

Prayer & Worship Night

City Church Slide

In 1986, Robert Munsch wrote the book "I Love You Forever"

It has now sold over 15,000,000 copies.

In case you don't know what I'm talking about, maybe the cover photo will jog your memory.

SHOW COVER

Lets just admit it up front. This story can be a little creepy. As evidenced by **these pictures. 2 Pics SAME SLIDE**

I think it's the eyes in the first picture, and the gloves in the second picture that make this bedroom look like its about to be a crime scene. What exactly is she going to do with that Baseball bat?

But turns out, this momma really loves her son.

See, this book is about how the unconditional love of a mother for her son... transforms him into a man who unconditionally loves *HIS* kids.

Remember, the Mom would sing her son to sleep with the song "I love you forever" no matter how old he got.

Robert Munsch wrote this book after he and his wife had 2 babies that were born dead.

He wrote it to express the deep longing he had to see his kids grow up...the longing every parent has to outlive their kids. He didn't get that...and so this book is the overflow of the broken heart of a Father. When you read "I Love You Forever"...Its not a book about being a helicopter parent...it's a book that hates death...and deeply aches for new life.

There's a picture in this book, that's stayed with me for a long time. **Its this one.**

You know what's happening at this page of the story?

The little boy from the story is now a man. A father.

And his mother, that all his life has sung to him the song "I'll Love you Forever"... she has just died.

And when he gets home after seeing his mom for the last time,

He pauses outside his new born baby's room, and the book says, "He stood a long time at the top of the stairs."

I remember when I first read this book to my oldest son a couple of decades ago after becoming a father. I stopped at this page....and just stared at this picture.

This is the picture of a man standing between "life and death".
This is the picture of a man who wants so badly to break down and weep because of death....he wants to stop....yet at the same time he wants to go into that room and embrace his new life.

Here's the thing. Eventually, probably multiple times in your life, you are going to find yourself at the top of the stairs.

You are going to find yourself in between the broken past and the hopeful future.

In between death and life.

Something you depend on to make life worth living is going to collapse right under your feet....

...and right there...you have a choice. You have to figure out what to do.

On one hand, You can ignore death. Be tough. Pull yourself up by the bootstraps. Move on. Pretend like its not there. But that's not dealing with the reality of death.

On the other hand, you can wallow in it. And pretend there is not really a way forward. But that ignores the future. It dismisses everyone that depends on you. Its self-centered and hopeless.

So what do you do?

When you are at the top of the stairs...how do you keep going?

Look at that picture. When you're there...at the top of the stairs...something has to go through your head. Some thought. Some mantra. Some belief. What is it?

Today, I'm going to show you the lives of 3 people that handled these moments in different ways. My guess is, every person in this room is going to identify with one of these people.

TITLE SLIDE- "The Top of the Stairs: The Life & Death Decision Facing Us All"- Acts 16:9-34

And let me just lay all my cards on the table.

I want you to walk out of here today having trusted Jesus with every one of your Top of the Stairs moments. The ones in the past- and the ones coming in the future.

At the end of this service, I'm going to invite you to make the most important decision of your life- to follow Jesus- and be then next Sunday- we're gonna all celebrate it with you at your baptism.

EVERYBODY TAP CARD

Ok, now that you know why to do, let me show you these folks in these Top of the Stairs moments

Acts 16:9-34

During the night Paul had a vision in which a Macedonian man was standing and pleading with him, "Cross over to Macedonia and help us! " 10 After he had seen the vision, we immediately made efforts to set out for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

11 From Troas we put out to sea and sailed straight for Samothrace, the next day to Neapolis, 12 and from there to Philippi, a Roman colony and a leading city of the district of Macedonia. We stayed in that city for several days. 13 On the Sabbath day we went outside the city gate by the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and spoke to the women gathered there. 14 A God-fearing woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, was listening. The Lord opened her heart to respond to what Paul was saying. 15 After she and her household were baptized, she urged us, "If you consider me a believer in the Lord, come and stay at my house." And she persuaded us.

16 Once, as we were on our way to prayer, a slave girl met us who had a spirit by which she predicted the future. She made a large profit for her owners by fortune-telling. 17 As she followed Paul and us she cried out, "These men, who are proclaiming to you a way of salvation, are the servants of the Most High God." 18 She did this for many days.

Paul was greatly annoyed. Turning to the spirit, he said, "I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her! " And it came out right away.

19 When her owners realized that their hope of profit was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to the authorities. 20 Bringing them before the chief magistrates, they said, "These men are seriously disturbing our city. They are Jews 21 and are promoting customs that are not legal for us as Romans to adopt or practice." 22 The crowd joined in the attack against them, and the chief magistrates stripped off their clothes and ordered them to be beaten with rods. 23 After they had severely flogged them, they threw them in jail, ordering the jailer to guard them carefully. 24 Receiving such an order, he put them into the inner prison and secured their feet in the stocks.

