons asked to then watch the video. They had to count how many successful passes the team in the black shirts made to each other. After a few minutes, they were asked the total - and most answered, correctly, '15'. So far, so good.

But then Dr. Simons asked, 'Did you see the gorilla?'

Gorilla? What gorilla? The video was of people throwing balls, not of gorillas. Watch it again, Dr. Simons said – and sure enough, about halfway through, a man dressed in a gorilla suit waltzes into the middle of the game for a few long seconds, stops, and beats his chest dramatically. Right in the middle of the screen, and quite unmissably – you would have thought. But a full 50% of those watching the video had missed it. Their attention was on black shirts throwing balls. There wasn't room for anything else. They had just filtered out the gorilla in the room.

Many of us, I think are a bit like that when it comes to stories like today's from Acts 16, of Paul in prison and the earthquake that set him free. Perhaps we're so focussed on the question of whether things like miraculous earthquakes really happen that we miss some gorillas in the room. Please don't misunderstand me: I'm not saying that the 'did this really happen' question is unimportant, or that you shouldn't ask it – it really is, and I have been wrestling with it all week. But you can obsess about it in a way that leads you to miss some gorillas. So, just for a few minutes, if the questions of fact and history are the ones that hold you, just try to park them for a moment, and see what else there might be in Acts 16.

So, for instance, did you notice the slavery? The whole story starts when Paul and Silas encounter a slave girl – and when they interfere with the institution of slavery, casting out whatever spirit she had and depriving her owners – and note that little, terrible phrase, her *owners*, a human being's *owners* – of their source of profit. Maybe the story isn't about earthquakes, it's about the Gospel beginning to dismantle the whole slave system.

Or did you notice the anti-Semitism? What's the first thing the offended owners do? They whip up a crowd against Paul and Silas: these men are disturbing our city, they're not from here, *they're Jews*. And that's the cue for the mob to lay in to the apostles. This story is not about earthquakes: it is about how slave-owners use prejudice to whip up violence to defend their economic interests.

Except of course it wasn't a mob, it was the magistrates – the forces of law and order in a proud Roman colony, the people who were meant to secure peace and justice, civilisation. Turns out that in the end, they're just looking out for their rich friends. They don't care about law, or justice – they don't even slow down to check whether these strangers might be Roman citizens, an oversight which will come back to haunt them. No, interfere with my friend's money and we'll use our guards and prisons, its whips and chains to put you in your place. It's not a story about earthquakes. It's about the Roman State and civilisation, shown up for what it really is.

And the biggest gorilla of them all is the claim of the story that all this – the vicious State, the corrupt justice, the anti-Semitism, the slave system, all of it – is beaten. That all these powers, which seem so powerful and solid in the ancient world, so unmoveable, are beaten. As Luke puts it, the foundations of the prison were shaken, all the doors opened and everyone's chains unfastened. The old world is coming to an end, and a new one is being born – one where Jesus is King, and slaves and floggings and prisons are no more. That's the gorilla: in Philippi, in the year 50 AD, Luke is saying, *this* is what the Kingdom of Jesus looks like.

That's what Acts 16 meant there and then. What about here and now?

Well, firstly, it means that we should be surprised if following Jesus does not, on occasion, lead us into confrontation and conflict. We may not have obvious and formal slavery anymore – though we certainly have the hidden kind, and much of it – but unless you think 21st century England is the Kingdom of God, you should expect to find in it much the same kind of exploitation and abuse that was there in Philippi. And sometimes, indeed, dressed up under just the same veneer of law and decency and civilisation. Look more closely, and you'll find people being treated as if they were things: to be exploited, abused and disposed of. It would be an odd Church, a poor Church, implies Acts 16, that wasn't especially alert to all that, exposing it and helping to end it. And that will mean difficulty and conflict. Woe to you, said Jesus, when all speak well of you, for so they once did to the false prophets.

Secondly, Acts 16 reminds us that we really should be looking for Jesus to free people. It is not always going to be as sudden and dramatic as it was in Philippi – spirits are not always to be instantly driven out of people, prison doors will not often instantly fly open. But freedom is what it is all about. The Church should be full of people being set free gradually or not so gradually from all that enslaves them – from fear, from greed, from compulsions and addictions, and yes, from others, from the bullies at home or at work or in wider society. Ultimately, this is what the Gospel is about – that at the heart of everything, there's a power which wants people to come alive, to be full and free, for all the things which chain us up to just fall away. It will probably, usually, be a slower business than we would like, but if we know *nothing* of this liberation, that's a problem. We're missing what the Gospel is about. Real chains have to fall off.

Which bring us back to where we began: the history question. Did it really happen? Is Acts 16 true?

Well, a certain amount of scepticism when it comes to claims of miracle is always a good thing. There have always been people too eager to claim miracle, and people too willing to

believe. It's a reasonable doubt to have, and it doesn't make you a bad Christian – at least, I hope not, because it's my doubt, my constant doubt.

But... against that natural and proper scepticism, you have to put this. The very point of the Gospel is the refusal that things are closed down, locked in and inevitable. The heart of everything about this place, this faith, is the belief in grace – the trust that at the heart of things, there is this astonishing power of newness, that can touch all the grim and hopeless things and turn them around, make them Spring. That's what belief in the Resurrection means: that because of Jesus, and in Jesus, all things will be made new. That history is not left to itself, to end in decline and misery and death – that the whole thing is caught up by a power beyond itself, and given a destiny it could never have made for itself, a destiny which St. Paul calls elsewhere 'the glorious liberty of the children of God.' Now listen, *that's* the incredible thing. *That's* the truly astonishing, mind-bending, awesome Miracle behind all miracles. And if you can believe that ... well, there may be particular reasons why you object to this or that particular miraculous claim, but the idea that God can't do it should not be amongst them. God acts. God acts to bring about his Kingdom. That is pretty much the essence of our faith. It's even what the name 'Jesus' actually means: God acts.

So... in the end, for me, it's 'yes'. Yes to the earthquake, yes to the chains falling off ... and yes to the bigger freedom those things are just glimpses of, yes to the day when Jesus brings all the old powers crashing down, and brings in his Kingdom of glorious liberty. Yes to no more slaves, no more corrupt judges, no more whips and prisons. Yes, to freedom. To Jesus our King, be glory forever. Amen.

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