Joy and courage at Midnight
Acts 16:19-40

We're working our way through the book of Acts, and we're seeing how the good news of Jesus spread like it did in the first century, and came to impact as many lives as it did. And today we're going to see that two reasons for that were the joy and the courage of the early disciples. And if you think about it, those two characteristics of joy and courage are things that we all want to grow in. I doubt there is anyone who wouldn't want to know more joy in their life: that deep sense of inner contentment, of well-being and settled confidence, that overflows in happiness. And which of us don't admire courage? That genuine inner strength, to choose and to do the right thing, even when it costs you. I reckon we'd all be happy with more joy and courage in our lives.

But before we look at that, I want to remind you of the context of today's passage. Paul and his team have arrived in Europe, in the city of Philippi. And a slave girl had been following them around, calling out that these men 'are telling you the way of salvation'. But Paul knew that was coming from some dark power, and that this young girl's misery was being used and traded on by her owners, and so in Jesus' name he cast the spirit out of the girl… and that's when the trouble began.

Acts 16:19-40

Joy at midnight
Now, if you're around here long enough, you'll hear us talk a lot about 'the gospel', which nowadays has all these Christian and religious overtones. But it wasn't always the case. You see, the early disciples simply borrowing the word from their surrounding culture. And the word gospel simply meant *good news*, and so if your army had just won a decisive battle, or the queen had just given birth to a baby boy, or the king was declaring an amnesty for all debtors, then the herald would go out into the public square and declare gospel, good news, – hear ye, hear ye, this is what has happened, and it's great news.

But of course what is good news for one person is bad news for another, isn't it? And if your country's army has just triumphed in battle someone else's army was lying dead on the field of battle.

And whilst the gospel of Jesus was and is good news for those who are oppressed by the forces of darkness, like the young slave girl, it's bad news for her owners, and for anyone else, then and now, who seeks to trade on other people's misery, because as Luke puts it in v19, 'their hope of gain was gone.'

Now when the gospel challenges these powers of darkness, we should expect a kick back, which is exactly what happens: The girl's owners seized Paul and Silas and dragged them to the public square and the magistrates. And these two men who, in the name of Jesus, have just rescued a girl from abuse, are themselves abused. They have just stepped in to save a girl from mistreatment, and are themselves mistreated as a result. But Jesus never said the Christian life would be easy, did he? Especially if you take a stand against the principalities and powers of this dark world.

And in accusing them, these slave owners don't give the *real* reason they are so agitated, they don't say 'we were making good money from her', instead they disguise their greed as concern for wider society: v20, 'they are disturbing our city'. It's not the first or the last time that evil cloaks itself in the guise of what is good for society, is it? And because of that, sometimes cities and societies need disturbing with the good news of Jesus. And wouldn't it be wonderful if in our day our city, our society was disturbed by the gospel, and the principalities and powers that hold people in slavery today were rattled like they were in Philippi?

But at the same time as appealing to civic concern, these men deliberately, appeal to the kind of underlying anti-semitism that exists even today: v20, 'these men are Jews'. But again they cloak racism in patriotism. 'These Jews', as opposed to 'us Romans', these Jews, v21, 'advocate customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to accept or practice.'

And they managed to whip up the crowd who set upon Paul and Silas, tore their clothes off them, and subjected them to a public beating before throwing them into prison. Now later on Paul would write that they had been 'shamefully treated at Philippi' (1 Thess 2:2), by which he meant that the authorities and the crowd should have been ashamed for the way they treated them. But think about the shame, or the humiliation, that Paul and Silas could have felt: stripped naked before a crowd, beaten, thrown into jail, and put in stocks, and all because of the greed and malevolence of men who would abuse a young girl.

And it's how they were treated and how they *could* have responded that makes how they *did* respond all the more remarkable. Verse 25, 'About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God.'

Now, compare that to what often passes as Christianity, or as religion in general, which is a bit like a contract. 'God, I'll do my bit, and in exchange I'll expect you will do yours. God, I'll go to church, I'll be good, I'll read my Bible, I'll give my money, and in exchange for me doing my bit, God you will do your bit, and you'll bless me, and make my life comfortable, and give me stuff, not too much, but enough, and in exchange for me doing my bit, things will go well with my life.' Now of course, we don't express it as crudely as that, but essentially we can think that if I buy into the spirituality thing, there will be a payback in my life, and God will bless me.

