

### **Freed**

She was really getting under his skin, working his last nerve we might say. She kept following them, kept shouting about who they were and what they were up to, “These people are servants of the Most High God! They are proclaiming a way of salvation to you!”<sup>1</sup> We’ve spent the past few weeks getting to know some of the less familiar faces in the book of Acts: Stephen, Barnabas, Lydia, and now we meet a slave girl and a jailer. We aren’t told their names. Of course they have names, but for some reason the writer of Acts feels no need to tell us what they are. Instead we know them for what they do. She is a fortune-teller of sorts, who makes a lot of money for her owners. He is a jailer, in charge of the place where Paul and Silas are sent after they enrage the slave woman’s owners by freeing her and rendering her worthless in their eyes. And at some point in the text, they are bound, prisoners in a way, as are Paul and Silas.

She quickly disappears off-stage. Once Paul calls the spirit out of her, we hear nothing more from her, just that her owners want payback for their loss of income. She only matters to them when she could make them a quick buck. Now that her gift has left her, she is no longer of any use to them. I wish we knew her name. I wish we knew what happened to her. So many scholars celebrate her being freed from her owners, her being liberated from this spirit that holds her captive. I want to celebrate, too, but I worry about her. I worry that though she has been freed from this one entrapment she is still just a throwaway, just another nobody who has nowhere to go, nowhere to be now that she is no longer generating a profit. I want to believe she is truly free now, but I cannot be sure she is because nothing in the text tells me it is so.

But then there is the jailer. His story is a bit more complete, a bit more fleshed out. We gather that he takes his job very seriously, that he wants to do it well. He wants to please his masters, the ones who hold his life and his livelihood in their hands. The Greek goes to great lengths to underscore just how thoroughly he locks up his prisoners. It is not simply a matter of locking the door; instead the text tells us, “He threw them into the innermost cell and secured their feet in stocks.”<sup>2</sup> Everything is secure, locked up and pinned down, or as

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 16:17, CEB

<sup>2</sup> Acts 16:24, CEB

secure, locked up and pinned down as he can make them. Once the earthquake hits, we realize just how vulnerable the jailer is. Yes, he holds the keys to the prisoners' freedom, but he himself is not free. He is only of value to the empire as long as he does the empire's work, as long as he holds these others in check. When they are suddenly free, we see just how bound he actually is. And he does, too. He knows that his life is of little value to those who want the troublesome missionaries locked down and shut out from turning the world on its head. The empire can find another jailer. They can find another body to do the job. He is replaceable in their book. He is stuck. He is doomed. And he knows it. He sees no other way out, and he falls at Paul's and Silas's feet and begs, "What must I do to be rescued?"<sup>3</sup> His job won't save him. His bosses certainly won't either. He seems to think these free-in-a-different-way prisoners might be able to help him out.

They tell him, of course: "Believe in Jesus Christ, and you will be free." Other translations read, "Believe on Jesus Christ." Either way, they encourage him to put his trust not in the power plays of the lords of the empire but to build his life on the one true Lord of all, the Risen Christ, the One no empire can contain or defeat. And he does. And it changes him. He is no longer simply the jailer but a freed and forgiven child of God who understands himself first and foremost as a freed and forgiven child of God. He goes from eking out a living to having a life. He still works the same job it seems, but it does not work on him the way it once did. And he goes from locking them in stocks to cleaning their wounds, from beating them with rods to welcoming them to his table.

