

## “Earthquake”

### Acts 16: 16-34

<sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, “These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you<sup>□</sup> a way of salvation.” <sup>18</sup> 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.

<sup>19</sup> 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. <sup>20</sup> When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, “These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews <sup>21</sup> and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe.” <sup>22</sup> The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. <sup>23</sup> After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. <sup>24</sup> Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

<sup>25</sup> About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. <sup>26</sup> Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone’s chains were unfastened. <sup>27</sup> When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped. <sup>28</sup> But Paul shouted in a loud voice, “Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.” <sup>29</sup> The jailer<sup>□</sup> called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. <sup>30</sup> Then he brought them outside and said, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” <sup>31</sup> They answered, “Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.” <sup>32</sup> They spoke the word of the Lord<sup>□</sup> to him and to all who were in his house. <sup>33</sup> At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. <sup>34</sup> He brought them up into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.

This week in our weird stories of the Bible series, we continue in the Book of Acts, taking a look at one of Paul's journeys. I have to tell you that there is so much weird stuff happening in this text that it is hard to focus on just one thing. In this story, we get a girl who is possessed by a spirit of divination. We also get Paul calling out this spirit from the girl, not because he is trying to help and free the girl, but because he is annoyed that the girl keeps following him around, shouting, "These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation." This is weird because Paul IS proclaiming to the people a way of salvation...so why is he annoyed with the help the girl is giving to him?

However the weirdness does not stop there. Next we learn that Paul and Silas are arrested, not because they were proclaiming the Gospel, but because they had angered the owners of the girl, now that she could no longer earn money for them by using her gift. Then we are told of an earthquake which shakes the very foundations of the prison, leaving the doors thrown open wide. The weird part is that the people's chains fall off AND NO ONE LEAVES the prison. Everyone remains!

And on top of all this weirdness so far in the text, when the jailer asks Paul what he should do to be saved, Paul says, Believe on the Lord. No we aren't reading that wrong. As a response to the jailer's question, "What must I do to be saved, to be rescued?" Paul really does tell him to believe on the Lord.

As I have lived with this text all week, I came to accept, if that's the right word, all the other weirdness in this story, telling myself that, Luke is just a great story teller, and he was adding all the other stuff for dramatic effect, but why...why would Luke choose that weird phrase, of "Believe on the Lord"?

Sure, this strange "on" could very well be attributed to a monk who was sloppy in his translating work hundreds of years ago. And yes, grammatically speaking, the word "in" makes more sense. But what I finally discovered is that Luke uses that "on" rather than in, to show us that even in the midst of all this weirdness, in the text, and yes, in our current reality, there is always an opportunity to make a connection, to share the Kingdom of God with others, to be a "vessel of divine grace even when we are in dire straits." And it all starts with believing on the Lord.

Here's what I mean by that: The word "on" sort of positions us. It is not that "in" sense of the word which can be used to create distance or be used to validate something as real. We say we believe in...fairy tales. We believe in Santa Claus. We believe in...I'll let you fill in the blanks. When we say we believe in something we validate its existence. However, just because we believe that it is real does not mean that it is the center of our being. But the word "on" changes things. We believe on God. It supplies weight to our beliefs. It shows an attachment to something beyond ourselves.

The word “on” indicates a position in our beliefs, almost like it shouts to the world that we have centered our whole being on God. As people of faith, it is not just that we believe in God. We also believe on God. We have centered ourselves on God. We have positioned our very core being right slab dab in the middle of God’s grace and God’s love.

I like to think that this is exactly what Paul meant when he said to the jailer that in order to be saved, to be rescued, to be set free, we as people of faith need to believe on the Lord. It is not simply enough for us to validate that God is real. We are called to tell and more importantly show the world that we have centered our whole lives on God. We are called to tell and more importantly show the world that we have positioned ourselves right in the middle of God’s love and God’s grace. We are called to tell and more importantly show the world through our words and our actions that our lives have been transformed, all because we have encountered the Risen Lord.

As people of faith, By believing on God, we are proclaiming to this world that anything is possible and nothing, nothing this world can send our way can ever keep us chained down or locked up, afraid and insecure.

Just Think about it. It’s funny what can chain us down in our lives. It’s funny what we give power to which allows the darkness to start to overtake us and

drown out the light. We can become chained down through our own self-imposed assumptions about ourselves. We can become chained down when we fail to meet other's expectations. We can even become chained down simply because we allow ourselves to lose our voice, to lose our identity, to we lose our connection to what centers us and empowers us. And it is not just us which can become chained down. Through our words and our actions, we can chain others down as well.

As people of faith, In our lives, we can so easily become chained down and sometimes have the misfortune to chain down others as well that we need constant reminders that we need something more, something not of this world to believe in, to believe on so that when the chains of fear, greed, hate, start to tighten, start to hold us down, we have the strength to say no! To say to this world that we are centered, we are grounded on our God's love and grace and that nothing this world does can ever bring us down or overtake the light.

Believing on God reminds that we are not powerless in the face of darkness. We are not powerless in spite of the chains and prisons which this world tries to put upon us. It is this bit of knowledge which gives superhuman strength. Not because we have been made invincible and certainly not because now we have the ability to leap buildings in a single bound or stop bullets with our hands.

Through our belief on God, a belief which centers us, a belief which grounds us, we now have the power to release our chains. We have the power to let go of what locks us down. This power comes from the fact we are loved more than we could ever imagine. This power comes from the fact that we are named and claimed as one of God's one. This power as people of faith comes from the fact that we know God will always have the last word.

Now, in any situation, regardless of how dark the night may be, we as people of faith can have hope. We know that the chains which tried to captured us, which tried to tie us down are nowhere near as strong or as powerful as the ties which bind us together as the Body of Christ, which bind us together as children of God. We have been set free through the power of God's love and grace.

You see, this world, try as it may, to chain us down, it will never succeed. Through this belief in our God and on our God, We have hope in the Lord. We have the strength to face whatever comes along our way. We have the ability to experience joy in the midst of pain because ultimately we know that is our belief in God, our belief on God which has rescued us, which has helped us become the person God created us to be.

As disciples of Christ who have experienced the life-giving power of the risen Lord, we have been set free and now it is our turn to break the chains which

hold others down as well. We realize that we cannot do this on our own nor will anything made of this world is powerful enough to break down the prison walls which trap so many in our world. Yet, as ones who have experienced the power, the majesty and the might of the risen Christ, we know that God love and God's grace certainly is and that it is at work in our world doing just that. It is breaking down systems which oppress and dehumanize. It is breaking cycles of injustice and poverty. It is working in this world to bring healing and wholeness to all of God's creation.

Knowing all this, we have the courage to embrace our call to make connections with others, to be vessels of divine grace even when we are in dire straits. We have the courage to release the chains which bind us because we know that God will always have the last word, and that love is a word of love, a word of grace, and more importantly, a word of hope.

So now today and always, may we believe on the Lord, sharing the good news of the power of God's love and God's grace as we join the struggle to set this world free. Amen.