

Paul and Silas in Prison

16 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. **17** While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, "These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you[a] a way of salvation." **18** 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.

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

25 About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. **26** 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. **27** 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. **28** But Paul shouted in a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." **29** The jailer[b] called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. **30** Then he brought them outside and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" **31** They answered, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." **32** They spoke the word of the Lord[c] to him and to all who were in his house. **33** At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. **34** 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.

A community that Saves

Do not harm yourself, for we are all here

Every now and then... I find myself taken aback by the mysterious ways stories from our scriptures jump out at us at just the right moment in time. Rare moments when it seems like the wisdom of our text somehow knows that there is something that we, The Church, need to hear – Today's text was one of those examples... For this story from Acts has come to us, the Church for just such a time as this. A time when we need to hear a story representing those among us who have lost hope, who have been made to feel as though they have failed, there are those sitting beside us who are waiting in the shadows to relieve the imaginable pain they live in – This story has come to us for just this time – A time when we as the church to start being ***the community that saves.***

Our text tells us the story about Paul and Silas sitting in prison after curing a young girl of her demons that brought about worldly desires for money and power. Powers that her family wasn't too happy to lose when Paul healed her and so they handed over to the authorities to be put in prison. But While sitting in Jail praying and singing hymns, An earthquake comes and rumbles the foundation so fiercely that all of the gates to fling open and the chains to come undone. It appears that the earthquake caused such destruction that Paul and Silas have the option to escape. In fact, when the guard comes running over and looks into the cell at first he can't see them and he thinks for sure that he had lost the prisoners. This is the point of the story – where it seems our plot takes a rather dark turn in which the guard, thinking he has lost the prisoners, pulls out a sword and is about to kill himself. You see, This guard had ONE job...

guard the prisoners. His livelihood, his family, his reputation, his sense of purpose is resting on this job. If he lost this job – his whole life would have crumbled in an instant... and so he thought the only thing to do would be to escape the pain that was bound to come... by taking his own life.

But then... he hears the voice from Paul say ***Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.*** A voice that not only saves his life – but transforms him and leaves him forever changed.

This text comes to us, the church, while we are in a unique point in our culture when a national conversation has finally brought public something that has always been so private –the very real struggle of depression, anxiety, mental illness and suicide. And while we all know this is not a modern phenomenon, it's always existed, recent stories about the tragic death of celebrities and Netflix dramas has brought the conversation more to a forefront in news discussions, reality talk shows, and even around dinner tables.

Now, unfortunately, as prevalent as suicide and depression has always in our culture, society, and families- it is one area that church hasn't done well. Generations of Church that have come before us have told us either directly or through their actions of silence “that there are just some things we don't talk about... “ and it has embedded itself into our preaching, our prayer lists, and our passing conversations. For some reason its easier to share about a family member who has received a diagnosis of cancer rather than one of depression or attempted suicide.

There are many reasons why this is hard for us to talk about, but I can't help but think some of this tension for the church is because we have somehow been told that there is no good news to be found in our scripture regarding the subject. In fact texts of terror have been used to scare people out of talking about it, praying about it, or sharing about their own demons within.

And yet, here we are in this unique moment in our modern culture, and here we are as a church gathered together to study the Gospel Acts, when we stumble upon this story that comes to us for just such a time as this... a text that opens the dialogue on this very subject by telling us the about a man who overcame such hopelessness because of the voices, because of the church that spoke out. He overcame this attempt of suicide because those who were gathered praying and singing hymns - that shouted out to him – *we are all here*. This text teaches us that teaches us not to ignore, or hide, or flee, or remain silent but rather to stand in place and embody the grace that says we are here.

This story today tells us **three** important things about the church's role in this important conversation.

- 1.) Hopelessness, the desire to relieve the pain through selfharm and/or suicide– does exist. It always has and it always will. It's not a modern day phenomenon, it's not just celebrities or even people who have struggled with depression for a lifetime

We know very little about the character of the guard. We don't know if he had a series of mental illness. We don't know if he struggles with anxiety. What we do know – is that he has experienced an event set his life off course. In the moment, all he thinks is that his life cannot come back from this. I believe this is the most important thing that we, The Church, needs to understand about suicide. Very rarely is it actually about death at all – it's about escaping unbearable pain. It's about a pain so severe that it causes isolation. It could happen to anyone at any time – if it happens to one of us it impacts to all of us.

We as the church need to learn how to say that outloud. It is something that happens to “them” or someone out there... but rather... it happens to us. We are members of this community... we are members of this body of Christ. Depression and suicide happens to us.

My great great-grandmother died very suddenly and tragically. It was the kind of tragedy that was felt through the generations... but no one ever said how she died--just that it was sudden and tragic. One day when my mom was young she asked a family member about it and they just responded with they don't talk about that... It wasn't until she was an adult that she learned of the speculation that it was suicide. This kind of silence happens everywhere – and it most certainly happens in the church. But if we are to be a force that cares for each other we must develop a culture that talks about it not one that remains silent.

2.) Which brings us then to the second point that our role as the church is to be the **voice that says, do not harm yourself for we are all here.**

- a. There are things that happen to us that set our life off course. I know in this room there are those among us who have experienced pain that is hard to come back from. Though we may not be able to take the pain away – we are called to be fully present standing by each other's side. We are called to be the ones to say... we are all here and you belong to us.

This belonging starts young – by learning the names of our kids so they know that they are a part of this community. We need to get to know our youth – what they are interested in, what they like to do, where are their talents and gifts... where are their struggles and hardships? We need to show them in our welcome that they are valued members of this community because of who they are.

We need to show each other forgiveness. Remember this guard was the one that held Silas and Paul captive – for a crime in which they were just trying to help. They had every reason to run away and to escape from him. But they don't... they stay. They stay behind and say WE are all here – a radically inclusive statement that demonstrates not you and me, they or them... **WE** are all here.

We have to be that grace to one another. Whether it's a disagreement in a meeting or seeing something different politically – this kind of forgiveness is more than “a polite thing to do” this passage shows us that our lives, our community, depends on it.

3.) Finally, after witnessing this type of community and belonging this guard experienced a powerful moment of conversion and was baptized having experienced the love of God through community. Through Paul and Silas this guard got a glimpse of the love of God. Paul was like Christ to him.

- a. Being community is not really about us – it's about embodying the unconditional love that we know Christ has for each of us. By showing one another that God's love crosses over all barriers and claims us as God's own. Our lives matter because they matter to God. When someone experiences that kind of unconditional belonging it changes them - it brings them into a community that beyond humanly boundaries.

While serving as a nurse in the war, one of the wounded soldiers told Clara Barton “ you are Christ to me” that is our role as community... to be the love of Christ that says you belong to me.

Friends, all summer we have read these stories from Acts and heard stories about the early community that gathers, the trials they overcame, the way that faith spread from one

community to the next. But here, we go even one step further to say that being a community of faith, living out God's unconditional and welcome is our call as a people of faith – and our very lives depend on it. To open the circle of welcome, to practice forgiveness and grace, to embody a hope that there is love greater than anything we could ever imagine – has the power to save and transform lives.. ***And so my prayer for us, is to be the voice that says We are all here, to be a community that saves.***

Amen.