

**The Foundations Tremble**  
**Acts 16:16-34**  
**Northminster Presbyterian Church**  
**April 22, 2018**  
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Prologue (introduction to text): Today some 25 or more years after Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension, we encounter Paul, the great missionary of the early church, and Silas and Lydia, and several others who are in the midst of Paul's second missionary journey to the areas we would identify as Turkey and Greece. The pattern was to go into a city, meet folks in the synagogues, share the stories of Jesus, and invite them to become followers of the Way, that particular brand of Judaism that included the followers of Jesus Christ. Today's text recalls how one of those particular periods of time did not go quite as planned. We are now in that section of Acts written in the first person, as the author of Luke, who is also the author of Acts, either copies another's memoir of that time, or uses it as a narrative device to make the events more personal.

Sermon:

The foundations of the prison were shaken. Do you feel the foundations shaking? They feel them in Cape Town, South Africa. Until recent rains increased the water behind the dam that collects its water, it was projected that Cape Town, a city of over 300,000 people, would have to discontinue home water service in August. Those recent rains have increased the amount of water behind the dam to 18.3 percent of capacity, delaying day zero until next year. All citizens are limited to 50 liters of water per day for drinking, cooking, bathing, washing dishes and clothes, and gardening. The average American shower is 8.2 minutes long and uses 65.1 liters of water.

Do you feel the foundations shaking? Sixteen of the warmest 17 years on record — in the history of our record keeping of global temperatures — have occurred since 2001. In the year 2016, the world experienced the warmest January, February, March, April, May, July, August, and September ever recorded. Since 2003, Antarctica has lost a net 1.9 trillion metric tons of ice and Greenland has lost almost 4 trillion metric tons, and it started melting much faster since 2009. In the past 25 years, since 1993, the global sea level has risen over 87 millimeters, after rising 150 millimeters in the prior 100 years, a four-fold increase in the rate. There are three major scenarios in the literature about what will happen to sea level by the time this darling little one has turned 85. If we institute global changes now, sea levels will have risen by only one foot under the BEST case scenario. If we implement the changes agreed to in the Paris accords, by four feet. If we continue on current paths without fully implementing Paris, it will be six and a half feet, creating chaos around the globe.

I ask again? Do we feel the foundations shaking? The jailor was just trying to do his job. He was just trying to live the life he had with the resources he had available, but the system in which he lived was so tenuous that in the moment of crisis, when something completely out of his control happens, he is the one who loses hope. He is

the one who believes whatever forces oppress him will so cause him injury and pain that he would rather end it all.

In New York City last week, prominent civil rights lawyer, David Buckel, who had been struggling with depression for several years, in the middle of the night poured gasoline all over his body sat down in the middle of a park and set himself ablaze. He left a note saying that he used fossil fuels to kill himself as a symbol of how humanity was using them to kill the planet. Mr. Buckel's death was senseless, tragic, and in no way represents any significant segment of the current debates on climate change. We will never know the role his personal struggles played in his decision or if it was a principled, if horribly wrong-headed, action of protest. But his actions are just one more tragic story of those who have begun to lose hope like the jailer did.

The rest of today's story cries out that Mr. Buckel's decision was exactly the wrong response to the challenges we face in our relationship with God's creation. The story is one of deliverance from oppression, deliverance from exploitation, and deliverance from fear. That is the gospel, the gospel of the resurrection of Jesus Christ; it is that we always live in hope, not ignoring the realities all around us, but with our voices and our actions being agents of deliverance.

When Paul encounters the slave girl who would daily shout an inconvenient truth at him and Silas for all the world to hear — a truth they knew, but which drew the wrong kind of attention to their new movement — Paul was mostly annoyed, but eventually something motivated him to end it, to speak words of freedom that took away both her mystical abilities and her owners' ability to make money on her labors. Their efforts at exploiting her, and what some would call a natural gift the young girl had, were at an end. She would no longer be their cash cow. And so they had a cow, hauling Paul and Silas before the authorities, attacking their faith, their race and nationality, and their strange practices.

We shouldn't kid ourselves. There are certainly forces in the world that are hell-bent on exploitation — exploitation of people, exploitation of systems, and exploitation of the wonders of creation. The question we face in connection with those forces is, when will our annoyance at messages the earth is sending us motivate us to stand up to those forces of exploitation and destruction? When will it be enough for us, like Paul, to turn and confront those forces with the words and actions that will free this great gift entrusted to our care, free it from an exploitation that doesn't care at all about what is being exploited?

