

## Christian Jailbreaks

Acts 16:25-40

This morning, in honour of the remarkable story of Paul and Silas, in the central part of the jail in Philippi, their backs beaten with rods, their feet in stocks, singing hymns, when an earthquake comes and they stay put in jail to baptise the jailer and his household, being released the next day...

In honour of that story, of miraculous liberation,  
Of chain breaking, stock shattering, bar bending earthquakes  
Of prison warder conversion,  
I would like to, this morning, go on a brief history of Christian Jailbreaking  
The divine escapology  
Because God loves a jailbreak.

It may well be that God's favourite film may not be  
The Greatest Story Ever Told  
The Ten Commandments  
Or Jesus of Montreal  
Or maybe is the Great Escape.

## Brother Yun

On the evening of the 4<sup>th</sup> May 1997, Brother Yun, a 39 year old Chinese evangelist, had reached the lowest point of his life.

Six weeks earlier he had attempted to escape from another prison, by jumping out of a window. Not only had his legs been broken by this, but further broken by the repeated beatings he had received. For 6 weeks he had been unable to walk, carried to from vicious interrogations, by another Christian Prisoner, Brother Xun.

He complained to God, did Brother Yun, but that morning he had a dream, a vision, through a verse from Hebrews 10:35 – "So do not throw away your confidence, it will be richly rewarded."

He still felt despair but read a number of more verses, including from Jeremiah where it said "I will save you from the hands of the wicked, and redeem you from the grasp of the cruel" – Jeremiah 15:21

At that point he had a powerful vision that he was at home with his wife Deling who was looking after him, a powerful sense overcame him that he was to escape. This was crazy, no one had ever attempted such a thing from Zengzhou maximum security prison.

And it was crazy to attempt because the punishment for attempting such a thing would be execution.

But Yun believed this was the right thing to do.

So without any planning, he began to act.

First of all he had to get out of his cell. That part was very surprisingly easy. He banged on the door of the cell and told the guard he needed to go to the toilet, at that he was let out alongside Brother Xun who had to carry him.

Out the cell.

But now the problem was that between him on the third floor and the ground floor, there were three iron gates, each with two guards guarding them.

Now to get from third floor to second floor, there was an iron gate, which had two guards either side, but just at that moment Brother Mesheng another Christian brother was coming in, the gate was opened and the guard at that moment received a telephone call.

The second gate was sometimes left open, because it was considered less of a risk, but there was always a guard on it, on the second floor. However at that point Brother Yun heard a voice saying "The God of Peter is with you", and just at that moment the guard seemed to be blinded and Brother Yun walked past.

Now the gate from 1<sup>st</sup> floor to ground... at the bottom of the ground floor there was a main iron gate which was almost always guarded, but this was mysteriously ajar.

Then into the courtyard, which was full of guards, but the guards seemed not to see him, and then mysteriously the main gate of the whole prison was also mysteriously ajar and without any gates, so Brother Yun walked out into the street of Zengzhou maximum security prison. But even then he was unsure of how to escape, when a yellow taxi came up to him on the pavement and the driver said "Can I give you a lift?"

So he got a lift just as a torrential downpour began and that meant any scent was going to be washed away. It was then also that Yun noticed that he had been walking.

Brother Yun arrived at the house of some Christians whom he knew, they can't be named for security purposes, but when he got there the daughter of the house said Brother Yun we have been praying for you for a week and fasting, and today we were told to prepare a room for you, and that is how he escaped.

So that's a story of a jailbreak with all the miracles of Acts, probably the late spring of the year 57,

So miraculous jailbreaks happened on 5<sup>th</sup> May 57

And the 5<sup>th</sup> May 1997.

It's the Hollywood jailbreak, it's the Acts jailbreak, and they keep happening  
Because God loves to set the prisoners free.

## Tomas Cisek

The second story concerns a pastor in the Czech Reformed Church called Tomas Cisek.

On the 1<sup>st</sup> January 1977 he and a number of other pastors and politicians and thinkers signed a document protesting against the authoritarian regime of the Czech Government. It was called Charter 77.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s Tomas was on the radar of the security forces. He and his wife were continually harassed, threatened with the removal of their preaching certificate by the government, friends were encouraged to stay away from them, they were unable to speak in their own home because they discovered bugs in the attic, every few weeks he was pulled in for questioning.

Unlike Brother Yun, Tomas Cisek was never physically beaten. Instead he was ground down, isolated, separated, he had seeds of doubt sown into him, he was criticised by the government – in many of the interrogations he was just simply exhausted but also felt the protection of God.