The problem is, what happens when life does not go well? When it seems like God has not kept his side of the deal you put on him? Because then you are left with this contract that you thought you had with God, that is now worthless. And its because of that kind of thinking that people turn away from God and walk away from the church when hard things happen to them, because 'if God won't keep his part, then I won't keep mine.'

But that is a million miles from the Christianity of these two men, Paul and Silas, imprisoned and in stocks, with red raw backs, for whom every move must have meant pain, with the powers of darkness laughing at them, and there they are,

singing songs and praying to God, at midnight. A Christianity that doesn't leave them with a worthless contract, but one that leaves them singing in the night.

You see, if you have a contract view of Christianity, 'I'll do my bit and in exchange, God, you will make sure life goes well for me', when life does not go well you end up feeling resentment, or self-pity, or even bitterness: 'things should not have turned out this way, this wasn't in the agreement God, I've kept my side.' And if that is too dramatic, at least there can be a debilitating sense of disappointment with God: that he has not lived up to his promises.

And yet it's because the very foundations of your faith are wonky. And what then happens is that the circumstances you find yourself in drive how you feel about life and about God. And a downward spiral sets in, and it ends with you feeling more cut off from God, more dejected, and frankly more unhappy, and joyless in your faith.

But instead, Paul and Silas pray and sing. And that has a very different impact. You see, when you are in the midnight of suffering, or in the midnight of circumstances that seem like a prison to you, or in the midnight of it seeming like God has failed you, and instead of sinking down, you fill your head and your heart with truth about God, and you sing and pray about His greatness and glory and purpose and love, and you're bringing that to bear on how you feel in your situation, then a change happens in your heart – your situation may not alter, but how you see it, how you feel about it, changes. And hope and joy are allowed to rise up.

You see what's happening is that songs take intellectual truth about God, and they set them to the music of your heart. And so they move truth from your head to your heart. And it's there that the truth begins to challenge those feelings of being abandonned or of pain that we can feel in the night-time of suffering. 'God is good, he has not forgotten me, he is in control, he will never leave me or forsake me', and your heart, and not just your mouth, begins to sing again.

And did you notice that the other prisoners noticed it: v25, 'and the prisoners were listening to them'. Now, the hard truth is that when we think that God has not done his part, and we feel sorry for ourselves, and sink into self-pity and complaining, people will listen to you… for a bit. But because self-pity saps joy, your joy, and others' joy, eventually people turn off and turn away, and that leaves you feeling even more hurt. But just think how differently people respond when they see joy and peace in the face of adversity. That isn't a turn off, is it? It's an inspiration. We see that and we think, man, that's special, I like that, I want to listen to that.

But where can you get that kind of a faith from? Where can you find what Paul and Silas had, the kind of Christian faith that becomes a fountain of joy, that wells up into song in the midnight of adversity.

Well, before we get there, I want you to see one other remarkable way these two men responded. Because if their kind of faith resulted in deep inner joy, it also meant they didn't choose the easy way out.

The Courage That Stays

Now I've never been to Greece, so I wouldn't know, but according to the Seismological Laboratory of Athens University, which measures earthquakes, on Friday, when I looked, there had been no less that 32 minor earthquakes in Greece in the past 24 hours, and 22 significant earthquakes of magnitude 3.6 or greater in the past year. But however common earthquakes are in that neck of the woods, the one that struck Philippi that night was uncommon: v26, 'And suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken. And immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone's bonds were unfastened.'

Now just think how you might have responded to that. You've been unjustly treated, you have been the victim of a miscarriage of justice, the authorities who threw you in prison are biased against you and you don't trust them, and seemingly in response to your prayers God sends an earthquake, your chains are wrenched from the wall, the prison door flies open and you are standing there on the cusp of freedom. What would you do?

Now, of course, you don't have to find yourself in a 1st century Roman jail to experience something like this. You could find yourself in a marriage that is hard, in a relationship that is struggling, in a situation that is painful. Your situation feels like you are trapped, in a prison. And the option is there to just walk away. And when life is not going the way you want it, there is always the temptation to turn your back, and say 'I quit, I'm going, I don't deserve this anymore'.

But look how Paul and Silas respond to the escape route being shown them. The remarkable thing is that they don't run! They don't use this as an opportunity to escape, but as an opportunity to tell more people about Jesus. They don't see this miracle as sent to save their bacon, but as an open door to save others.

