

The sermon text for today:

²³After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. ²⁴Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks. ²⁵About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. ²⁶Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened. ²⁷When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped. ²⁸But Paul shouted in a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." ²⁹The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. ³⁰Then he brought them outside and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" ³¹They answered, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." ³²They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. ³³At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. ³⁴He brought them up into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.

Dear congregation!

Acts 16:23-34 has a very special meaning for me. It reminds me of a very difficult and dark time in my life and in the life of the congregation I served in Piet Retief. I would like to share this story with you today, it's a story about tragedy and hope...

I had to preach on this sermon text almost 6 years ago on a day that was marked with many tears and sorrow. On that Friday evening, the 4th of May 2012, the congregation and myself were rocked with the shattering news that two of our members, a husband and wife, have died in a private plane crash. This was a great tragedy for the whole community and especially for their two teenage girls. The woman was a very dear friend of mine and I was

devastated by the news. So was the whole congregation. Everybody was devastated.

Everything changed. I had plans to go home and celebrate my brother's birthday on this Sunday, the 6th of May 2012. There was to be no celebration. Only mourning, wailing and tears... What to say in a situation like this? What to say to a congregation when you yourself are inconsolable? "After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks." We were all caught and thrown into the innermost cell of tragedy and death. In the innermost cell of a Roman jail, there was no window, no light, no hope shimmering through, nothing. Only utter darkness and despair.

"About midnight (when night is at its darkest) Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners listened to them." It just so happened that we were visited by a brass band from Germany this tragic weekend and they were to play in the church on that Cantate Sunday. This was also to be a big celebration. The conductor came to the manse to talk to me on Saturday afternoon. He expressed his deep condolences and said that out of respect for the deceased and the mourning congregation they would cancel their plans and not play on Sunday. There was a long moment of silence between us and then I simply said: No... Please! Play for us. We need you to play for us on Sunday. Another moment of silence, and then he said. Ok. We will play for you. "And the prisoners listened to them..."

On this particular Sunday, we, the congregation, were the prisoners. Prisoners of sorrow and grief shackled with why questions and disbelief. Nobody could sing while drowning in tears and choking on words and notes. Little did we know what the sound of spiritual hymns could do for us that day.

What a release it was for us to just sit and listen to beautiful music played with melodies

that slowly but surely broke through our darkness and sorrow. Tears were still flowing and nobody could really sing, but the melodies of familiar psalms and hymns carried and comforted our broken hearts in a way that cannot really be explained in human words. But, *“Suddenly... all the doors were opened, and everyone’s chains were unfastened.”*

Our saving Grace was spiritual music, together with the reminder of the message of Easter, that Christ has risen and that He broke through death’s dark prison. Indeed, we have no greater hope or comfort than this. No matter what shape our dark prison takes in our lives at any given time. Maybe you also remember the watchword for this past Thursday, which read: “Joseph remained in jail, but the Lord was with him” (Genesis 39:20.21). There is no dark place in our lives where God would not be with us. God sees us through every single thing – even death.

The jailer, who wanted to kill himself, was stopped by Paul and Silas reassuring him that they were all still there. We are also not alone. God gives us friends, a congregation, a spiritual home and family that can come to our aid, to comfort and console us in dark times, to bring light and hope when we suffer, when we are dying, when we are mourning.

And instead of wanting to kill himself, the jailer then called for lights. The light of Easter cannot be overcome by the darkness of death and despair. And the melodies that we learnt from childhood, the melodies that are in our hearts of God’s saving grace and compassion for us is what keeps us alive and brings us new hope and light, especially in times when darkness threatens to overcome and overpower us. It can break the shackles that stifle our hope. And it also helps to know that Christ himself was bound in a dark prison, which means that we are never alone when we find ourselves there. Christ is right beside us even and especially in the hour of our darkest despair.

There is no place where He cannot go with us or where He himself has not already been. Our prisons cannot hold us forever. There will come a time when a breakthrough will come, always with Christ by our side leading us into the light of new life and new possibilities. .

What binds you? What holds you back? What darkness enfolds you? Where in your life do you need release? All these questions come together in the one question the prison guard asked Paul and Silas: “What must I do to be saved?” There is nothing that we can do really. When we are in that deep, dark place and can’t even move. We cannot find the way out by ourselves when we are shackled and when it is that dark. It is when we can’t move or see a thing that there is only one place our inner eye can turn to – the sun that saves and lights our spirit is Christ alone. In Him our hope is found. He has done all that is necessary and needful for our salvation; for the manifold deaths we need to die on this earth, for the final death we need to die on this earth and also for the hope we need when we can’t hold on and have lost all hope ourselves... It always helps to put on spiritual music; or to remember a hymn with words and melodies that gave you hope and lifted your spirits.

There was absolutely nothing for Paul and Silas to sing about or hope for in that deep, dark prison except for this: *“For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*

When we left the church that Sunday we were still mourning – but we were mourners carried by the sweet melodies of grace, hope and new life.

And may the Lord of this grace, hope and new life fill our hearts with new hope and comfort in His Peace that surpasses all our understanding.

Amen.