



# SERMON OF THE WEEK

## First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

### March 9, 2014

#### "Joy" (Book of Acts Series)

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It's hard being in the month of Lent because it is a time of sacrifice; a time when we take away things that are important to us that we think we can't live without. So we do without. We fast. We fast from something we enjoy doing, or consuming that we like to do in "normal times"—things we think we have to have in order to live.

So we give up a food item we like, or a drink or an activity. We pare back. Like stripping down the old paint to the original surface to start again so that we might find a new relationship with God and discover that maybe there are some false gods in our lives that we have been pursuing, but we didn't know it.

That is what our Bible passage is about for this morning. When everything is stripped down and gone, where will our joy be?

Here is the set up for today's passage. We remember from last week how the Apostle Paul and his friends were in the city of Philippi in Greece. Here is what Philippi looks like today (a picture of Philippi was shown).

Named after Philip the II—who is the father of Alexander the Great—Philippi became a city of strength and strategic importance in 356 BC both in business and in war.

It was in 42 B.C. when two Roman armies fought in a civil war in Philippi. One led by Cassius and the famous Brutus (famous for the so-

called Shakespearean quote by Julius Caesar, *Et Tu, Brute*—"And you Brutus"—before being assassinated), and the other army led by Antonius and Octavianus who eventually won. The consequences of that war were enormous for the future of the Ancient World and the Roman Empire.

Philippi was a bustling city with a huge amphitheater built by Philip the Second (a picture of the amphitheater was shown). When our church group went to Greece last October we actually got to walk on the main road that all travelers, including the Apostle Paul, used for journeys to Philippi and surrounding cities like Thessalonica.

Here I am making the trek on the actual road that Paul used (a picture of Pastor Dan on Ignatia Road was shown). It felt like walking on holy ground. Literally, it was walking in the footsteps of Paul.

In our Bible story today, Paul and his entourage went to what is called in Scripture a beautiful "place of prayer" along a river in Philippi, which many scholars say is this place that we visited.

(A picture of a river where Lydia was baptized was shown.) It was here that Paul led Lydia, a business-woman, a seller of purple goods, to become the first European convert to Christ. He baptized her in the river where today is a spot that is commemorated by this small, modern amphitheater.

People think the baptism was near this place near the river because they found ancient pictures or relief paintings of Lydia getting baptized by Paul near that spot. Because of this holy ground, many of our church members on the Greece trip decided to renew their baptismal vows at this location (a picture of those being baptized was shown). And so they lined up and one by one, 15 or so of them, as they renewed their faith and as we thought about Paul baptizing Lydia, the first follower of Christ in that area. It was a cold and rainy day as I took the water and consecrated the many who took part. As Ron preached last week, we read about Lydia in Acts 16 of how her whole household was baptized there. So it was nice to baptize our household of faith of First Prez.

Back to our Scripture, Paul went back to that river sometime later maybe to pray. But this time, there was a demon-possessed slave girl who was into fortune-telling and who kept bothering Paul. He got so annoyed with her that he exorcised the demons from her and led her to Christ. Wish we could be so annoyed and exorcise demons.

But that conversion caused problems because the slave's owners lost revenue off of her because of her new faith in Christ. (Now the action really picks up in our story.) The owners were furious and so they brought Paul and Silas to the magistrates, and possibly bribed them to put Paul and Silas in jail. Riots broke out in the town square.

**P**aul and Silas are stripped, beaten with rods, flogged, and then thrown into jail and tortured more. Clearly, a bad day at the office.

*Acts 16:25 About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them.*

*Acts 16:26 Suddenly 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.*

*Acts 16:27 When 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.*

*Acts 16:28 But Paul shouted in a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here."*

*Acts 16:29 The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas.*

*Acts 16:30 Then he brought them outside and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"*

*Acts 16:31 They answered, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household."*

*Acts 16:32 They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house.*

*Acts 16:33 At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay.*

*Acts 16:34 He 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.*

*Acts 16:35 When morning came, the magistrates sent the police, saying, "Let those men go."*

*Acts 16:36 And the jailer reported the message to Paul, saying, "The magistrates sent word to let you go; therefore come out now and go in peace."*

*Acts 16:37 But Paul replied, "They have beaten us in public, uncondemned, men who are Roman citizens, and have thrown us into prison; and now are they going to discharge us in secret? Certainly not! Let them come and take us out themselves."*

*Acts 16:38 The police reported these words to the magistrates, and they were afraid when they heard that they were Roman citizens;*

*Acts 16:39 so they came and apologized to them. And they took them out and asked them to leave the city.*

*Acts 16:40 After leaving the prison they went to Lydia's home; and when they had seen and encouraged the brothers and sisters there, they departed.*

This is the word of God.