Maya Moore has changed, too. Until this past winter, she had been all about basketball for as long as she could remember. Since she discovered basketball at the age of 3, she has been a shining star. She played for championship teams at UConn. She is now a superstar with the Minnesota Lynx and has been named the WNBA's Rookie of the Year and later the MVP. And yet, she walked away on a self-described sabbatical in February, because basketball, what she does is no longer enough. It is no longer the entirety of who she is:

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<sup>3</sup> Acts 16:30, CEB

She is answering what she says is a call from God. For most of her life, others have defined her: ‘the Invincible Queen’ and ‘the Perfect Superstar.’ Now she believes that God wants her to step away from the fray and consider what is truly important.<sup>4</sup>

In a way, she is stepping away due to burnout. The WNBA does not pay as much as the NBA, so Moore plays year round in international leagues as well. But her sabbatical is not just a stepping away. It is a stepping toward, a stepping in. Moore is hoping to help free Jonathan Irons from prison. She is convinced that Irons—who is now 39--was wrongfully convicted at the age of 18, for a crime he supposedly committed at 16. The evidence was shaky. He was questioned without an attorney or a guardian. Irons makes no claims that he is a perfect citizen; he had several misdemeanors on his record when he wound up in “the wrong neighborhood at the wrong time—in the wrong era” in January 1997 when a burglar broke in to a home and shot the homeowner in a predominantly white suburb of St. Louis.<sup>5</sup> Moore first became aware of his case when her godfather, a pillar in the community started examining Irons’s case after getting to know him through a prison ministry at their church Moore and her family think of Irons as family. They refer to him as Big J.:

She was shocked by the bare-bones facts. Irons was a poor African-American teenager who had been tried as an adult and convicted by an all-white jury. The crime was violent and involved a gun, but no weapon was found. No blood evidence, no footprints and no fingerprints tied Irons to the crime. His 50-year sentence was handed down at a trial that ended when he was 18 — Moore’s age [at the time].<sup>6</sup>

And now she is using her influence and her resources to see if she can help. And Irons is deeply grateful. He refers to Moore as “pure light” and as “a lifesaver who gives him hope.”<sup>7</sup>

Moore seems lighter these days, even as she awaits news of whether a judge will reopen Irons’s case. She sings in her church choir, spends time with her family, and serves in other ways in her community. She is no longer defined by her sport, by her job. Instead she is living into a larger calling, a deeper identity. Now free, she is working to help someone else be free as well. She has been saved. She has been rescued, and she sees

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<sup>4</sup> Kurt Streeter, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/30/sports/maya-moore-wnba-quit.html>

<sup>5</sup> Streeter

<sup>6</sup> Streeter

<sup>7</sup> Streeter

Irons as a sibling and wants to tend to his wounds and help him find new life. And she is looking forward to welcoming him home, into her home where they can break bread and play another round of checkers like they did when she visited him in prison as a teenager twelve years ago.

Like Lydia, the jailer responds to his baptism, his being claimed as Christ's own by opening his home and tending to his prisoners' wounds. He understands that his new found freedom releases him from the fear of the empire and opens him to a life marked not by chains but by a table, not by fear but by generous hospitality, not by inflicting harm but by tending to wounds. Moore also understands that that is what her newfound freedom means. She is a child of the church, but her faith seems to have changed her in recent months. In 2016, following the deaths of Philando Castile and Alton Sterling, along with the shooting deaths of five police officers in Dallas, Moore could no longer remain silent. She says she found her voice and sensed a call to speak out for criminal justice reform. Moore's faith has been working in and on her, freeing her from fear of what others would say or what her future holds; her faith has freed her to work to free others.

We have spent the past week celebrating freedom, but our freedom in Christ goes far beyond anything listed in the Bill of Rights. Freedom in Christ is not something to be clutched or hoarded. Freedom in Christ is not contained by prison walls or restricted by national borders. Freedom in Christ is not in short supply, nor is it simply a frame of mind or a nice idea. Freedom in Christ does not permit us to sit silently by when any of God's children are in chains. Freedom in Christ abounds when it is shared and scattered.

Today we gather around the table. This table is not simply a place to gather with friends. It is a place to remember what our Savior suffered to free us from anything and everything that would bind us; it is a place to look forward to that heavenly banquet when we will gather with all of God's beloved ones from the farthest reaches and across the ages; and it is a place where we are nourished for the work of freedom now, the holy work of helping every single one of God's beloved children know what it is to be rescued, to be saved, to be free.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.