

July 17, 2016

Church Planting  
*Life in Flagstaff, Maine*  
Acts 16:19-31

**Opening words:** Once again, we find ourselves in the sixteenth chapter of Acts. Paul, Silas and Timothy are in the Roman colony of Philippi. We have already looked at the conversion of Lydia, the seller of purple cloth from Thyatira and the healing of the fortune teller. That story has a direct influence on this morning's story. I have said it a million times. People do not like change. Angry because her ability to see into the future was gone, the whole community turns against our missionaries. They are dragged before the authorities and found guilty. A short time later, they are stripped, beaten and imprisoned. To the human eye, everything looks bad, but with God all things are possible.

This is sermon number thirty-seven in my sermon series on the book of Acts, *Church Planting*. Our scripture lesson for today is Acts 16:19-31. Let me call this message *Life in Flagstaff, Maine*. This is a message about the importance of hope.

**Acts 16:19-31** <sup>19</sup> When her owners realized that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to face the authorities. <sup>20</sup> They brought them before the magistrates and said, "These men are Jews, and are throwing our city into an uproar <sup>21</sup> by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice." <sup>22</sup> The crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas, and the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten with rods. <sup>23</sup> After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. <sup>24</sup> When he received these orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks. <sup>25</sup> About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. <sup>26</sup> Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everyone's chains came loose. <sup>27</sup> 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. <sup>28</sup> But Paul shouted, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!" <sup>29</sup> The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. <sup>30</sup> He then brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" <sup>31</sup> They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household."

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They tell me that in Somerset County, Maine, is the community of Flagstaff. It was named after a flagstaff Benedict Arnold had constructed there during his short time there in 1775. I would not recommend you go there, because it is a ghost town. The citizens of Flagstaff left during the 1950's when the Dead River was dammed, creating Flagstaff Lake. Historians tell us in the months before it was to be flooded, all

improvements and repairs in the whole town were stopped. What was the use of painting a house if it was to be covered with water in six months? Why repair anything when the whole village was to be wiped out? So, week by week, the whole town became more and more bedraggled, more gone to seed, more woebegone. It has been said, "Where there is no faith in the future, there is no power in the present." There is some truth in that statement. Maybe it describes the world that we live in today.

Like Flagstaff, Maine, many believe our world has no future. Just think about it for a moment. Our world is facing some tremendous problems. It is more than overwhelming; it is intimidating. The people at Listverse took a survey and asked people what were the biggest problems facing the world today. This is their list in inverse order:

10. Drug Abuse
9. Refugees
8. Political Instability
7. Infectious Diseases
6. Climate Change
5. War and Terrorism
4. Unequal Distribution of Financial Resources
3. Poverty and Unemployment
2. Population Growth
1. Hunger and Water

Does anyone have a quick answer to any of those problems? The answer is no! That list is not just overwhelming, it is intimidating. If you agree with me, say, **"Amen!"**

I talk to people regularly who say they will never visit outside of the United States because the world is so unsafe and unpredictable. I would agree with them, except for one thing. This is not a utopian society. Our country is facing some tremendous issues. Not long ago, ABC News asked Americans what were our greatest national problems. This is their list in inverse order:

10. Drugs
9. Illegal Immigration
8. Crime and Violence
7. Hunger and Homelessness
6. Wealth Distribution
5. Size and Power of the Federal Government
4. Social Security System
3. Terrorism
2. The Economy
1. Affordable Healthcare

In comparison to the world, we have high-class problems. Does anyone have a quick answer to any of those problems? The answer is no! That list is not just overwhelming, it is intimidating. If you agree with me, say, **"Amen!"**

Maybe the answer is to just stay home with family, since the American family has no problems. Nothing is farther from the truth. The American family unit is facing some amazing problems. LifeWay researchers asked 2,000 people from around the country what is the greatest problem facing the American family? This is their list in inverse order:

10. Materialism
9. Balance of Work and Family
8. Negative Media Influences
7. Lack of Communication
6. Financial Pressures
5. Lack of Discipline
4. Absent Father Figures
3. Time
2. Divorce
1. Anti-Christian Culture

Does anyone have a quick answer to any of those problems? The answer is no! That list is not just overwhelming, it is intimidating. If you agree with me, say, **"Amen!"** If you think you have a quick answer to any of those thirty things, then you are a fool. Every corner of our world, country and homes is filled with complex issues. No wonder many believe we are living in Flagstaff, Maine. There are no quick answers to these complex problems. To the unfaithful it all looks hopeless. Yet, standing in the middle of these complex problems is the Gospel of Jesus Christ, who offers the faithful hope. Let us look at this morning's scripture lesson.

