

“Midnight Confessions”
Acts 16:16-34
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By Larry Gaylord

William Wilberforce led the fight in the late 18th century to get rid of slavery in the British Empire. He was viewed as an enigma by some of his contemporaries: a popular but small and sickly man whose single-handed energy and determination helped to eventually overcome the powerful pro-slavery lobby in the British Parliament and compel the abolition of the slave trade. Biographer James Boswell witnessed Wilberforce's eloquence in the House of Commons, and noted:

"I saw what seemed a mere shrimp of a man mount upon the table; but as I listened, he grew, and grew, until the shrimp became a whale."¹

The recent movie “Amazing Grace” is a film biography of Wilberforce. It documents his Christian faith as the source of his social activism. He saw a world-wide problem, deeply entrenched in an economic system, and by the power of moral persuasion he set out to overcome it. It's interesting to me that two prominent spokespersons against slavery—Wilberforce and Lincoln—also spoke strongly against cruelty to animals. They had this ability to empathize with other beings, to want to address their suffering, and that empathy is a good definition of love.

I think the book of Acts wants to show us that we're not powerless to affect our world. It's one thing to read the newspapers or watch on TV and get disgusted or discouraged, thinking that the forces at work are too mighty to ever change. For people of faith, that's not good enough. We've been given the ability through prayer and action to bring light into the darkness. No matter how challenging the situation—whether it's a personal problem or a global injustice-- there is always a ray of hope, always the power of Christ to bring something new, always the ability to make life better for one other person. And the book of Acts is not just a look back at a long ago time when there were such miracles, it's a word of encouragement to help us believe that we too can witness new life and constructive.

It begins with a case of what we might call spiritual darkness.

An episode landed Paul and Silas in jail. A slave-girl kept bugging them. She said, “These men are slaves of the most high God, and they proclaim the way of salvation.” What's so bad about that? A little free publicity never hurts. But it got old. Day after day she said it, non-stop, and it seemed as if she had no control over it. They couldn't go anywhere without her and her big mouth. Finally, Paul got irritated enough to heal her of the evil spirit. We might wonder why he didn't do that the first day, but that's not the important thing here. Think about those two words, slave girl. How much of the human story is summed up in those two words. Young enough to be called a girl, a child, she was legally owned by others, who exploited her ability for profit. It was common in the Roman and most other ancient empires. But we don't need to reach that far back: it still staggers the imagination to realize that our own country was dependent on such arrangements. The auctioning off of people to the highest bidder, the breaking up of families, sending children away from their sobbing parents who would never see them

again, returning those who had against all odds found their way to freedom under the notorious Fugitive Slave Laws: it wasn't all that long ago. And what about our 21st century? On a drive down to Bellville IL last week, I stopped at the Railsplitter Rest Stop out side of Springfield. I wondered how Old Abe would react to having a bathroom named after him. But inside there was a poster up on the wall. It depicted children who had been taken for the purposes of human trafficking. The poster said, keep your eyes open for strange or unusual situations, where it looks like someone is being held against their will. Yet the good news is that our awareness is growing, there are people working on this problem, people who care, and their numbers are increasing. Human trafficking.org documents these efforts.

The girl's owners didn't appreciate what Paul had done. The girl of course was much better off, but it also meant the end of their money making venture. Without the annoying demon inside her, she was worth nothing to them as a fortuneteller. They got angry. As long as Paul was just sharing religious ideas, they were fine with it. But when the power of Christ became operative in their little kingdom, they were upset. That power of Christ works to overthrow injustice, to end exploitation of others. Inevitably, somebody's way of life is disturbed. In this case, a young person was set free, literally. And the so-called owners didn't like it. It seems to be almost a rule, that when you're taking a stand for good or for God, you *will* encounter opposition. If you're trying to right in your place of work, in your community, even in your home, not everybody will thank you for it. Some will oppose you with everything they have. Jesus said, in the world you will have tribulation—count on it—but be of good cheer: I have overcome the world. The one thing we all have to do is make sure our strong stand is because of principle, and not just our own stubbornness or self-righteousness.

In this case, the whole power structure swung into action to protect the economic arrangements that existed. The missionaries were severely beaten, put in the innermost part of the prison, and fastened in place. Can you imagine yourself in that position? Bloody and bruised, beaten and whipped, then thrown into a dripping, rat-infested dungeon and chained to the floor. This is definitely a low point. But, oh, we should pay attention the low points in our lives. The time of loss, the place of vulnerability, the point where it seems like there's no way forward, and no way back. That's where the Holy Spirit sometimes works most powerfully. That's where we have to trust. That's where the glory goes to God. Recently a friend was sharing with me about some pretty serious employment concerns in her family. She was quite worried about what was going to happen. Later she told me her mother had urged her to trust—trust in God. And the clouds parted, and the job came through. There's not always an instant answer—but we are to trust in the time of trial. And the trust even before there's an answer is key.

Consider Paul and Silas there in that dungeon. What fear and terror must have filled their hearts! What dread must have gripped them, as they awaited the next horror to come! The next sentence says: "About midnight, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them." They were singing and praying! They might have been afraid—but they were singing. The darkest place in the darkest night: but they were singing and praying. They had a faith, a power within, which let them endure this darkness. And somehow, that faith, that song, those prayers, turned it into light. We believe that by faith, we all receive the Holy Spirit. It's a source of power, and courage, presence of mind, and determination. Our challenge is to tap into the power

when the pressure is on. Once in a difficult time in my life a friend sent a postcard to me. It had a photo of a beautiful dawn over the mountains on it. It said simply, “You are not alone.” That said it all.

When you walk through a storm
Hold your head up high
And don't be afraid of the dark.
At the end of a storm
Is a golden sky
And the sweet, silver song of a lark.

Walk on, through the wind,
Walk on, through the rain,
Though your dreams be tossed and blown.
Walk on, walk on with hope in your heart,
And you'll never walk alone,
You'll never walk alone.

Yes, the disciples had some timely help—an earthquake came right on cue. But notice what didn't happen: the Christian missionaries didn't use the open prison door in order to save their own skins. They stayed—realizing that the jailer would be executed if they had escaped. Think about that for a moment. They put the Christian witness before their own freedom. Are we willing to put our likes and dislikes aside, in order to make a witness? Some things are more important than what I want, or don't want. Their witness brought the jailer and his family to faith in Jesus Christ.

So, there was a midnight confession of Christ, a profession of faith. And the sign of change was service. The jailer washed their wounds. Let's say that again: the jailer washed the wounds of his two prisoners. Then he was washed—in baptism. Then they all sat down and ate supper together. And they rejoiced together. In the natural order of things, jailer and jailee are not expected to be friends. They are natural opponents. But by a faithful witness, by prayers and hymns, by the presence of the Holy Spirit, the unexpected happened. From enmity to amity, from foe to friend.

Message: be open: to the call to free people from spiritual slavery. Don't be discouraged if the problem seems to big, or too entrenched, or too powerful. God is bigger than any problem. And be open: to the unexpected to happen, for people and circumstances to change, and for faith to overcome.

Let us pray:

Lord of life, help us trust in you for every need. Surprise us by your Spirit, who sets people free, and turns enemies into friends; through our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.