

Acts 16:16-34:
What about the girl?

How old do you imagine the slave-girl was?

In our story from Acts. The shouter chasing after Paul and Silas.

How old do you think she was?

There's no way of knowing, of course,
but I still haven't been able to stop thinking about her.

What, was her name?

How long had she been a slave?

Was she born into slavery?

Had she been an orphan bought for a meager sum?

Or was she taken from her parents at a still-tender age?

There was a name for women like her: sybil—the name refers to any prophetic woman of antiquity who had a knack for fortune telling.

All were female. Most were slaves. Women exploited for their disability or their gift (I suppose both could be true).

I wonder, if all slave-women were referred to as “girls,”
or was the girl in today's story an exception?

If she was indeed a child; how much more tragic.

We read only that Paul and the others met this slave-girl
on their way to prayer;

a slave girl with a spirit of divination who begins to follow them,
shouting, “These men are slaves of the Most High God.”

At first we think, *wow*, this girl *is* prophetic!

But she is not.

The god of whom she speaks, is but one of many in ancient Greek and Roman mythology.

She knows nothing of Paul and Silas' God; nothing of Israel's story.

We are told she kept following them for days; all the while shouting, until she had, at last, managed to work Paul's last nerve. (Heartening to read of an apostle getting annoyed. It gives me hope). Anyway, Paul orders the spirit, in the name of Jesus Christ, to come out of her. The spirit obeys! Her shouting ceases. And so does her part in the story, for that is the last we hear of her.

I wonder, now that she no longer possesses her "gift," if her owners let her go? I wonder if she had any place *to go*? Perhaps we are not meant to ponder such questions, because our story immediately jumps to the next scene: the outrage of the slave-girl's owners.

This is when all the action and special effects stuff starts happening. The girl's owners, having lost their source of income, grab hold of Paul and Silas! They drag them into the marketplace, accuse them of blasphemy against Rome, and manage to get the entire crowd riled up against them.

The magistrates order them stripped and beaten, then thrown into jail—thrown all the way in the back, the furthest cell from the door, their feet in stocks. *All this*, because Paul had healed an annoying slave-girl!

Think about it. She is free and Paul and Silas are in chains. Go figure.

See. I warned you. I can't stop thinking about her. What do you imagine freedom felt like after her healing? Something miraculous happened and now, I suspect,

she feels whole and alive; but also terrified and alone.
The world can be a scary place,
especially if you are seeing it for the first time all over again.

There had to be others nearby;
others who saw what had happened,
others on that same path to the place of prayer,
others who were as dumbfounded as she,
others who would come to her side and
help her stand on her new-found freedom-legs.
It takes a community to fully grasp freedom.
I think it's too scary otherwise.

Imagine those first steps after an alcoholic survives seven days of detox
and walks into the daylight, sober for the first time in years.
Or those of a battered wife who somehow found the courage to leave
and is spending her first night in a safe house.
Or a man incarcerated for a decade who gets time off for good behavior
and is being granted early parole.
Or a woman addicted to painkillers who takes the risk and confides in
her doctor.

I suppose we could spend a better part of the morning considering
examples new-found freedom.
Times when someone we know or love
has taken those first steps into an unknown future.
Shucks, it might even be our own legs feeling a bit wobbly this morning.
After all, just a few short minutes ago, all our sins were forgiven!
Everybody's. All of them.
Slates wiped clean. Muck rinsed off.
No strings. No exceptions.
Even if you're not sure you believe it,
your sagging faith does not make God's forgiveness any less true.

You have been forgiven and healed. Freedom is yours.

Thanks be to God for the others. For AA sponsors and social workers.
For corrections officers and medical professionals.

For pastors and teachers and mentors.

For the people of this assembly and
the larger community that is Grace Lutheran Church.

Thanks be to God for all the others who have been there to steady us
when our legs weaken and gratitude overwhelms.

I believe it is this holy interdependence that most closely resembles the
oneness for which Jesus prayed after his last meal with the disciples.

We *are* one. As Jesus and the Father are one.

No doubt about it, we need one another.

To pray for one another and help where we can.

To encourage one another in both life and faith.

To share our wisdom, our talents, and our gifts.

Yes, it takes a community to fully grasp freedom.

I do think it's too scary otherwise.

Thanks be to God for the others.

Thanks be to God for each one of you!

Amen.