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Text: Acts 16: 25-34

Earth-Shaking Love

Keys, keys, keys...as a jailer, it's my job to keep a close eye over the keys at the Philippi jail. My Roman bosses throw people in here for all sorts of reasons. They are usually thoughtless or desperate, and they find themselves in trouble. That being said, I try not to judge. Deciding whether someone is guilty or innocent is far above my pay grade. It's my job to find them a cell, and I use these keys to make sure they are locked up. If they get hurt or escape before my bosses say it's OK, I will lose my job and potentially a whole lot more.

If you think those pews are uncomfortable and smelly, you definitely don't want to end up in one of my jail cells. There are no cushions, beautiful windows, or fancy paint jobs. It's simply a place to wait for whatever comes next with nothing extra to keep you comfortable.

Countless men and women have come through my jail, and I don't have a great memory for names or faces. Paul and Silas, though, were unforgettable. From the moment they first came to Philippi, they were the talk of the town!

A friend of mine who guards the city walls told me that they simply showed up at a prayer service down by the river. They interrupted the prayers of some very wealthy and respectable people, and the crowd loved it. They were hanging on to their every word. Before long, they were all lining up for these characters to dunk them in the river. I had never heard of such a thing!

As the week went along, I heard how these odd ducks were praying and preaching all over town. Everything was fine until they started interfering with local business. There was a girl in town who used to be in touch with a spirit that allowed her to predict the future. People would come from all over the city for advice, and this made her owners a lot of money. When Paul and Silas came upon her, they knew that spirit was torturing her, and they cast that thing out!

Of course, no good deed goes unpunished. Word spread and the entire business community was furious with Paul and Silas. Without that spirit, the owners' lucrative business was finished. Other owners became afraid they might jeopardize their businesses, too. The girl's owners dragged Paul and Silas before the magistrates, and they ordered a fierce beating. When it was all over, my bosses told me to lock up these "trouble makers."

Even after all that punishment, those two fools were singing and praying away in their cell. When I was about to close my eyes for some shut-eye, the ground began to shake and all the doors swung open. It was a fierce earthquake! Prisoners were simply walking out, and my keys were of no help. I figured I was done for.

It was then that I heard Paul and Silas call out to me, "It's all going to be OK. This is the work of God, and we're still here." I was so scared, but something inside me guided me towards them. Perhaps we would be able to help each other.

I came over, unlocked their chains and asked what I should do next. As I gently cleaned the dirt from their wounds with a damp handkerchief, they told me about this fellow named Jesus. They explained how it looked like his world had ended too, when God brought him back to life and gave him a new start. God wanted new life for me and my family, too. Who was I, an old jailer, to deserve such love? This God had a bigger heart than I could have imagined.

They encouraged me to get baptized, so I could experience this love first hand. From there I rushed home to bring along my whole family, and Paul and Silas lead us down to the river. The water felt warm and inviting as we waded in. When it was my turn, Paul tilted me back and gave me a dunking in the name of this three-person God. As I came up, I felt something mysterious, something hopeful taking root in me. Silas saw the relief on my face and whispered, "That's the Holy Spirit."

We then ambled home in our soggy clothes to celebrate. The smell of fresh bread filled the house. We didn't have much but we shared the loaves and the wine. It was then that Paul and Silas told us more stories about Jesus. They said Jesus himself is present in meals like these wherever two or three or more gather in his name. The bread and cup feed us to continue on, even when life no longer feels exciting or new. God makes all who share part of a greater whole, just as a baker makes individual grains into a single loaf of bread. Through it all, God supports us, and we support one another. That sounded like good news if I ever heard it.

We ended up sharing stories like that all night long. I would have loved for them to have stayed longer, but I knew God had other plans for Paul and Silas. They went on to the next city, and I went back to my position as the city jailer. Although I still have my trusty keys, things aren't the same anymore. God has come into my life, breaking the chains that shackled my heart. I now live as a follower of Jesus—eager to use these keys to open rather than lock doors.

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