And being a Christian means you don't run. Paul and Silas do not take the easy way out of a hard situation, and neither should we. They had the courage to stay, when they could have escaped. It's the courage to stay in a hard marriage, the courage to work through a relationship. The courage not to head for the exit when that would be way easier to do. And it's because these guys stayed that God uses it for good for the jailor and his family. Many more get blessed because they didn't run, but had the courage to stay.

But that doesn't mean you should be a doormat. Now, I don't know about you, but I just love the way Paul conducts himself at the end here with these Roman authorities. It just appeals to the anti-establishment man in me. And I reckon there's a true Brit inside all of us, you're just supressing it, that hates being told what to do by unelected bureaucrats. And the authorities want to let them go, they're probably bored with this case already, but Paul says, 'o no, they're not getting away with it that easily': v37, But Paul said to them, "They have beaten us

publicly, uncondemned, men who are Roman citizens, and have thrown us into prison; and do they now throw us out secretly? No! Let them come themselves and take us out."

Now, this is not Paul being anti-establishment. Paul knows that he has done nothing illegal, or wrong. And he knows that when he moves on, the Christians he leaves behind will have to deal with these authorities who have just abused him and Silas, and so he wants to put down a marker for their sake and for the sake of the gospel: the job of the magistrates is to protect Roman citizens, including Christians, from injustice, not to be the perpetrators of injustice.

And so Paul does not just roll over and go quietly. He's not going to be a doormat. It's the courage not just to stay, but to stand. The courage to stand for integrity in your work place. The courage to take a stand against injustice in society. The courage to stand for truth on campus, when truth is not popular.

So where do you get that kind of joy and courage from? The joy that sings in the night of your suffering, the courage that refuses to run?

The Way of Salvation

Now at first, when he feels the earthquake, and sees the prison door open, the jailor is about to kill himself, because if they have escaped on his watch he is already as good as dead. But when he discovers that they're all still there, and Paul and Silas urge him not to harm himself, Luke says that, v29-30, 'trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them out and said, 'Sirs, what must I do to be saved?' Now, we don't know for sure what's brought this man to this point. Had he heard the slave girl crying out behind Paul and Silas 'these men are telling you the way of salvation'? Had he listened to them singing and praying, before he turned in for the night? And having heard that, and experiencing this earthquake, does he now sense that God is on their side, and he's on the wrong side?

Whatever it was, this jailor knows that he has got to respond personally to the message. So he asks, 'what must I do to be saved?' Tell me, I'll do it. What part do I have to do, so God will do his part. Do I have to clean up my act? Do I have to stop doing something? Or start doing something? Do I need to start supporting your mission trip financially? Or go on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem? 'Tell me, what must I do to be saved.'

And the answer of course is that *he* doesn't have to *do* anything, because the good news of the gospel is that it's not what you do, it's what Jesus has done for you, and you're saved not by trying and doing and stopping or starting something, but by putting your trust in what Jesus has done for you. Which is why Paul responds, v31, "believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." Because this good news is not just for you, it's for your wife and your kids and your extended family. And they explained the gospel to him more fully, and he and his family believed it and were baptised that same night. And salvation, through the gospel, has come to another family.

But look at what the gospel does in that family. Verse 33, 'He took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds.' Verse 34, 'Then he brought them up into his house and set food before them. And he rejoiced along with his entire household that he had believed in God.'

So, do you see the joy and the courage. He's rejoicing – he's full of joy - because he's believed the gospel, and he's showing courage by standing with the accused, Paul and Silas, in their mistreatment, washing their wounds and feeding them, men his superiors have condemned, and that could cost him dearly.

You see, it's understanding and believing the gospel that becomes the bedrock from which the spring of joy can flow, and on which you can take your stand when life requires courage not to run. You see, when you know that Christ was shamefully treated, that he was stripped and beaten by the authorities, that he suffered unjustly, and he did it for you, to save you, then you'll begin to understand what you mean to him. That however dark your midnight is, he loves you and will never let you go, and that travels from your head to your heart, then you'll know joy welling up. It's why Paul could write later, 'He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things.' If the cross is how much God loves me, I have nothing to fear from what I face now.

And it's that that will also give you courage not to run. Knowing that Jesus refused to run from you, knowing that he stood for truth, for you, knowing that he cared for you and washed the wounds of your soul at the cross, will mean that you will find the courage to stay and not run, to stand and not roll over, to serve and feed and wash wounds, when life would be so much easier if you headed for the exit. It is the joy and the courage that comes from the good news of what Jesus has done for you.