25 About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. 26 Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the jail were shaken, and immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone's chains came loose. 27 When the jailer woke up and saw the doors of the prison standing open, he drew his sword and was going to kill himself, since he thought the prisoners had escaped.

28 But Paul called out in a loud voice, "Don't harm yourself, because we're all here! "

29 The jailer called for lights, rushed in, and fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. 30 He escorted them out and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved? "

31 They said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved — you and your household." 32 And they spoke the word of the Lord to him along with everyone in his house. 33 He took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds. Right away he and all his family were baptized. 34 He brought them into his house, set a meal before them, and rejoiced because he had come to believe in God with his entire household.

Transition: Today, very simply, I want you to see that it doesn't matter who you are...or who you think you are...you need the resurrected Jesus.

1) Jesus doesn't have a type. If you're human, you need him.

- The 3 people in this passage are very different.
- **First, they are all different races.**
 - Lydia is from Thyatira. She's Asian.
 - Then there is a slave girl. She's Greek. ...we know this because she is influenced by the worship of a Greek god.
 - And the Jailer is Roman.
- **Second, they are all different social classes**
 - Lydia is **rich**.
 - She is a seller of purple goods.
 - Purple was the color of royalty and symbolized a higher wealthier class of people.
 - She sold beautiful fabric to rich beautiful people.
 - She is like the owner of a high end boutique
- The slave girl is **oppressed and poor**.
 - She is being used to make money for these slave owners.
 - Most likely she is a slave because she has been abandoned by her family, maybe even sold into slavery by her parents for financial gain. In fact, by the term that's used to describe her, she is most likely between 10-14 years old. She's a kid.
 - If Lydia is the established up and coming high-end boutique owner, this slave girl is the abandoned & homeless child begging on the street.
- Then there is this jailer. The jailer is your average, hard-working family man.
- He's Probably a retired soldier. And he's probably got a good bit of life in his rear view mirror.

- The Roman government provided civil service jobs like this to their x-military as part of their retirement plan.
- So, the Jailer is not nearly as well-off as Lydia, or as poor and oppressed as the slave girl...He's a middle class retired guy who's seen a lot of life and is probably a little cynical about it.
- Now look. There is something about this gospel message that Paul and Silas are preaching in Macedonia that is deeply meaningful, in fact, life-altering, to 3 different people, of 3 different races, and 3 different social classes.
- They are male and female. They are children, folks in the middle of their career, and folks in the last stage of their career. They are rich, poor, and middle class.
- They are both business owners, and owned by their business.
- They are high culture, middle class, and on the fringes of society.
- Yet, somehow, every single one of these folks finds something irresistible in this gospel message. The message that Jesus died and resurrected.
- So what is it? What exactly is it about this gospel that transcends age, gender, race, culture, and socioeconomic classes?
- Listen, I know that some of you have this idea that Jesus is for a certain type of people. But you didn't get that idea from the Bible. You may have gotten that idea from a church you attended, from your family, or maybe just from observing people on Facebook that post bible verses...
- **But you didn't get that idea from Jesus.**
- In fact, if you look at Jesus' life, you'll find him eating with dignitaries and sitting with children.
- You'll find him talking to well respected army generals...and then turn around and he's at a watering hole sharing a drink with a woman that's been labeled a home-wrecker.
- Male and Female. Old and Young. Jew and Gentile. Rich and Poor.
- Jesus loved and ministered to all of them.
- So should it really surprise you that the message of his death and resurrection isn't a white, middle-class Southern American religion?

- **In fact, a common prayer for a Jewish man at this time would have been to say, "Thank you God, that I was not born a Woman, a Gentile, or a slave."**
- ...and that is exactly who the Gospel message transforms in this passage.
- If you are attracted to Xianity simply because you think its what good, southern, white middle class people believe...you aren't a Xian at all.
- Likewise, if you've rejected the gospel of Jesus, and his church, because somehow you've gotten the idea that its "Not for you"...I'd like to invite you today to reconsider...

Transition: Because if there is one thing the Bible makes very clear, no matter who you are...you need the resurrected Jesus Christ.

2) You need Jesus because you have no answer for death.

- There is something that I know about you this morning.
- Every single person in this room, wants to avoid the very thing that is most sure to happen in your life.
- Death.
- Right now, whether you choose to believe or not, you are falling apart.
- You are wasting away.
- Your heart has a finite number of beats....and then...nothing. It stops. And so do you.
- All of us know that we are physically going to die, but do you know, or you do you care that you're soul is dying.
- See, God didn't make you to die. He made you to live.
- Death is not natural. Its unnatural.
- And every part of you that is trying to fight off physical death... every part of you that craves life and hates death...every part of you that despises cancer, hates funerals, and weeps over the loss of a child...every part of you that ignores going to the doctor when you find a lump...or feel a pain in a funny spot...because of the news you think you'll get.

