

Jesus is not afraid to surprise us

Surprise! When was the last time you were surprised? Was it on a quiz at school? Was it when you were talking to someone and you expected that person to say something, but instead, they said something you could never have expected? It can be fun to be surprised. Or it can be terrifying. The French General, Napoleon once said that it is permissible to be beaten, but never permissible to be surprised.

And, yet, as we look through the pages of scripture we see that God is not afraid of surprising people. In the words we look at this morning we find one of those people. Luke tells us in the book of Acts: *“Acts 16:25 About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. 26 Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everybody’s chains came loose. 27 The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped.”*

The apostles Paul and Silas were in prison. They were there because they were proclaiming the truth about Jesus. And, as they were there in chains, they prayed and sang. Then they prayed some more. Then they sang some more. They prayed and sang hour after hour. And then something amazing happened. A major earthquake shook the foundations of the prison. All of the doors of the jail opened up. And there is where we meet this jailor. Where was he when all of this was going on? He was sleeping. But not for long. When the earthquake came, he went downstairs to make sure everything was alright with the prisoners. But, as he took out his torch and moved through the darkness what did he find? The doors were opened. *All* of the doors were opened.

He didn’t need to go any farther. If the doors were open, the prisoners were gone. If the prisoners were gone, he would have to pay for letting them go. He would have to pay with his life! That was the punishment for letting prisoners free.

The Jailor has a choice. He can either let the authorities find him and then put him to death. Or, he can put himself to death. He starts to draw his sword and find the courage to kill himself, but he hears a voice from the prison—a loud voice. Paul tells the Jailor: *“Don’t harm yourself! We are all here!”*

Now, when the Jailor hears, you would think that he would rejoice, right? You would think that he would be happy. But what does he do? He despairs. He panics. He is even more terrified. And he begs Paul, saying: *“Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”*

The Jailor was terrified. He was forced to ask himself the question: ‘why are these prisoners being so nice to me?’ And, as that thought raced through his mind, the conclusion he arrived at was that there was *no* reason why they should be nice to him. There is no reason why they should not run for freedom. And, as he thought of this, he remembered so many of the times in his life he had been mean and selfish and careless. And he was no longer afraid of being punished here on earth. No, instead, he was afraid of being punished forever after he died.

That is what Jesus did. Jesus surprised him. He woke him from his sleep with an earthquake. He shocked him with open doors. He screamed at him through the voice of Paul. And all of this shock and surprising crushed him.

And isn’t that how it is with us too? Sometimes the clearest way we see our sin is not for Jesus to simply say you are a sinner. Sometimes, the most piercing way we see our sin is when Jesus shows us just how loving, faithful and forgiving he is. We are forced, like that Jailor, to ask the question ‘why’. *Why* is Jesus being so nice to me? And just like that Jailor, we come up with no answer. In fact, we come up with many reasons why Jesus should *not* be nice to us. And when we realize this, just like that Jailor, we start to bargain with God. We want to get on his good side. We want to do *something* to take away our sin.

And, sadly, there are many churches that would tell you that that is exactly what you need to do. You need to ask Jesus into your heart. You need to do good things to earn God’s forgiveness. But what does Paul say to this man who was surprised, shocked and then crushed? *“Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household.”*

Jesus surprised this man with the full knowledge of his-own sin. Now Jesus surprises him with the depth and breadth of the forgiveness waiting for him. The Jailor wants to *do*. Paul and Silas tell him: ‘*trust*’. Trust in Jesus.

No doubt, the next question from the Jailor must have been ‘who is Jesus?’ And so Paul and Silas shared

God's word with him and his family. He shared with him that salvation wasn't something we can earn by asking or working. No, salvation is a gift.

What a shocking, surprising thought! And Jesus surprises us with that same, surprising truth today. How often are we told that you can't get something for nothing. And in this world it's so very true. But, Jesus surprises us by choosing us to be his own, dying for the sins of everyone and then giving us the gift of faith.

Jesus surprised this man with his sin. He surprised him with the gift of salvation. But Jesus still has one more surprise waiting for him. Luke tells us: *"33 At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized."*

These are words you have to picture. Picture the Jailer, who has heard about this Jesus who has taken away all the evil things he has done. Picture him washing the wounds of Paul and Silas out of thanks to them for the priceless gift they have given to him. Then, at some point, Paul speaks to him about baptism. He tells the man that just as the Jailer washed his wounds, Jesus has a way of washing the wounds in the Jailer's heart. He has a way of bringing that forgiveness that Jesus won for everyone and giving it to him. The Jailer rejoices at this gift. He is baptized along with everyone in the house, both young and old.

Jesus surprised this jailor. He surprised him with the *knowledge* of his sin. He surprised him with the *gift* of salvation. And he surprised him with the *means* of salvation. When banks want to move money from one place to another, what do they use? Do they use bicycles? Do they use horses? No, they use armored cars. If you carry a great treasure, you carry it with something powerful, don't you? Jesus surprised this Jailer by taking the salvation that Jesus won for him on the cross and giving it to him through water. Where are the armed guards? Where are the power and protection? It wasn't there—at least the Jailer couldn't see it with his eyes. Jesus surprised this Jailer by taking his priceless treasure of salvation and attaching it to his word and to water.

And there were no soldiers shouting trumpets. There were no armed guards presenting the Jailer with this priceless treasure of forgiveness. There was just Paul or Silas putting water on this man and saying "I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." But the gift was real. And there may not have been soldiers blasting trumpets. But there were angels rejoicing that God had given the gift of repentance to this man.

How did this man and his family react to everything that happened on this surprising night? Luke tells us: *"34 The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole family."*

The Jailer rejoiced. And through these words written about him, he encourages you to do the same. Rejoice that Jesus surprises you. He surprises you with the knowledge of your sin. He surprises you with the gift of salvation. He surprises you with the means of salvation. Amen.