

8 February 2017  
Commemoration of Silas

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Greenspring Village, Springfield, VA

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“A Greater Life”

Text: Acts 16:19b-34; Mark 8:34-38

It was a jailer’s worst nightmare. He was in charge of securing the prisoners. How long had he dozed off for? It didn’t matter. All that mattered was that while he slept, the prisoners had escaped. The prison doors were open. Surely the prison was empty. According to Roman law, there was only one punishment now for the jailer: death. He would be killed, or he could honorably kill himself. The jailer chose the latter. His sword was drawn, he was about to plunge it into his body.

But just as his muscles were tightening for the fatal thrust, a voice came from inside the prison. A prisoner who could perhaps see what the jailer was about to do. *Don’t do it*, he said. *Your prison is not empty, but full. We are all here. Do not harm yourself.*

The jailer was a hard man; not much got to him. He had seen horrible things. He had seen the worst of the worst come through his prison. But *this* he had never seen! He called for light and rushed into the prison. He went right to where the Jewish prisoners were - the ones around whose feet he had fastened the stocks just a few hours earlier. The stocks that were now lying on the ground. He went to them because he recognized the voice that had called out to him. It was the same voice he had heard praying and singing earlier. Maybe it was the singing that had put him to sleep! Anyway, he had heard a lot of sounds coming from his prison in all his years - but until that night, singing had not been one of them.

Who were these men? Really? He knew *the charges* against them, but this wasn’t normal! He was afraid of no man, yet he found himself trembling before them. They were something he was not. They had something he did not have. He didn’t know what it was, but this he knew: he wanted it. He *needed* it. He wanted their joy. He wanted their confidence. He wanted their faithfulness. He needed their life. So he knelt down before them and asked: *Sirs, what must I do to be saved?*

It sounded funny even as he spoke it. He, a free man, asking them, prisoners who had been beaten and locked up, *how to be saved!* Yet he knew it was the right question. They were really the ones who were free. He was the one locked up in fear. ***Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.***

He had heard reports of this Jesus, who had lived in Judea and had been crucified, but who some were saying had come back to life. But here were men who said they had seen

it with their own eyes. And one of them, the one named Paul, was once like the jailer, a man who imprisoned followers of Jesus, but who Jesus had changed and set free. And Jesus, he said, wanted to do the same for him. And the more they spoke, the more the jailer wanted to hear. He was like a thirsty man whose thirst could not be quenched. He drank up every word. Words that were like living water to his soul.

He got some water and began washing the wounds they had received from the beating. And with every wound he washed, it felt as if his own were also being cleansed. And so when Paul mentioned baptism, he couldn't wait. He didn't even want clean water! He wanted to use the water tinted pink with the blood of his prisoners-turned-friends. Not that their blood added anything. But it reminded him of whose blood *would* be washing him in this water. And then when his wife and children were baptized too, he was so filled with joy.

This night that had begun like a nightmare had turned into a dream come true. This night when he thought he was going to lose his life, ended up with him gaining life. Paul and Silas had their days of resurrection. This one was his.

And you too have your day of resurrection, for you have been raised. You too have been given this life. You too have been washed with blood - the blood of the Lamb of God - in Baptism. You too believe in the Lord Jesus. This Jesus who is the Lord, the great I AM, the God of creation in human flesh, who laid down His life that you might live. This Jesus who sets prisoners free - and even the problems and prisons of this world and life cannot lock up what Jesus has set free.

And Silas is a powerful testimony of that to us tonight. We don't know much about him. He didn't get his own verse in the hymn we sang tonight, and the church cannot even agree on a day to commemorate him - he has five different days, depending on which denomination you are! But this he knew and this he lived - the words we heard from Jesus tonight: that ***whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it.*** That statement that seems exactly backwards to a world which will do whatever it takes to keep and preserve our life here and now. But Silas knew there was a life greater than this one. A life that not even death can end. A life that only the one who rose to life from death could give.

He spoke of that life while sitting in the stocks. He sang of that life in the darkness of prison. He believed in that life as Roman rods came crashing down on him. He traveled with Paul to proclaim that life. He would later sit as Peter's secretary and write about that life. But above all, he was living that life. It didn't matter where he was - in Judea, in Macedonia, in Rome, or any place in between. His life wasn't in a place, it was in a person. In Jesus. And so where He was, Jesus was, and where Jesus is, He would be. And no one could take that away from Him. Not Roman rods, Roman prison, or a Roman sword. He could deny himself because he knew that Jesus never would.

And that is your life, too. You don't have to worry about Roman persecution - you have other worries. Maybe other persecutions. But the life given you by Jesus is greater than all of it. His forgiveness and resurrection giving you a life that nothing in this world can take away from you. For you are baptized. You are in Jesus and Jesus is in you. And one day you'll take your place beside that Macedonian jailer, and Paul and Silas, too. Rejoicing in Jesus, and Jesus rejoicing in you.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.