

"Saved"

I want to think with you about what is arguably life's most important question! It emerges from an event described in Acts, chapter 16. The scene is a jail cell in the ancient city of Philippi. Paul and Silas, Christian missionaries, are in jail – not because they committed some sort of crime – but because they preached about Jesus. "The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. 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 (Acts 16:22-24).

They're in prison. Their feet are in stocks. How did they react to this ugly turn of events? They held a pity party. They griped about how they were unfairly incarcerated. *No they didn't!* "About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them" (verse 25). It's midnight. They're praying...and singing hymns! And the prisoners are listening (did they have any other choice?). But somebody managed to sleep through it all: the jail keeper!

But God was up to something! He arranged a little earthquake. That was not extraordinary in itself. Earthquakes were common in that region. The miracle was the timing of it, and what happened as a result! It woke up the prison warden! "When the jailor 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" (verse 27). Probably if the prisoners had escaped this man would have been executed for allowing that to happen. You have to wonder, how did Paul and Silas ever get those prisoners to stay there? We're not told how many inmates there were, but to convince them all to stay put was amazing! Realizing the prisoners are all there, deeply moved, shaking with fright, he blurts out: "What must I do to be saved?"

That, my friends, is one of life's ultimate questions. What must I do to be saved?

Sometimes we have to go back to basics. I love this story about legendary Green Bay Packers coach Vince Lombardi. The Packers had played a terrible game; they were beaten badly. They couldn't do anything right on the field (except perhaps to get off the field after the game). Back in the locker room Coach Lombardi addresses the losers. He's holding a football. "Now, men, we're going to get back to basics" – then, showing them the football he continues, "Gentlemen, this is a football." At that, one team member speaks up: "Coach, you're going too fast. Can you go over that again"!

Sometimes in the church we need to go back to the basics. Ladies and gentlemen, this is a Bible. (*Hold up a Bible*). It contains the message of salvation. The church is entrusted with the message of salvation.

This is basic stuff! Commenting on His mission, Jesus said, "For the Son of man came to seek and to *save* the lost" (Luke 19:10). One can be saved or one can be lost. John 3:16-18 says, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to

condemn the world but in order that the world might be *saved* through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned, but those who do not believe are condemned already because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God." 1 Timothy 1:15: "The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to *save* sinners."

In the United Methodist Book of Discipline it states that one of the reasons for joining a church is the desire to be saved: "All persons *seeking to be saved* from their sins and sincerely desiring to be Christian in faith and practice are proper candidates for full membership in the United Methodist Church."

I realize that our American culture is moving away from traditional Christian teaching and a belief that the Bible has any authority over us. Maybe people don't lie awake at night worrying about the condition of their soul. And most people don't think much about their relationship with God, or whether things are right between them and their maker. But that doesn't mean this question, *what must I do to be saved*, is no longer relevant or important!

I think we're asking that question in other ways: How can I avoid being so self-centered? Why do I act so miserably at times? Who can deliver me from habits and attitudes that I'm ashamed of? How can I overcome my feelings of hopelessness and despair? Who am I? Why am I here? What's the meaning of my life – beyond just getting up in the morning and doing the same thing day after day?

Beyond these personal questions, we ask, Why can't we just get along as human beings? Who can stop us from hurting and destroying one another by weapons of war or crimes of violence? Who can prevent us from ruining our planet through pollution or consumption?

What must I do...what must we do...to be saved? The answer to those questions is found in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. He is the one – the only one – who can save us!

In the *Old Testament*, the words most often used for "salvation" carry the idea of *deliverance* – being delivered from dangers or perils. In the *New Testament*, the word for save is the Greek word "sodzo", which means healing or wholeness in every aspect of life. So, "salvation" means that we are delivered from things that are perilous and destructive so that there is wholeness and harmony in life. *Ultimately, Jesus is the one who provides that deliverance when we are saved.*

What are some of the things Jesus saves or delivers us from? The New Testament in different places tells us that we are saved from the wrath of God, from condemnation, from eternal death and separation from God. And we are saved from our sins: "And you shall call his name Jesus, for he shall save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). Christ delivers us from the *guilt* of our sins...from the *power* sin can have over us...and from the *penalty* of our sins, which is separation from God.

The story in Acts 16 zeroes in on one man who got saved – the jail keeper. Let's look at what

happened, and what we can learn from it.

First of all: Somebody was sharing the gospel! Paul and Silas were there in the first place because they were telling the story of Jesus in a hostile environment. And even in prison, maybe they got to preaching (it doesn't say). But it does say they were singing hymns in the middle of the night. And they were praying. *Maybe the Lord was speaking to the prisoners through their hymns and prayers!* Perhaps that was one of the reasons why none of them opted to escape when the prison doors flung open!