The biggest threat from the authorities was that he would be put in prison for 3-5 years, his income was slashed, he had to struggle to survive.

This is different kind of persecution from Brother Yun, and it was a different kind of escape.

Through contacts who included John Miller in Scotland and Ian Hulbert's uncle Alastair, Tomas Cisek was allowed to leave the Czech Republic – he and his family settled in Glasgow and he became a minister in the Church of Scotland, his daughter Lucy getting married to Alan who is the current Clerk of Perth Presbytery.

If brother Yun's escape was dramatic, Tomas Cisek's shows a different kind of story, its less defined, longer lasting, less "miraculous" but still really really tough, but God using ordinary means to bring about escape from prison.

## The Deck of a ship

The final story concerns my friend Marjory MacLean, minister of Hope Church in Orkney, who in 2016 served as a Chaplain on HMS Enterprise, 12 miles off the coast of Libya – what she calls the single most emotionally difficult of her own ministry;

This was in the middle of her part of the migrant rescue efforts of the European Union.

Dawn each day, a spotter plane from the nearby Italian Aircraft carrier would find the horrible overcrowded rubber boats, that had been pushed off from the beaches in the Bay of Tripoli under cover of darkness, with just only enough diesel to make it into international waters – you see that smugglers had factored the rescue of the Royal Navy into their business plan. It was rescue by us or certain death.

But even in the boats we rescued, not everyone survived. On that unforgettable day, 700 migrants eventually squeezed onto our quarter deck, probably crushed in the lower layer of humanity crammed too deep, onto one of the inadequate inflatable craft. And tragically each of the two was travelling with family members who were distraught.

The sister of one of these ladies was an East African woman. French speaking and wearing a wooden cross round her neck, her only possession. Space was found for her in the makeshift first-aid station. Marjory was called for to pray for her, and Marjory found a young catholic lieutenant who had a degree in French.

We must have looked ridiculous in their full white paper PPE long before everyone wore such clothing during the pandemic. And kneeling on the hot uncomfortable metal deck, on front of the woman I held her hands in mine, I extemporised a prayer, with my young colleague at my shoulder translating as best he could.

And then suddenly, the sorrowing figure took a breath and began to pray, desolate lamenting prayer, desolate fast prayer, too fast for the young people to keep up with translation, too fast, he began to panic, and she waved him away – it didn't matter to me what she was saying, she was praying now her own sorrow and need and I only needed to keep holding her hands.

When you are seen, you don't need to be translated.

And that too is a jailbreak. A release, into being human in the place where we are.

Yes, she was escaping from persecution, and on the deck of a British Royal Naval Frigate, she had escaped, her body had escaped  
But her soul was still trapped like a bird in a cage  
And something about Marjory had allowed her to sing.

It strikes me that in these stories of jail breaks, there are four characters

There are the escapees – the ones who flee  
There are the ones who didn't make it,  
There are the jailers  
And there are the accompaniers

And I think there is a word for all four

To the prisoners, all of us, ours is a liberative God, always pushing at the door of the jail

To the ones who do not make it, there is a hope of a next life, there has to be, when all are free.

To the jailers, yes, we are sometimes jailers too, I love that in this story, this is a story about how the jailer is saved.

Think about prisons. The prison is the thing which confines, which is an utter waste, which cannot be escaped, and which can be escaped.

Think about the prisoners – where are we trapped

it seems that in Philippi the story that the accompanier is missing, but in the other story the accompaniers are a key part.

Think about accompaniers – in the story of Marjory, she is the accompanier, in the story of Brother Yun, it is Brother Xun, it is the Taxi driver, it is the family who prayed, in Tomas Bisek it was Fiona and Alastair Hulbert

And the accompanier, in the Marjory on the deck of the boat, it is the one who watches, the one who gives hope, the one who enters into the risk; in in some of the Acts story the accompanier is an angel.

And think about the jailer, this is frightening to think – jailers are good people who have to make a compromise, to look after their own safety, they are part of the system that says unless you do what we say, you'll become a prisoner too. They too are frightened. But they keep the others inside. Let us ask a disturbing question – when are we a jailer.

I said that there was no accompanier in the Philippi story,  
But there is one

Acts 16:27-34

<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." <sup>32</sup> Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. <sup>33</sup> At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his household were baptized. <sup>34</sup> The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole household.

So the prisoners – you escape

The accompaniers – you do the work of the angels

The jailers – have faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, you will be saved

And let us finish with some words from the Gospel

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me

Because he has anointed me

To bring good news to the poor

To proclaim release to those who are in jail”

God loves it, loves it, loves it

To set the prisoners free

Have faith in him

This is the Gospel

AMEN