- ...there's a deeper part of you, your soul, that is crying out for something more than a temporary physical fix.
- There's a part of your soul that wants to be eternal. That wants to count.
- There's a part of your soul that, no matter how much you try to stuff it away...longs to love and be loved forever.
- I want to show you this in these three characters.
- First Lydia...the purple seller.
- **Acts 16:13-14a (end at "of God")**
- You see where it says that Lydia is a "worshipper of God"?
- This isn't just a random description...this is an official term.
- Whenever a non-Jew was called a God worshipper...or God-fearer, it meant that they had abandon their pagan worship practices and begun to read the Jewish Bible. The Old Testament in our Bible now.
- So Paul comes into town, and there is no Jewish presence the city of Phillipi. The city is functioning completely under the typical worship of the many Greco-Roman gods of the time.
- So, he goes outside the city, and he finds this little women's bible study and prayer group.
- Now, here's the question you have to ask about Lydia right here?
- Why would a cosmopolitan business woman who rubs elbows with the upper crust of society, who has every reason to be confident about who she is and what she's accomplished...why in the world would she abandon the popular religion and worldview of her day...to go outside the city...and pray to this seemingly "Jewish" god?
- I think the answer is in **v 14b (start at "The LORD")**
- You see where it says that the LORD opened her heart to "pay attention". That phrase in the original Greek language its written in means that she was deeply attracted to this gospel message. Its not just that she listened and took notes...she was mesmerized by what Paul told her about Jesus' death and resurrection.
- Here's why.
- Lydia's tasted everything that promises life.
- She's tasted money. She's lived among the elite.
- And it wasn't good enough.

- It didn't satisfy that craving in her soul to love and be loved forever.
- In fact, as one of the culturally elite, she would have been very familiar with the 2 most popular pagan philosophies of her time.
- **Look at Paul's conversation with them in Acts 17:18**
- The Epicureans and the Stoics. See, Paul went to these philosophers, just like he went to Lydia, and he preached the gospel...Jesus' death and his resurrection.
- And this was a foreign idea to these guys. So they wanted to hear more...because the gospel of Jesus didn't fit
The 2 main philosophies about life and death at this time...the one's Lydia would have been very familiar with.
- And, by the way...these are still two of the most popular ways to "handle" death.
- First, The Stoics tell you that you shouldn't love anything too much.
- That you have to detach your heart from these deep feelings of love, and hope, and peace...or else you'll end up terribly disappointed.
- **In fact, one of the most famous Stoic philosophers said**
 - **"If you kiss your child, or your wife, say that you only kiss things which are human, and thus you will not be disturbed if either of them dies." – Epictetus** <http://classics.mit.edu/Epictetus/epicench.html>
- You know what that means? The Stoics solve death by telling themselves that your feelings aren't good. They aren't real. That's the way you face the top of the stairs.
- If a Stoic wrote the book "I love you forever" when the mom picked up the baby she *wouldn't* sing "I love you forever"...she'd sing "You are going to die...I only have an animal instinct to care for you...but this feeling isn't real...so don't get too attached...you are only a clump of cells....you exist only by random chance...and if my brain didn't trick me into caring for you...you'd be no more important to me than my next meal."
- That's a disturbing lullaby...but if you're going to adopt a secular view of life and death...this is exactly where it leads.
- I mean, the stoics were the ultimate Debbie Downers.

- They said, "don't love too much...or else you'll be crushed when the death hits" If you love too much...you'll never make it past the top of the stairs. The only way to keep going...is to constantly tell yourself... "I don't really love this person...My brain is just tricking me."
- See, if you answer death like a stoic...your soul has no hope of loving forever...because you can't even believe love is a real thing.
- **Acts 17:18**
- And then on the other end of the scale, you had these Epicureans.
- And the Epicureans said, "Look when you die...that's all she wrote.
- There is nothing eternal. So, why not enjoy yourself while you're here."
- The epicureans were famous for saying, "Eat, Drink, and be Merry, for tomorrow we die!"
- **Acts 16:14-15**
- But see, Lydia has a household. She has a family. She has people she loves...and she simply cannot live with Stoic idea that her love for them isn't real.
- And she's tasted high life....Everything the epicureans have offered... Eat Drink and Be Merry...but still...she feels empty.
- And neither of these philosophies gave any sort of future hope. They all made you into just a clump of cells with firing neurons in your brain. A machine.
- But, Before Paul tells her about Jesus' resurrection, she hasn't really found any hope in these Jewish Scriptures either. Just another religion.
- A list of rules that she knows she won't be able to keep. And that's deflating too.
- **So the reason she lights up, the reason this "gospel" takes her by surprise and she immediately wants to turn her home into a church, is because in the gospel....in the death and resurrection of Jesus...she finds everything she's been looking for.**
- All the beauty she searched for in purple cloth, and riches and business success...she finds in Jesus.