But the jail keeper fell asleep through all of this! What got him up? An earthquake (kind of hard to snooze through an earthquake). "When the jailor 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" (Acts 16:27). Paul yells, "Don't do it! We're all here!"

Somebody's got to tell the story of Jesus. If you are a follower of Jesus today it's because someone, in some fashion, shared the gospel with you!

Some of us, perhaps, came to Christ by the "soft hymns and prayers" approach. We grew up in the church; our parents took us to church. We've always just kind of believed and been a Christian. We started our Christian journey in an unspectacular way: we were drawn to Christ by the influence of a pastor, or Sunday School teacher, or friend. Or perhaps we went through a rough time and a Christian was there for us, and we saw something in that person that made us want to follow Christ.

Others come to Christ by the "earthquake" method! It really took something to shake us up and get our attention! Maybe we got into drugs, or really lived a wild life. Did a lot of really bad things. Maybe a crisis in our life knocked us to our knees. We were sailing along, and the bottom dropped out. Several weeks ago as I was just starting this message we had a painter come to give us an estimate on doing some painting at the house. When Nancy mentioned that I was a pastor, he began to share how the Lord had saved him! Though he had been to church as a kid he got into drugs, into Satanism, did some really wild things – and God brought him to his knees, and saved him! The "earthquake" approach! *It doesn't matter how you come to Christ; it only matters that you come to Christ!* Moved, shaking, trembling, the jail keeper sees his need for salvation, and he cries out, "What must I do to be saved?"

How did Paul and Silas' answer that question? "Live a good life and do a lot of good deeds." (No). "Go to church and become super religious." (No). "Just believe there is a God." (No). "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved" (Acts 16:31). The Greek word for believe (pisteuo) doesn't mean just have a casual belief in Jesus or accept certain facts about Him. It means to *trust in, rely upon, cling to*. Like you are drowning, going under, and someone throws you a life preserver. You grab that and hold tight, put your weight into it, and trust that it will keep you from drowning.

I had a friend in one of the churches I served who was building his own ultralight airplane. He

had a pilot's license. I saw it different times in his garage. His wife didn't want him to fly in it when he finished building it. He believed in it, that it would fly. But the real test was to get in it and trust it to keep him safe. Some of us believe in Jesus like we're standing there, casually looking at the plane, and believing it would fly. The belief in Jesus that saves us would be for us to get in the plane when it was finished and actually take off! Theologian Alan Richardson said "faith" is "the 'yes' of the whole personality to the fact of Christ."

The jail keeper believed what Paul and Silas said, surrendered to Christ, and it changed him.

If you say you're a Christian, you trust Christ to save you, and it hasn't changed you for the better, you ain't got the real thing! Now this change that Christ brings looks different for each person. It may be more obvious in someone who's lived a decadent, destructive life. How Jesus changes someone who's been a moral and religious person will look different. This doesn't mean the good religious person is any less in need of a change. We all sin – whether our sins are sins of the flesh, or the more subtle sins of attitude and spirit.

The jail keeper believed. He didn't put it off (remember, it was just past midnight). He washes the wounds of Paul and Silas. He takes them to his home and feeds them. He tells his family what happened, and he and his whole family are baptized. And it says that he and his whole family *rejoiced* because they had found salvation! *Our Lord Jesus Christ is in the business of changing people's lives!* I love that old gospel song, "What a wonderful change in my life has been wrought, since Jesus came into my heart. I have joy in my soul for which long I had sought, since Jesus came into my heart."

For some, the change may be sudden, dramatic – like my new friend, the painter! He shared how Christ had turned his life around. For others the change is less dramatic and more gradual. *Salvation is always a process – a lifelong process of change and growth.* 1 Corinthians 1:18 says, "For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are *being saved*, it is the power of God." Every follower of Jesus is a work in progress! But Christ can make something beautiful of our life in a way we can never do just by ourselves!

When God created the world and everything there is, it was perfect. A paradise. A Garden of Eden. But then sin entered the picture. We humans rebelled against God, wanting to go our own way, do our own thing, live our lives *our way*. And creation became a *fallen creation*, marked by disease, suffering, evil and death. But God has acted to restore fallen creation to its original goodness. God is in the process of saving or delivering all of creation from evil, decay, sorrow, sickness and death, and bringing about a new creation, a new order. Obviously, this hasn't happened yet. Romans 8 says the whole creation is waiting with eager longing to be set free from its bondage to decay. But the new creation, God's kingdom, where God rules completely, broke into the world when Jesus came. And the Bible says that when we come to Christ and are saved, we begin to share in this new creation. "So if any one is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ" (2 Corinthians 5:17-18a).

What must I do to be saved? "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved" (Acts 16:31).

