

Open and Shut
[Acts 16:9-34](#)
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Don't worry - it'll be easy. A friend asks you to help him move, and tells you it's just a few boxes, maybe a coffee table, don't worry - it'll be easy. And the next thing you know you're carrying a king-sized mattress down three flights of stairs, trying to maneuver an L-shaped sofa through a tiny hallway and around a corner, nothing is as easy as it was supposed to be. Or you get signed up for one of those charity 5k runs, and you don't train at all because, hey, you were a pretty good runner in high school, so how hard can it be - don't worry, it'll be easy - and you're two kilometres in when your lungs are burning and your legs are wobbling and that breakfast of coffee and donuts is lurching around in your gut, and nothing is as easy as it was supposed to be. We like to hope for the best, to see the glass as half-full, but when you're expecting things to be easy, smooth sailing all the way, and you run into nothing but trouble, it's hard to stay positive - it's hard not to throw up your hands and wonder what is going on, how everything became so, so hard.

I think Paul was probably feeling like that most of the way through our reading this morning. His first missionary journey was a great success - he travelled through Cyprus and Turkey and Syria, telling people about Jesus everywhere he went, and everywhere he went, people listened - new communities of believers sprang up all over the place, everything Paul said, everything Paul did, it all worked, and when they got back to Jerusalem they

told everyone all the amazing miracles they had witnessed, all the amazing things God was doing all over the world, and then Paul gets ready to do it all again. Another journey, another trip to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ out into the world. Don't worry - it'll be easy. But as soon as they get started, there's trouble. They travel through Asia, but the Holy Spirit prevents them from preaching God's word there. So they travel on to Mysia and Bithynia, but again, the Spirit won't let them go, the Spirit won't let them preach. And then Paul has a dream, where a man from Macedonia, across the sea, begs and pleads with Paul - please, please, come help us, come tell us about Jesus. And Paul decides that this is the break they've been waiting for - God wants them to go to Macedonia, God wants them to bring the gospel of Jesus to this new land, so what are they waiting for? Don't worry - it'll be easy.

Except it isn't. They sail across the sea and travel inland, and reach the city of Philippi, a major city, fertile ground for the gospel. Except it isn't. On all his journeys so far, Paul's developed a fool-proof strategy for telling the story of Jesus - you start in the Jewish neighbourhood. You go to the synagogue, to all the people who already know about God's promise of a coming Messiah, people who are already waiting for that promise to be fulfilled, and you tell them that Jesus is that Messiah. And then you move on to the god-fearers, those Gentile friends and well-wishers who are curious about the Jewish faith but not sure how they might fit in, and you tell them that what Jesus has accomplished is open to them as well. That's the plan, and it's worked really well so far, but it doesn't work in Philippi. Philippi is a Roman colony - it's a settlement of retired

Roman soldiers, and there aren't a lot of Jews in the Roman army. So when Paul gets to Philippi, there's no Jewish neighbourhood. There's no synagogue. There's no community of fellow descendants of Abraham, ready to hear the good news Paul and his friends have brought. There's no one to welcome them and feed them and give them a place to stay and a couch to sleep on. The best they can find is a little gathering of women that meets every Sabbath down by the river - maybe these women heard about the Jewish faith in their hometowns, and they've kept up some of the practices in this new city their husbands have retired to. It's not much, but it's all that Paul and his companions have to go on, so they head down to the river and sit there in the mud, tired and hungry and probably a little grouchy. This was supposed to be easy, and instead all they've hit are roadblocks and closed doors and trouble, everywhere they look, everywhere they go, nothing has been easy.

And yet, sitting there in the mud on the river bank, something changes. Paul and his friends speak with the women who have gathered there, and in one of those women, something changes. The Lord opens Lydia's heart. After all these closed doors and roadblocks they've run into, there in one single heart, something opens, and Lydia accepts what Paul is saying, and she gives herself to Jesus Christ, and she invites Paul and his companions into her home. Everything was closed, until the Lord opens Lydia's heart.

Which is great. But it's still not much. They've come a long way, they've been through a lot, and all they have to show for it is one person. One heart opened, but the rest of Philippi is still locked shut tight as ever. Sure, they've

got a place to stay now, which helps, but it's still not much. So they go back to work, they head down to the riverbank again and again, Sabbath after Sabbath, but nobody else wants to hear what Paul has to say, nobody else wants to follow in Lydia's footsteps, again and again the doors and hearts of Philippi are closed to the gospel Paul is preaching. And to make matters worse, as they make their way through the market on their way to the riverbank, this little girl starts following them around, shouting at the top of her lungs that "these men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation" – which has got to be frustrating. I mean, getting heckled is no fun for anyone when you're just trying to do your job, but this girl is actually telling the truth, and no one cares. They have someone advertising to the entire city exactly who they are and what they're doing there, and still nobody listens. In fact, it's only when Paul, in a fit of frustration, actually heals this little girl of the spirit that's possessing her, that anyone actually starts to pay any attention to them. For all Paul's preaching and proclaiming, the only thing that gets him noticed in this city is threatening somebody's livelihood. And all that gets them is a riot, and a beating, and they're thrown into the deepest pit in the local jail.