What can we learn from this? What is jarring and stunning is that Paul and Silas were singing in joy. Come on now! Who sings for joy in a prison cell? It's not even a prison cell with electricity, a toilet, running water, or a bed. We're talking first-century jail.

While we were in Philippi last October, we saw where it was believed to be the exact jail cell where Paul and Silas were imprisoned. Want to see a picture of it?

(A picture of the jail cell was shown.) Built with stones all around it, the jail cell was sturdy to protect a

jailbreak. Stark, simple. And then on the inside you see here it was that Paul and Silas were put in stocks. Not the most pleasant place.

Why do people feel this was the jail? Because if you look closely on the right side are some remains of ancient reliefs or pictures of the apostles being in jail that were painted centuries ago. I got very pensive and somber there as I thought about how our forefathers suffered for their faith. We stand on the shoulders of others. Here's a close up of those relief pictures. (A picture of a mural was shown.) These old decaying murals are possible evidence of the apostles being in this exact jail cell.

But let me tell you about how hard it was for the Apostles being in that jail cell. Tim Keller makes this observation and interpretation. [Tim Keller. "A Woman, A Slave, and A Gentile – The Necessity of Belief," Nov. 9. 2003]

Keller says the jailer tortured Paul and Silas. The jailer wasn't told to torture them. He was given no orders other than to keep them secure in the prison cell but the jailer decides to put their feet in stocks, which is torturous and incredibly painful. One foot is put into a hole of the stocks and then the other foot is put in another hole and then the two feet are pulled far apart so that your legs are painfully spread wide as long as you are chained. The muscles cramp and you are locked in position for days. This is cruel and sadistic, and remember this is after Paul and Silas were beaten with rods and flogged.

Maybe the jailer did it to kiss up to his bosses. Or he just did it because he liked following the law and going beyond. But then something happened. Around midnight when the pain would be at its worst, Paul and Silas start to sing. They start praising God. Was it through clenched teeth?

**H**ey Silas, sing with me. Let's just praise the Lord. Praise the Lord." Now you get the feeling they let it out joyfully to praise God. The jailer had never seen or heard joy like this before.

Have you ever seen or heard joy like that? When things are stripped away, knocked off, scraped down to the marrow of our souls, do we find joy in our lives?

Keller would ask, where does your joy come from? If you say "My joy comes from my health," and your health is taken away, then there's no joy.

Or "My joy comes from my bank account." But when that plummets, there's no joy.

Or "My joy comes from my accomplishments," but if you take away that, then there's no joy. It comes from my status, and position but take that away is there joy?

My joy is from love, but what if you are caught in a place where there is no love, then there is no joy. And if your joy comes from life and you are dying, will there be joy?

Yet for Paul and Silas, who were dying, had no health, no accomplishments to save them, no riches, they have joy! This kind of joy—biblical joy—followed of Christ joy comes in the midst of suffering not apart from it. This is the kind of joy that says that if I die tomorrow, I can still sing.

The jailer who was so cruel and sadistic hears his victims sing with joy! But then suddenly wham! an earthquake rips through, and the chains on the prisoners fall off. And incredibly the jailer finds the convicts who don't run away. He had their lives in his hands and now because they didn't run

away they had his life in THEIR HANDS because if they run away he would be killed according to the law. But they don't run.

What kind of pure love is this that even the tortured don't hate their torturers? Everything is taken away from them but still they have deep down a joy that all will be okay in the end.

It is because Paul and Silas knew firmly that Jesus Christ is the Lord, and they had given their lives to Jesus Christ. They had devoted their lives to follow Him so they would take on any challenge and keep on in a loving way. They trusted that if God allowed this, they could still trust Him.

Because they knew the Man, the Lord Jesus, they were fearless. They did not worry about their future.

Now this can be so idealistic and sound so namby-pamby. But let me tell you how this works. This past week, Pam and I had lost our car keys and the remote fob that came with it. I went to the car shop and left the car. Then they called me hours later to pick it up.

