

In the movie, *The Shawshank Redemption*, Tim Robbins plays Andy Dufrense, a banker wrongly convicted of murder. Andy is incarcerated in Shawshank prison during the 1950s and 60s. Shawshank is presided over by a tyrannical and brutal warden.

As the only innocent man in the whole place, Andy has a certain internal sense of freedom that is mystifying to those around him. Yet, at times, it has a profound effect on them.

At one point, Andy is called into the warden's office to pick up a shipment of records that has been sent for the prison library. While the guard is using the restroom, Andy does something he's not supposed to do.

He selects a disc from Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro* and puts it on the turntable. He then patches it into the prison PA system. All of a sudden, out of nowhere, the sounds of two women singing the "Letter Duet" comes forth from every speaker in the entire prison. All of the prisoners are entranced by the sound. As the camera pans over all of their transfixed faces, the narrator, Morgan Freeman says,

"I have no idea to this day what those two Italian ladies were singing about. Truth is, I don't want to know. Some things are best left unsaid. I'd like to think they were singing about something so beautiful, it can't be expressed in words, and makes your heart ache because of it. I tell you, those voices soared higher and farther than anybody in a gray place dares to dream. It was like some beautiful bird flapped into our drab little cage and made those walls dissolve away, and for the briefest of moments, every last man in Shawshank felt free."

One of the great themes of *The Shawshank Redemption* is that sometimes those who seem to be free are not free at all. And sometimes, those who seem to have lost their freedom are truly free.

Our reading from Acts is all about the meaning of freedom. True freedom. A quick word about our setting. Last week, a few verses earlier in Acts ch16, we read that Paul and his companions had just arrived in Greece. They were bringing the Gospel to the continent of Europe for the very first time. At the end of our reading last week, we heard that they made their first European convert: Lydia, a wealthy business woman dealing in purple cloth, who finances Paul's stay in Philippi.

Yet, right after Lydia, the next person we encounter in Acts is at the opposite end of the socioeconomic scale from Lydia. This morning, we hear that Paul and his companions meet a slave girl.

And not only that, Acts says she has a "spirit of divination;" literally a "snake spirit." In other words, the people believe that she is a soothsayer, a mouthpiece for the god Apollo. These days, we would probably say something different about her. These days we'd probably diagnose her as being schizophrenic. So not only is this girl a slave of her owners, she is also a slave to her mental incapacity, the "spirit" who keeps her mind in bondage.

The slave girl follows Paul and Silas around for days and days. All the time she keeps shouting, "These men are servants of the Most High God." Over a period of days this must have gotten very annoying. So eventually Paul turns and heals her in the name of Jesus Christ. The slave girl is freed from the forces that have enslaved her mind. She enjoys true freedom.

But, then we hear that the girl's owners are furious. They've been making quite a bit of money off of her. Their fortune teller no longer tells fortunes. Their cash flow is going to take a dive. Consequently, they're really upset with Paul.

There is sad irony here. The owners of the slave girl who has been freed from her mental bonds are themselves slaves. They are enslaved to their overwhelming desire for profit. They are so beholden to their own economic selfishness, that it doesn't matter to them whether they're making money off a girl's suffering, just as long as they ARE making money. It's ironic. The slave girl is now free. The slave owners are still in bondage.

And so, they drag Paul and Silas before the magistrates. Paul and Silas are beaten. Then they are jailed. Again, a sad irony. The power of Jesus has freed a girl from bondage, and as a result, two of his servants are given chains of their own.

We might expect Paul and Silas to be utterly demoralized. These men are imprisoned behind locked doors, with their legs in stocks. They're sitting in the innermost cell in the middle of the night. The cell was probably very dark, almost pitch black. Yet, we're told that they pray. And more than that, they sing. They sing hymns of joy and praise to God. They offer prayer. They're having a jail house revival. Though their bodies are locked up, their spirits are free.

That's a very impressive kind of freedom. It's a freedom that defies the sometimes brutal powers of the world. That's a spiritual freedom that transcends mere physical freedom. Paul and Silas are saying by their actions, 'You can lock us up. You can chain our legs. But you can't have our spirits. Those belong to God. And because of that, we're free.'

And then suddenly, there is an earthquake. It shakes open the doors of the prison and shakes loose the shackles on the prisoners' legs. Spiritual freedom is transformed into physical freedom. Yet, Paul and Silas don't run away.

When the jailer comes to check on his prisoners, he looks at the open doors and thinks that the prisoners have escaped. He pulls out his sword to commit suicide. Again, this is ironic. The one whose job is to keep others in chains is himself a slave of his job. And he thinks the only way out is suicide. The lesson is, iron bars do not necessarily make a prison. Having the key does not necessarily make you free.

But, before the jailer can fall on his sword, Paul stops him. 'Wait a second. We're still here. We haven't escaped.' The jailer doesn't say, 'Hey, you morons should have gotten out while you had the chance.'"

No. Instead, the jailer is overwhelmed by the true freedom Paul and Silas exhibit. He knows power when he sees it. He is so overcome by their confidence and joy even in the midst of adversity, that he asks, "What must I do to be saved?"

The answer is, "Believe in Jesus Christ." And the jailer does. The spiritually free prisoners bring freedom to the jailer who has been spiritually enslaved. And he is baptized that very night, along with his entire family.

In Philippi that day, things are turned upside down. The ones who appear to be free are really slaves of various forces. The ones who appear to be enslaved and imprisoned are truly free. Paul and Silas could have been afraid. They had been beaten. They were imprisoned. They might be killed. But instead, they live in the freedom of Christ's resurrection.

Yes, they might be killed. But even death had lost its fearful power over them. Not only did that allow them to live in freedom. It also meant that their example was strong enough to change the lives of their jailer and his family. Paul and Silas' freedom led all of them to freedom as well.

In Antioch, a few chapters earlier in Acts, Paul had told the people, "Through Jesus, everyone who believes is set free from all those things from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses."

Those words apply almost as well to us. Through Jesus, we are set free from all those things that the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution cannot free us from. Through Jesus, we are set free from all those things that the accumulation of wealth and power and possessions cannot free us from.

True and ultimate freedom can never derive from anything created by human beings. Only God can give us true freedom. But it requires us to recognize and acknowledge the ways we are enslaved.

Addictions are rampant in our society. There is a strong cultural message that we need to earn more, buy more, and own more. There is a strong message that we need to try to be perfect parents, or perfect children. There is a constant pressure to achieve and succeed. If we get caught up in these things, are we really free?

Or is there a different kind of freedom? Is there a deeper kind of freedom? Like the slave girl in Philippi, can we experience new life in Christ Jesus? Like Paul and Silas, can we bask in the freedom that Jesus brings, and sing with joy even while our legs are chained? Like the jailer, can we turn from our old way of doing business, and begin, BEGIN to live in a new way, believing and trusting in the Lord?

"If the Son makes you free," Jesus says, "you shall be free indeed." May we be open to the true freedom he brings.