**Sermon 2/24/19**

**Acts 16:11-40**

With a touch of theatrics, the Indianapolis judge shook his head very slowly back

          and forth, as his clerk read off John Erwin's offenses from a red record book.

He had skipped school too many times to count.

He had stolen numerous petty items,

          like flashlight batteries, pens and candy bars, only to discard them.

He had stolen bicycles, ridden them to the junkyard, and destroyed them.

Most recently, 12-year-old John had joined a gang of young toughs

             and threatened his foster parents with a .22 rifle.

The judge leaned forward and announced:

"Young man, I do not know how any one boy can be as mean as they say you are.

        But I am convinced you will never change.

        I am going to send you to a Manual Labor Institute for correction.

       And I predict you will spend most of your life in institutions."

Three decades later the Judge's prophecy had been partially fulfilled.

John Erwin had spent over 25 years in a large, notorious institution –

        Chicago's Cook County Jail.

But not as an inmate.

The judge was mostly wrong.           John did change.            Remarkably.

During a stint in the army, Erwin met a family who adopted him,

           determined to show him the same love they had shown their own children.

The defenses he had built up in a childhood of violence and sexual abuse slowly melted. He experienced God's love and forgiveness, and he became a new person.

As a free man determined to help set others free,

        he founded and led the PACE institute,

        one of America's most successful prison rehabilitation programs.

Then he joined the staff of Charles Colson's Prison Fellowship.

When asked how he has been so effective in the failure littered field of prison work,

Erwin replied: "Maybe it is because I have been behind bars, like these prisoners.

Most of them also came from miserable homes and were abused by their parents.

        I understand what makes life so hard for them.

        And my story gives them hope.

        I don't give up on people.

       If God can change me, he can change them too."

Converts like John Erwin often make the best crusaders.

Former alcoholics can convince others of the dangers of excessive drinking.

Those who have fought to get free of drugs, show others it can make a difference.

Those who have broken the gambling habit, show it can be done.

And when the book of Acts introduces the most effective Christian missionary

           of all time, he turns out to be a former bounty hunter of Christians.

How did a Jewish sect become the largest Gentile religion?

The answers trace back to the remarkable career of Paul, apostle to the Gentiles.

Paul, formerly called Saul, made his first appearance in the eighth chapter of Acts,

          assisting at the brutal stoning of Stephen.

Later, he led a gang of persecutors on a violent campaign against Christian believers.

But then came a miraculous turnabout on the road to Damascus. He encounter Jesus.

Other Christians, knowing Paul's old reputation,

        were initially skeptical about his conversion.

But he soon proved to be as fiery and intense in preaching Christ,

          as he had been in working against him.

In this morning's reading, we discover Paul in three separate, and very different,

          encounters with unbelievers, and the difference he makes in their lives.

Paul and Silas went to the city of Philippi.

They went out to a place of prayer and sat down and spoke to the women

         who had gathered there.

Lydia was already a worshiper of God.

But when she listened to Paul tell about Jesus, she and her household were baptized.

She became a wonderful example of Christian hospitality

            as she urged Paul and Silas to come and stay at her house.

One day, they met a slave girl who was possessed by an evil spirit.

She kept following Paul crying out in a loud voice.

She kept doing this for many days, until Paul, very much annoyed,

            turned and ordered the evil spirit to come out of her.

Unfortunately, her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone,

and they seized Paul and Silas.

The crowd joined in attacking them.

They were stripped of their clothing and beaten with rods.

After a severe flogging they were thrown into prison.

Paul and Silas, found themselves bleeding from open wounds, beaten with rods,

          in a rat infested prison, with their feet in the stocks.

The prison was a dark and wretched place,

          filled with pain and despair, with little hope, certainly no joy.

Yet, about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God.

And the other prisoners all heard them, and were listening to them.

Soon the prison walls echoed with hymns and songs of praise,

      a strange sound in that grim place.

The other prisoners had heard the commotion, the curses, and the command

        that the two men be securely fastened.

Word soon spread that they had been beaten and were now in the stocks.

Many of them would know what that was like.

They would expect to hear blasphemies from that isolation hole in the inner prison.

Instead to their astonishment they heard hymns.

Then suddenly there was an earthquake,

          so violent the foundations of the prison were shaken.

Immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened.

When the jailer saw the prison doors wide open he drew his sword

        and was about to kill himself, since he supposed the prisoners had escaped.

The only other option was torture and death for his failure to guard the prisoners.

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

Calling for lights the jailor rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas.

Then the night took a strange turn.

The jailor asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

A jailor does not fall down trembling before prisoners.

A jailor does not look to prisoners to be saved.

A jailor does not – ever – take prisoners out of the prison and to his home.

A jailor does not feed prisoners.

A jailor does not wash the wounds of prisoners.

And yet, in some way, this jailor wanted more than simply to stay alive another day.

He was seeking more.

And so, this jailor did all these things which a jailor does not do.

Once there was a man who was fishing beside a river.

Suddenly, he fell into the water.

He was not very good at swimming but he found a log to hold onto.

The log could barely keep him afloat but he held on tightly for dear life.

He floated down the river. But unfortunately,

     soon heard the noise of the river falling over a large waterfall.

The man could hear the roar of the water and see the mist from the falls.

Suddenly, just before he reached the edge,

        a man appeared on the side of the river and threw him a rope.

The fisherman had two options.

First, he could hold tightly to his log and go over the falls to a certain death.

Second, he could let go of the log, and grab the rope, and be pulled to the shore.

This is the same choice we face with believing in Jesus.

First, we can hold tightly to our old life and hope that we will stay afloat.

But the reality is, we are headed toward destruction.

Or, we can let go of whatever gives us false hope,

          and reach out to Jesus for salvation.

Because the jailor wanted more, he reached out for more,

          and he, as well as his whole family were save in a whole new way.

What must we do to be saved?

Simply believe in Jesus Christ.

Through Paul and the other disciples, the story of Jesus spread throughout the world.

And we continued to spread the good news of Jesus, wherever we can.

In any way we can.

AMEN