

An Interview of the Slave Girl and Jailer (Acts 16:16-34)

Roles:

- Interviewer (Int)
- Slave Girl, Harriet
- Jailer, Jaden
- Reader of Acts 16

Interviewer:

Strangers, refugees, immigrants upset the economic status quo. We know that story. In response to the upset, and perceived threat, the wealthy, with vested interests, package a little truth with a load of lies to stoke public fear and xenophobia against the strangers. The public, whipped into a frenzy, rough up the strangers and drag them before the courts. So-called 'witnesses' bear false testimony against the strangers. The strangers are flung into detention centres, little better than prisons. The strangers, refugees, immigrants, languish, wondering, 'How long shall we be detained?'

This scenario plays in the United States, and around the world, from China, to southern Africa, South America, across Europe and even here in the U.K. But, surprise, I am not referring to present day politics of immigrants and economics. Our story this morning occurs two thousand years ago in the Greek city of Philippi. And the foreigners are none other than, Paul and Silas. Luke tells their story in his *Acts of the Apostles* which _____ will read for us now.

Acts 16:16-24

Luke writes:

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. 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." 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.

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.

When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, "These men are disturbing our city. They are Jews and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe."

The crowd joined in attacking Paul and Silas. The magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely.

Following these instructions, the jailer put Paul and Silas in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

Let's stop at this point, and listen to the story from their own mouths.

Int: Pray with us. God may the words of our mouths and the thoughts of all our hearts be acceptable to you. You are our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Good morning. It is nice to have you with us.

S.G. & J: Good morning!

Int: It's always good to hear first-hand accounts of events.

J: Absolutely. So much 'fake news' about. Hard to know what to believe these days.

Int: You both met Paul and Silas. Please, introduce yourselves.

J: I'm the jailer.

Int: Okay. And yourself? [to S.G.]

S.G. Luke just calls me 'Slave Girl'. You can call me Harriet, as in Harriet Tubman.

Int: Okay. Let's start with you then, Harriet. Tell us about yourself.

S.G. Luke does not name me in his story beyond my position as a valuable possession. As I mentioned, Luke calls me merely, 'Slave Girl'.

INT: Who owns you?

S.G. I am owned by a consortium, a group of people.

INT: Whoah. That's interesting. What makes you valuable?

S.G. I'm a psychic. A spirit gives me the power of divination. I can see, or predict, if you like, the future. As a fortune-telling slave, I make my owners a lot of money.

INT: Is yours an evil spirit?

S.G. Down the years, that truth has been lost. Luke does not say. But interestingly, the Greek word he uses to describe me as a diviner or seer is *poo'-thone*. And that translates as 'python' in English. You know, the big snake?

INT: We know the snake. Snakes take us right back to Adam and Eve in the garden. And that snake was NOT a good spirit.

S.G. Like many spirits mentioned in the Gospels, my spirit seizes control of me. It makes me do things. My spirit recognizes the Spirit of the Most High, the Holy Spirit, that fills Silas and Paul. My spirit makes me follow them around, day after day, shouting that they are servants of the Most-High God. Shouting that Silas and Paul proclaim the true way, the true path, to salvation.

INT: The spirit that possesses you makes you proclaim the truth?

S.G. Yes, but I annoy Paul, by following them around and shouting these things.

INT: Paul doesn't speak to you directly, does he? Rather, he speaks to the spirit. In the name of Jesus Christ, Paul commands the spirit to come out of you.

S.G. That's right, Paul's words free me of that spirit. Luke doesn't say what happens to me. Liberated from the spirit that possessed me, I become free to embrace the Spirit of the Most-High God.

INT: You were a slave to that spirit, but now you're free.

S.G. Fortunately for me, but unfortunately for my owners, once free from my fortune telling powers, I lose my worth. I am now of no value to my owners, and their income vanishes. Angry, and vengeful, they accuse Paul and Silas of disturbing the city and of being Jews. Well, everyone can see that they **are** Jews. People then assume that the rest of what my owners say must be true, too. Really, I have been the one disturbing the peace by dogging Paul and Silas' heels and hectoring them. But now all the blame is put on them.

INT: The story takes quite a dramatic turn at this point. What if you, Jailer of Philippi, [*referring to Jailer*] pick up the narrative?

J: You can call me Jaden.

INT: Okay Jailer Jaden, remind us, what happens next?

J: Well, it's not very pleasant. Public opinion is getting stirred up. Everyone is telling lies -- the owners and so-called-witnesses. The truth is far from their lips. You see, her owners drag Silas and Paul before the authorities. So, based on the false testimonies, the magistrate, who seeks no truth, finds Silas and Paul guilty. He has them stripped and whipped. He orders me to secure them, so I throw them in the innermost cell of my jail. There should be no escaping from there.

INT: When you get them, what are they like? What condition are they in?

J: Seriously battered, poor blokes. They are bleeding where the cane struck them. They stumble, unsteady on their feet, as I lead them to the dungeon. Almost doesn't seem necessary to shackle their feet in the stocks, but I do. That's my job, see.

INT: Where do you go, then, after Paul and Silas are secured in their cell?