I went there and I thought I would test my two remotes that now were reprogrammed, and lo and behold, they didn't work! With one remote in my hand, I could lock my front door but the other three doors would unlock. With my other remote I could unlock my front door but it locked the other three doors. They charged me \$180 to reprogram my remotes, and now they weren't working.

When the attendant checked on my car, I told him my remotes weren't working. He said that my door lock must have broken so that would be an additional \$525 to repair. What the heck?! No way!

I said, "I have 80,000 miles on my car. I have owned it for 12 years.

Don't you think it is weird that every day, 24/7 my remotes have always worked. My doors have always worked every single day for 12 years but on this day that you reprogram my keys you now claim my car doors broke and you now want another \$535 in addition to the \$175 I paid you? Then there is also the additional \$180 for you to make a duplicate key with the electronic device." That's an additional \$900. The lesson: don't lose your keys!

He said, "I'm sorry your door is broken, and so you have to leave your car overnight."

Now if you are a sinful human being like your pastor you might think, maybe think and possibly ponder that you are being ripped off. But then I remembered that I had a friend who worked at that dealership as a mechanic. I asked the attendant if my friend could be assigned to my car, and he said yes.

And as soon as that happened all of my anxieties, worries, doubts, and cynicism vanished. Why? Because I knew the man. My friend the mechanic would check out my car. I completely trusted him. I know longer worried. I no longer had suspicions. I knew he wouldn't rip me off. I knew he would give me an honest answer. I knew I could trust him with my 2002 car. I knew I would get an honest straight-up deal. For he was all-knowing about cars, and all-skilled, and he would be present.

As it turned out, my friend checked out my car the next day and said my door lock was broken and that I needed to get it fixed. Through him and the attendant, I got a 40% discount because they had known my frustration and that they had said it was fixed when I picked it up and it wasn't. Grace and mercy abounded because I knew the man! Even if I had to pay the full \$525, I was fine with it because I had known the man, my friend, who gave me an honest reading.

**A**nd that is how it is supposed to work when we really know The Man, Jesus Christ, when He is really the Lord of our life. When we really have devoted our life to His all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-present loving care, then it should reduce the anxiety in our lives. We can have joy even if we are feeling trapped and overwhelmed.

When I say joy, I don't mean some slap happy life. I mean a joy that is strong and constant optimism that deeply, deeply believes everything will turn out okay even if I have to suffer, even if I have to wait for an answer, even if I have to say goodbye to a loved one. I have that reassurance that somehow with God in my life there will be grace and mercy and strength and purpose in life.

If you saw the movie or read the book "Lone Survivor," the Navy Seal who was wounded and alone always had the faith that his fellow Navy Seals would come and get him. And friends, I love the Navy Seals, but Jesus is even more all powerful, all-knowing, and all-present than the Navy Seals.

When we have that kind of faith based on Jesus Christ as our foundation and not on wealth or health or technology or accomplishments or the things we own, then we can be strong in our faith and fearless and invulnerable. We can work without an unnecessary fear of being fired, or if by chance we are fired, we can live with the assurance of God's promise that He is in control.

Why don't we live as if it is true that Christ exists and is our Lord? That's novel. Let's live as if it is true. Maybe we don't live that way because we don't seek God out for direction, and answers, to know His call on our lives. Maybe we need to stop and really pray about God's plans for His future, not our plans for our future. Maybe we

need a period of discernment about what God wants, not what we want.

*Discernment* isn't a word you hear very often outside of the Christian context. The word *discernment* describes a process—a process meant to be undertaken to help one understand how the Lord is calling us to serve Him.

As you may have heard, we are in a discernment period right now. I announced it at the congregational meeting last December that it was coming. The members and leaders of our church, which includes many of you, have begun a period of discernment about whether to stay or leave our national denomination, the Presbyterian Church of the United States of America (PCUSA).

Why are we thinking of leaving our denomination? Because I believe, the present one we belong to is not living as if it were true that Christ is the Lord God. Unfortunately, it means we need to leave the Presbytery we just joined, which we really like, because the national denomination is going a direction we don't agree with.

When we hear that nearly all of the pastors can no longer affirm that Jesus Christ is the only way for salvation, then we get concerned. Why? Because we find our joy and strength and faith in proclaiming that very fact, and to state otherwise goes against the basic tenets of our faith in Jesus.