And if I was Paul, right about now I would be giving that Man from Macedonia a piece of my mind. Come to Macedonia, he said. Come help us, he said. Come tell us about Jesus, we're just dying to hear more of your preaching, Paul. Don't worry – it'll be easy. You won't spend months down by the river sitting in the mud, trying to explain the entire history of salvation from Abraham to Pentecost to a half-dozen disinterested washer-women. You won't get heckled by a

possessed pre-teen. You won't have any trouble at all. It must have been humbling, after all the lofty success of that first missionary journey, that this journey starts with such a colossal failure. After months of work and travel and toil and sweat, Paul and his friends have almost nothing to show for it. And if I was Paul, I'd be pretty frustrated. When you're expecting things to be easy, smooth sailing all the way, and you run into nothing but trouble, it's hard to stay positive - it's hard not to throw up your hands and wonder what is going on, how everything became so, so hard.

But Paul doesn't do that. He doesn't grumble. He doesn't despair. Instead, there in the depths of that Philippian prison, there in the heart of that miserable closed-off, hard-hearted city, Paul and his friend Silas start to sing. They pray and sing hymns to God. And as they pray, and as they sing, the prisoners around them start to listen. And as they pray, and as they sing, the ground begins to shake. And doors start opening. This massive earthquake tears through the prison, tears open the walls, tears open the doors, tears apart the bonds that are holding them captive, the power of God descends on Philippi, descends on that prison, and everything that was closed is broken wide open, everything that was standing in the way of God's word working in that city comes tumbling down. There in the rubble of those crumbling prison walls, the church in Philippi grows by leaps and bounds, as prisoner and jailer alike hear the word that Paul is proclaiming, they listen and they respond, and they rejoice in the new life they have found. After all that misery and hardship, after so many closed doors

and closed hearts, God steps in, God opens the doors, God opens the hearts, and the people rejoice.

And I wonder if Paul was thinking about that moment years later when he wrote to that church in Philippi, the church founded by Lydia and the jailer and those prisoners, all the people whose hearts and minds were so closed to the good news of God's love until God opened a way. Paul's letter to the Philippians is a remarkable letter, because it's clear just how much Paul loves this little church – it's obvious from every word how special they are to him. And when Paul closes his letter to this church, he tells them "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice." Because that's exactly what Paul did, that night in Philippi, when he had nothing to be joyful about, when everything that could possibly go wrong was going wrong, Paul and Silas still rejoiced, they sang, they worshipped the God who always finds a way to open what is shut. Paul and Silas knew that what they needed in Philippi wasn't more brilliant preaching, more healing, more miracles. What they needed was to trust that God was still a God who would open what was closed off, God would break through every barrier, every obstacle, God would do what was needed, and all they had to do while they waited for God to act was just to rejoice, to sit in that prison cell and rejoice in the Lord who opens what is shut, who seeks and saves what is lost, who sets the prisoners free. Paul and Silas knew that when things weren't easy, to wait for God to act, and while you wait, sing.

And that's good for us to hear, because nothing in our world right now is easy. Everywhere we look, all around us, the things that we once thought were strong

and reliable are starting to seem pretty shaky. The predictable ways of living – go to school, get a good job, work hard, and you'll get a comfortable life with nothing to worry about, don't worry, it'll be easy – that just isn't true anymore, if it ever was. The whole world is unpredictable, on edge, and everyone is trying to figure out the new normal, but all the institutions that used to tell us what to do and how to live, schools and newspapers and governments, they all seem just as lost and confused as the rest of us. All around the world, it feels like evil and cruelty and injustice are on the rise, the bad guys keep winning, the little guys keep starving, and we want to help, but the more we help the more we realize just how much more there is to be done, the more meals we serve, the more people line up at the door. Meanwhile the planet is getting warmer, the sea levels are rising, wildfires are burning out of control. And even when we turn to the church for help, for truth, for guidance out of the troubles of our daily lives, let's be honest, the church isn't doing so great either. When you're expecting things to be easy, smooth sailing all the way, and you run into nothing but trouble, it's hard to stay positive - it's hard not to throw up your hands and wonder what is going on, how everything became so, so hard.

But the truth is it's never been easy. Just like in Philippi, the church is always found in the mud and the rubble of the world, the church is always going to face closed doors and closed hearts wherever we go. The story of Philippi reminds us that even Paul and Silas got frustrated and fed-up, they spoke and no-one listened, they preached and no one showed up, they poured their hearts into serving and preaching and proclaiming the name of Jesus and still came up

empty-handed. But the good news is that the God who brought Paul to Philippi is still the same God we serve and follow today, and our God is a God who opens doors. Our God is a God who opens hearts. Our world is not going to be saved by political action, by institutions, by wealth or power, it isn't going to be saved by human ingenuity or human effort. No matter how hard we all try, we aren't going to fix what we have broken, we are not going to solve this by ourselves. But when we're at the end of our rope, when all our best efforts are getting us nowhere, that's when God steps in, that's when the ground starts to shake, that's when the power of God descends and the world begins to change, the church begins to grow, home by home and heart by heart. Down here in the mud, down here in the rubble, the church is waiting for God to open all the doors and break all the chains and send new life into his people, so that we can rejoice again in what our God has accomplished for us in Jesus Christ. Down here in the mud, down here in the rubble, the church is waiting, and while we're waiting, we might as well sing. We might as well rejoice. You never know who might be listening. You never know when the ground might start to shake. In the name of Jesus Christ - Amen.