
Beyond Ascension
Martin Grove United Church
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by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Acts 16:16-34 and Luke 24:44-53

Today's reading from Acts seems to be full of surprises. In the story, a slave girl who has the gift of divination is following Paul and his group. She now only follow the group around, but she proclaims loudly who they are. "These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation." And for some reason, this upsets Paul. But I have to wonder why? It seems to me that the girl was doing a good job advertising for Paul and his group of followers. Wasn't what she said exactly how Paul and his group thought about themselves. And if the girl had a reputation for fortune-telling - which she must have had because her gift was worth a lot of money - then that would have made her vocal marketing even more ... valuable. Paul should probably have paid her to follow him, but instead he exorcises the spirit of divination from her, leaving her without an occupation, leaving the girl's "owners" without their valuable possession, and leaving Paul without a marketing agent.

One theory as to why Paul was so upset by the girl is that her marketing message just wasn't specific enough. The acclamation that the men were "slaves of the Most High God" sounds OK to us, but in Rome, at that time, there were lots of Gods that people prayed to. Perhaps Paul was concerned that the people thought that his group were actually slaves to Zeus, not to the Christian God. Also, the girl was yelling that Paul's group "proclaim *a* way of salvation", not "*the* way of salvation". In biblical Greek, however, there is no indefinite article - there is no way in biblical Greek to say whether or not you mean "a way", or "the way", and so what we read in English is the best guess of our interpreters, but in any case, perhaps that bothered Paul.

Another theory is that after many days, Paul got sick and tired of seeing the slave-owners make a profit from the ability of the slave girl. But while this idea is well-received by our modern ears, slaves were an integral and important part of the economic and social fabric of Rome in those days, and it's hard to imagine that Paul - a citizen of

Rome - had any issues with slavery itself. Slavery was an accepted part of Roman society. So much so that Paul and Silas are thrown in jail when they are alleged to have ruined the commercial value of the slave girl.

My own theory is that Paul wanted to go to jail. Like the homeless person in Toronto who throws a brick through a shop window when the weather turns cold and then waits for the police to show up, perhaps Paul and Silas wanted to take their message of Jesus off the streets and into jail.

But whatever the reason, it is surprising in the text that when Paul and Silas go to jail, it doesn't seem to make much difference to them. Instead of wanting to see a lawyer, or demanding their phone call, Paul and Silas spend their time in jail singing and praying. We are not told what they are praying for, but clearly, they are not praying to get out of jail or they would have seen the earthquake as a sign from God and walked away. It's almost as if they don't realize that jail is a bad place to be. It's almost as if being in jail is just as good as being anywhere else. They live this out so well that when an earthquake opens all the cell doors, Paul and Silas don't even try to escape. They don't need to escape, because they are happily continuing their ministry in jail.

And it's the same thing in our gospel reading. The disciples are spending time with Jesus and - whoosh - Jesus is whipped away into the clouds. And how do the disciples react? They don't react. They went to the temple to worship God. Do you think that is how we would have reacted? I think we would have pleaded with Jesus to stay longer. I think we would have been afraid because our leader was leaving. And we would certainly have been afraid because of the method of Jesus's departure! And yet, the disciples act as if nothing strange has happened at all. Jesus floats upwards like a preview to Mary Poppins, and the disciples just take it in stride. They praise God. They pray. They sing.

So in both stories today, Jesus's friends are presented with exceptional changes to their circumstances, and they act as if life is actually fairly normal, and they just spend even more time singing and praising God.

Both Paul and Jesus's disciples are presented with a problem. For both groups, their reality changed and they had to decide how to continue their ministries. When Jesus

disappeared into the clouds, the disciples had to decide what to do. They could keep going without Jesus, or they could decide that conditions were no longer right for ministry and just quit. Paul and Silas could keep their ministry going, or they could decide that conditions were no longer right for ministry - being in prison and all - and just quit. And in both cases, they keep their ministries going so well that we hardly see any transition at all.

Transition and change usually lead to fear, but in this case, we don't see any evidence of that fear. But then, things don't always turn out as the experts predict. I want to share a quick story, of a respected Swiss scientist, Gessner, who was among "the first to raise the alarm about the effects of information overload [on our society]. In a landmark book, he described how the modern world overwhelmed people with data and that this overabundance was both 'confusing and harmful' to the mind. [*can you relate?*] It is worth noting the Gessner, for his part, never once used e-mail and was completely ignorant about computers. That's not because he was a technophobe but because he died in 1565. His warnings referred to the seemingly unmanageable flood of information unleashed by the printing press."¹ Sometimes, the "panic" that changes are supposed to produce just never actually become reality. Sometimes, life just continues to unfold.

In some ways, we are faced with the same type of problem as Paul and Silas, and the disciples. We - Martin Grove United Church - but also many mainline liberal churches in North America, are faced with a situation where the conditions in which we used to do ministry have changed. And we have to decide what to do about it.

Our neighbourhood has changed. The economic, racial, and ethnic demographics of our neighbourhood have changed to the point that some of us wonder how well we fit in our own community ourselves. We have lots of immigrants who move to Rexdale, but statistically, they are not mainly Christian, and even the Christians are largely Roman Catholic. The immigrants who are Protestant Christian are a mix of people who are either inactive in church, or who have embraced one of the over 12 ethnic churches that are within a 1 km radius of this spot.

And we ourselves have changed. We are older than we used to be. Numerically,

¹ http://www.slate.com/articles/health_and_science/science/2010/02/dont_touch_that_dial.html

we are in a stage of gradual decline. Our financial situation is probably best characterized as “fragile”.

Our conditions have changed - both our neighbourhood and we ourselves have changed - and we, like Paul, Silas, and the disciples get to make the same choice. Do we continue to live and breathe ministry into our congregation and our community, or do we simply decide that with the conditions we face, that we can only quit.

Well, I’m pretty sure I know the answer to that question. We *are* continuing to create and explore meaningful ministry opportunities within our congregation and our community. Besides, we have a number of advantages over Paul and Silas, and over the disciples. Paul and Silas were put in jail. We are not in jail. We are free to come and go as we please, but more importantly, we are free to open our doors as wide as we want to. We can embrace our community in any way we choose. And the disciples watched their leader disappear, leaving them flat-footed. But we have good leaders here, people who are committed to our present and our future. And personally, I have no plans to go anywhere.

We have so many gifts here. We have the gift of each other. We have the gift of a community in which we can be the face of Christ for others. We have the gift of the spirit. We not only have the story of the ascension, we are people living beyond ascension. We are living with the spirit of the risen Christ. What more do we need?

We live beyond ascension.

Amen.