We are in the sixteenth chapter of Acts. Do you remember the story? Paul healed the fortune telling slave girl from her spirit. Everyone should have been happy, but that just didn't happen. Everyone was upset. Those that wanted to see into the future were upset because their window into the future was gone. The owners of the slave girl were upset because they had lost an income source. Everyone turns on Paul and Silas. After being stripped and flogged, they are imprisoned. I can't describe to you the misery of their surroundings. Whatever words I use to describe it fall short of their reality. They are completely dependent on God. However, with God all things are possible. About midnight, Paul and Silas are singing and praying to God. He must have heard them, because a great earthquake rocked that place. It must have been some kind of quake because all the prison doors opened and all the chains and fetters fell off. The jailor considered suicide because he assumed everyone ran away. However, it didn't happen. All the prisoners remained, including Paul and Silas. When the lights came on he looked for Paul and Silas. He looked at them and asked the question we have all asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" They answered, "Believe in Jesus."

There is a spiritual side to this piece of scripture that can't be ignored. Earthquakes in the Bible always illustrate God's power. The jailor had just experienced God's power. He was humbled by the experience. All of his earthly pride was wiped away and he felt insignificant. In this humbled state he asks the question, "What must I do to be saved?"

I have never met a person who didn't want to live for eternity. In spite of all of our shortcomings, we believe that heaven is waiting for us and our loved ones. It would be a horrible thing to lose a loved one and question their salvation.

Years ago, I officiated at a funeral of a nineteen-year-old man. His life ended when it was just getting started. The story was tragic. The only thing he had done in life was get into trouble. He made one poor decision after another. On the night that he died, he made one last poor decision. It was 3:00 in the morning and he was drunk out of his mind walking down the middle of Wilson Avenue in Struthers. He never had a chance. He was hit by a drunk driver. Everyone who came to his funeral was young too. One by one they passed by his closed casket. One of them asked if she could speak at the service. The family granted her request and she ended her emotional words by saying, "I hope he found a way to get into heaven." Have you ever wondered about the salvation of one of your loved ones? Let me say it one more time. We are all saved by grace. The only way to get into heaven is by believing in Jesus. His blood will wash you white as snow. If you believe in Jesus, say, "**Amen!**" Yet, there is another side of this story.

There is also a practical side, a deeper side, to this piece of scripture that can't be ignored. At the very heart of this story is hope. The situation seemed hopeless to the jailor until he experienced God. With God all things are possible. That theme isn't just found in this story. It is found throughout the New Testament. It is the theme of our faith. People of faith understand it clearly. God has the ability to turn victims into victors. People who lack faith remain victims. They might as well move to Flagstaff, Maine where there was no hope. Do the people in your life consider you a hopeful, optimistic person? Do the people in your life consider you a hopeless, negative person? Perhaps, this is a better question: Do the people in your life consider you a person of faith?

This is the story of the most hopeless time in my life. When I was in seminary, there was one series of classes that I feared more than the rest, New Testament Greek. It was required I take three classes in Greek to graduate: Greek I, Greek II and a class in Greek grammar. I found Greek I to be challenging. I found Greek II to be impossible. Part of my problem was my life at that time; it was complex to say the least. I will never tell you stories about that chapter of my life. As the final approached, I knew it wasn't going to be pretty. It would be the first class I ever failed. The standards were high for that class. There was only one test and you had to get an 80%. That just wasn't going to happen. My future hinged on that test. If I didn't get an 80% I wouldn't get my degree, which meant I wouldn't be ordained. It was one of the most stressful moments in my life. With no other options, I asked the professor for more time to study. His name was Randy Richardson. He agreed, and said the latest I could take it was at 8:00 on a Friday morning because his grades were due at noon. I took that extra time to go back to the beginning of the class and taught myself Greek again. At first it was easy, but then it grew hard. It grew really hard. This is the truth. The

situation seemed hopeless. I remember the night before I took the test sitting in the library completely alone. Everyone else had gone home. Depressed, I sat there. In my heart I knew it. I had no hope of passing. I remember at 8:00, I started to panic. I felt like my future was over before it began. Trying to control my emotions, I knelt by my study carrel and began to pray. My prayer was simple. "Please, God help me. I can't do this alone. I need you. If you have called me into the ministry, then help me." For another ninety minutes nothing changed. There is no other way to say it. I was living in Flagstaff, Maine, hopeless. I remember waiting for the announcement that the library was closing. It was at that moment that God acted on my behalf. Like God rolled back the great stone on Easter morning, God rolled back the great stone to my brain. Suddenly, everything clicked. Greek is one of those things you either get or you don't. For the first time, I got it! Overcome with emotions again, I prayed a word of thanksgiving. The next morning, I was there early for the test so I wouldn't have time to forget it. I waited for Randy Richardson to grade it. I needed an 80% to pass the class. I would like to tell you I got a 100%, but I won't lie to you. I got an 81%. It was the most magnificent 81% in the history of the church! I knew the truth. I didn't get the 81% because I worked hard. I got an 81% because God was with me. Without God, there is no hope. Without God, I would have failed. I was reminded of a valuable lesson that evening. With God, there is always hope. Can I ask you a question?

How much time do you spend in Flagstaff, Maine? How much time do you spend wallowing in self-pity? How lost are you in a sea of hopelessness? The problem is not the situation. The problem is your lack of faith. With God, all things are possible. Never question it. God knows what is best. Martin Luther King Jr. once said, "*We must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope.*" And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**