Surely, that time will come and, for many on the earth, it has come, but clearly not for some in positions of power and authority in our own land. And if we're honest, for many of us it has not yet become sufficiently annoying that we substantially change our own behaviors. Here in the US, we are the highest per capita creators of greenhouse gases in the world. We are doubling down on coal and considering increased oil drilling off our three coasts that will both increase our dependence on fossil fuels and create threats to the environment from accidents and negligence.

But it isn't as black or white as it seems. Tens of millions of jobs in this country and hundreds of millions around the world are dependent, right now at least, on the continued use of fossil fuels and the electricity and heat they generate. A cold turkey response isn't feasible. But then, what are we to do? Is there any part of today's story that illuminates a possible way for us?

What do Paul and Silas do in response to the foundations shaking? They are vindicated; they are physically free; they could flee and leave those who are panicking and those who have been the exploiters to continue their spirals that lead only to death. But they don't. They stay; they remain engaged; they speak further words of assurance and freedom. Indeed, they are so confident in their place in the Kingdom of God that they, in the gloom of a collapsing jail cell, continue to sing their hymns of praise.

What does it look like to not lose hope? What does it look like to not surrender to hopelessness or despair? For Paul and Silas, who face the real possibility of death for confronting the powers and principalities, finding their identity, their hope and their peace in the risen Christ means that earthly powers, even if they threaten their lives, will not make them slaves to fear, but keep them as agents of liberation.

Across the world, millions of people today are pursuing peaceful, yet determined means to end the thoughtless exploitation of our planet, devising ways we in the privileged world can both alter our behaviors and create space for the burgeoning societies of the 2/3 world so that we can all survive; so that we can all thrive.

One hundred three years ago today, the world was introduced to a new kind of exploitation and terror. It was on April 22, 1915, that the Kaiser's forces launched the first large-scale chlorine gas attack on the Western Front in France during World War I. The terror of a visible cloud of choking gas inspired terror among the troops and very quickly led to an escalation of the development of non-conventional weapons. By the end of World War I, phosgene and other more deadly chemical weapons had entered the lexicon.

In the years following the end of that terrible war, all sides took a breath and realized that we had taken a path that, if we continued down it, would and could swallow the earth. Weapons that were just as dangerous to one's own troops as to the enemies could only continue to be used if we surrendered the humanity of ALL soldiers. And so a series of treaties were signed and the very weapons that were ultimately used by all sides were declared to be acts against humanity, violations of all rules of war.

We have not been perfect at following the principles we set for ourselves. Just see the recent actions of the government in Syria. But see also the global response. Virtually every nation condemned an action almost all would have undertaken 100 years ago. We have not yet reached a similar understanding about the use of nuclear weapons but the seeds of such a realization are certainly growing. And we have not yet reached

a unanimous understanding about a less destructive, less planet-killing strategy for energy production and use, but the seeds have surely been planted.

The story of Paul and Silas is a story of how the gospel of Jesus Christ intends the liberation of all from exploitation, for exploitation assumes superiority. And before the mercy seat of God, we are all equal, equally made in the image of God, equally unworthy of the grace we receive anyway, equally loved, and equally worthy of a full life. Living our faith means freeing all from slavery to fear and exploitation — and that includes the slave girl, those who exploit her, and the jailor who is a prisoner to fear as well. ALL are prisoners in their own way. All are in need of liberation.

Ending both the exploitation of the planet and of the poor who suffer the effects of climate change first have been intertwined in the Earth Day and Creation Sunday conversations that have taken place since Wisconsin Senator Gaylord Nelson championed Earth Day's first celebration in this country 48 years ago, an event which led to the creation of the EPA just a few months later. From the beginning, we have known that the exploitation of the earth and the exploitation of those who are not wealthy enough to escape or mitigate the impacts of our misuse of the planet are inextricably linked. People of faith, inspired by the Biblical admonition to take responsibility for dominion over the earth, have celebrated Creation Sunday almost as long.

Friends we have work to do — for the planet that God has entrusted to our care and all the creatures that live upon it, for our children and our children's children. But we will not be enslaved to fear or exploitation, for the very waters that are threatened are also reminders of our baptism into a communion that speaks liberation, lives liberation from fear and exploitation, and today invites us to rededicate ourselves in love to living our hope in tangible action, even if it means defying the forces of exploitation to liberate them too.

Paul declares that Christ's overwhelming love for us frees us to care — to break out of the perhaps too safe cells of comfort and respectability, or from paralysis at the recognition of a problem too large for us to solve — and to let the love we have received free us into making liberating choices everyday — not from guilt, but out of love — choices that will free others to live and grow as beloved children of God like today's baptism reminds us we all are. God has declared freedom for us all. Now let us live as though it is true until it is for all. Amen.