IF Jesus Christ is not the only way for salvation, then what a waste of His going to the cross. Why celebrate Easter?

We become concerned when recent decisions from the denomination no longer claim the Bible is authoritative in all ways.

When our denomination decided just a few years ago that for

pastors, elders and deacons that if married, they no longer need to live a life of fidelity, faithfulness and loyalty to their spouses in marriage, and that if single that chastity is not required, then something is very wrong with its family values, and it is time to discern whether God wants us to stay or leave. But according to our polity, it can't be my choice. It has to be your (the congregation's) choice.

When a denomination has not grown since 1966, that's 48 years in a row, not one year of growth, 48 years of decrease, then the passion of a Paul and Silas to spread the gospel no longer exists, and the entrepreneurial, passionate, risk-taking spirit of reaching strangers for Christ (like a Philippian jailer) is gone, then it is time for us to seriously consider moving on.

So your staff and elders have unanimously asked for us to enter into an official period of discernment with our Presbytery in San Diego, as the first step to us seek God's direction on whether to stay or leave. But if you vote to leave, then my message to the national denomination will be "let my people go," and by doing so we will be able to serve God more completely, creatively, and comprehensively, and finally own our property.

Two informational town hall meetings, that will have five Presbytery representatives attending, will be held for the entire congregation to choose from to attend, one on Saturday, April 5, and the other on Sunday, April 6. And we hope you will go to one of them as we discuss the POSSIBILITY of moving to a NEW different Presbyterian denomination formed two years ago that is more of a passionate movement than a bureaucracy. It is called the The Covenant Order of Evangelicals Presbyterians, also known as ECO. Yes, I know the acronym ECO doesn't work with the first letters but it is called ECO for short.

**S**o please attend one of the town hall informational meetings. Small Group Leaders and Ministry leaders will be meeting this week to prepare to help the congregation understand this process we are in that will hopefully end sometime this year. It is one of the reasons I have been traveling so much—to work out the process. Ah, but I have digressed.

Back to Paul and Silas. They were so sure in their faith in Christ, so sure, so stouthearted, and so fearless that they didn't run off and three stunning things happened: They led the Philippian jailer to Christ. They stopped him from killing himself. They then baptized him and his entire family.

And when they could have left, they stayed and demanded an apology from the magistrates for they were Roman citizens and Roman citizens don't get treated like that. Wow, not me. I would have hightailed it out of there once the chains were off and part of the jail cell had fallen down. But not Paul and Silas because they were fearless. They had a silent, strong, joy in their hearts that all would be well no matter what.

I close with this thought and challenge. Paul and Silas were thrown in jail because they led a slave girl to Christ. The girl was slave to fortune telling that was not from God and to the men who pimped her. But when she heard of the real life-changing, forgiving, loving Jesus Christ, she joyfully bolted from those men into the arms of Jesus.

Here's the challenge: if there is something that is taken away from our lives and we then have no joy, is it possible we are a slave to that? If we think if we believe we have less money than we should have, and have no joy, then maybe you are slave to money?

I just came back from some of the poorest people in the world in the Philippines but they still have the joy of the Lord. And we in America can be so unhappy with so much. Learn from the poor. Don't be a slave to what you own and what you want to own.

If you think that you have not accomplished much and therefore you have no joy, then are you a slave to goals that are not from God? Are we slaves to thinking that the universe is all about us and we are always the victims? If you are bored, are you a slave to something that gives you no purpose or a slave to laziness?

And if you always feel someone or something is exploiting you, hear this: maybe there is something inside you that is exploiting yourself. Are you always trying to please others or maybe control your spouse or your calendar or your boss or your neighbors? Be a slave to that need for control and you will not have joy.

Learn from the slave girl who said, "Enough with these slave owners. I want Jesus Christ."

Learn from Lydia, the business woman who sold purple goods who said, "Enough, give me Jesus, not just a lucrative business. And I want my whole family and friends and customers to know Jesus."

And learn from the Philippian jailer who said, "Enough of hate and hurt. I want Jesus Christ and I want my whole family to passionately know Him."

Dare I say, don't let your personal life become like a dying denomination. Don't let the passion of evangelism be snuffed out. Don't let the adventure of joy be extinguished.

For today is a new day, a day when the true joy that comes from God is available to us all. Amen!