J: My rooms are actually attached to the prison. I basically live at work, so I go home and join my family. It's been a long day and I put my feet up. As I'm relaxing, we hear those two men singing and praying. I can tell it's them from their accents. Foreigners they are, not from Philippi, so they have strong accents, you know, distinct.

INT: Yes, I know about strong, distinct accents.

J: Strange how quiet the rest of the inmates are. Usually at night, one hears all sorts of noises from the cells. But not tonight. My wife says the other prisoners must be listening to the hymns and prayers, too. They are peaceful. Astonishing, really.

INT: Astonishing, why?

J: Given what has happened to those two, beat up and all, it seems to me their God has abandoned them. But clearly, they don't believe that. Their songs and prayers express a faith that stays strong.

INT: And then?

J: The next thing I know, the earth quakes beneath my feet. The shaking flings our house doors open. I look to the jail and see those doors open, too. Just hanging on their hinges.

INT: In Acts, Luke writes you are ready to take extreme measures?

J: I am scared. It's my job to keep those cell doors locked and secure. And now they hang open. What will become of me? My family will be disgraced. Caning, beaten? Think what awaits me when the Romans find out this jailer has allowed the prisoners to escape! I am ready to fall on my sword.

INT: But Paul intervenes?

J: He shouts for me to stop, to not kill myself. He assures me the prisoners are all there. At first, I wonder what he's up to. Who can see in that darkness? I call for light. I count my prisoners. They are all there, just like Paul said, all present and accounted for.

INT: How do you feel?

J: Overwhelmed. I am sooo grateful! I fall on my knees. I ask what I must I do to be saved.

INT: Your question has a double meaning, I think.

J: Ah, yes. On the one hand, earthquake or not, I am supposed to keep my prisoners securely in jail. So, I'm thinking about being saved from the wrath of the Romans. I'm wondering how I am going to explain this mess. But this foreigner, Paul, he kind of turns the question upside down, puts a spin on it. He seems to be hearing me asking what I need to do to turn my life around? To have a better life? He and that other fella, Silas, they tell me I should believe in Jesus, as they do.

INT: What happens?

J: I take them into my rooms, introduce them to my family. They tell us that Jesus is the Son of God, the long awaited Messiah of the Jews. They are really excited about this 'good news', as they call it. As they speak, I wash and wrap their wounds. Then they turn around and wash me and my family. I think you call it baptism. We share food and drink with them. I think you call that communion.

INT: How do you and your family feel about all this?

J: Even after that frightening earthquake and all that happened, we are feeling at peace. I feel like I am born again, given a fresh start in life. My entire family rejoices in my new faith, truly a gift from God.

INT: Let's return to you, Harriet. What do you, a slave, make of all this?

- S.G. The Jailer and I have been sharing our stories told by Luke in his account of the Acts of the Apostles. All of you sitting out there, I have a question for you. What arrives on Pentecost? (*The Holy Spirit*). Paul and Silas release me from the spirit that shackles my soul. Liberated, I am free to embrace the Holy Spirit, the spirit of their God, the God of the Israelites. Paul says it well, 'Now the Lord is Spirit. Where the Spirit is... there is freedom.' That's what happened to me, to both of us. [*gesture toward jailer*]
- INT: You receive the Spirit of God, what we often call the Holy Spirit, and you say you become free. But you remain a slave?
- S.G. True, I am still owned by my consortium. But the followers of Jesus welcome me; that's part of the Good News. Now I am part of the growing Philippian Church. It will take society and the church hundreds and hundreds of years to resolve the issue of slavery, but including slaves in the early church is a giant step.
- INT: Trafficking in people, modern slavery, continues to be a struggle in our world, today. Jailer Jaden, what do you make of all this?
- J: I occupy a different place on society's spectrum. This young woman is a slave, while I am free. Seemingly, I enjoy the good things in life. But like many people of my time, my identity wraps around my job. Take away my job, and who am I? I might as well be dead. Fail in my job, I might as well fall on my sword and kill myself. The night of the earthquake, when Paul stills my deadly hand, I realize that the jailed Silas and Paul are actually more free than me. It is I, their jailer, who needs to be liberated. Hearing them teach God's word, baptizing me and my household, their evangelism enables me to be free. Now, I, too, am part of the growing Philippian church.
- INT: The Philippian Church. Luke, in Acts, speaks of a wealthy woman who joins the Philippian Church after being baptized.
- S.G. That's Lydia. Of course, we know Lydia. She is great at telling Gospel stories. I think you call it preaching. She often preaches when we gather for singing, praying and breaking bread together. She can really stir the soul!
- INT: Being part of the Philippian Church, did you spend much time with Paul?
- S.G. One time when he was busy writing a letter, I felt the fullness of the Spirit upon me. I sat with him and said, 'Paul, that Spirit of God moves freely, from rich to poor, from slave to free, from male to female, from Jew and Greek, from ex-con to exemplary citizen.' I then asked him, 'Paul, who is not included in the realm of God?'

INT: What did he say?

S.G. He glanced up from his letter, smiled and said, 'In Christ we are all one.'

INT: Pray with me.