- All the frustration she found in reading this Old Testament law...it was immediately relieved in the death and resurrection of Jesus.
- Does that sound like you?
- Have you had the money, the toys, the vacations, the house in the right neighborhood ...or maybe you're still shooting for it?
- Have you tried religion...And its left you flat?
- Have you been exhausted TRYING to read the Bible but only finding a list of rules to follow and a message you can't seem to connect to your actual life?
- If that's you...there is something in the death and resurrection of Jesus that you have been looking for. There is an answer to your disappointment.

Mini-Transition)

- Then there's the slave girl.
- **V 16**
- She's been rejected by her family. No one is rocking her to sleep and saying "I love you forever."
- All she has is these men who use her to make money.
- In fact, when it says that she has a "spirit of divination" that literally reads "the spirit of the Python"
- The Python was the symbol of the greek god Apollo.
- See, at some point, this girl was at her lowest...she needed help...and she went to Apollo's temple perhaps to get this ability to tell the future...because she had to make money somehow.
- And it backfired. Its being used against her to enslave her.
- **V 17-18**
- And ironically, she is following around Paul and Silas saying that they are the ones who are enslaved...they are the servants to this God they're preaching.
- She doesn't need the same thing Lydia does. She's never tasted the good life. She doesn't really have anyone to love, or anyone that loves her. She needs an act of power...an act of power that frees her from a life of being used and abused.

- ...and she finds it in the name of Jesus Christ. In his death and resurrection.
- Some of you may be like that today. Embracing some kind of spirituality, but not the God of the Bible. And perhaps that has even made you hostile toward the God of the Bible and anyone who would proclaim to you that "HE is the way to salvation".
- Maybe you've been hurt and used...even by people that claim they love you. Someone has abandoned you. And you hate God for it.
- **But I'm telling you,** the power you need to overcome all of that is in Jesus' death and resurrection.

Mini-transition) And then there's the jailer. He's different. **V 23-24**

- See, Lydia and the Slave Girl both had come to situations where they are searching. They were interested in spiritual ideas.
- But this Jailer is pretty apathetic. He's just trying to keep his job to go home to his family at night. Probably a little cynical. He's old enough to reach retirement- he's seen religions come and go in Rome.
- He's not really thinking about anything that Paul and Silas are saying.
- To him, Paul and Silas are just orders. If he keeps them, he keeps his job. He feeds his family, he gets to go on.
- He's not a bad person. He loves his family and he works hard at what he does. And he doesn't really think about death...or God...or eternity.
- **v 25-26**
- But then, the world he thought he had control of was turned upside down.
- An earthquake.
- **v 27**
- And suddenly, this seemingly cool calm and collected prison guard turns suicidal.
- See, if these prisoners escape...he loses everything. His job. His family. He may even become a prisoner himself.
- He might be executed.

- The truth about this jailer is there is something he fears even more than physical death.
- That's why he's willing to kill himself rather than face it.
- IN this moment. Right here. He finds himself at the Top of the Stairs.
- When he sees that empty jail cell, he sees his own empty life.
- Listen, There's a lot of us here today, that are like this jailer.
- In fact, you don't really bother much with spiritual stuff.
- And you think you're free. Free of all that waste of time religious stuff.
- But everyone is serving something. Everyone is a slave to something. Everyone is controlled by something.
- You want to know how to find out?
- Look at the top of the stairs.
- Look at the moment when you lose everything you thought was important.
- **V 19**
- Do you react like the slave girl's owners? When they saw that the girl no longer had this spirit that made them money...it says, "they lost their hope of gain"...and so in anger, they lashed out at Paul and Silas.
- What makes you angry? What makes you lash out?

Back to 2)

- What is that you could lose that would put you at the Top of the stairs?
- What would have you draw your sword, because you can't figure out how to go on?
- What if you lost your money? What if you lost your job? Your marriage? What if your kids disowned you? What if your friends abandoned you?
- What if you found out that all the people that respected you were lying to you?
- What is your hope of gain?
- If you lost it...Would it crush you?
- See whatever that person or thing is...you'll always be a slave to it.
- And You'll go to work to try to get it...and then you'll go to work to keep it...all the while, you'll be apathetic to the only God who can really love you forever.

- Your money, your status, your reputation, your sex life, your good looks, ...none of those things can last forever. Death will take them all away. ...and your eternal soul will still want love forever.
- So here's what we have to ask...what changes? In this jailer. In Lydia, in this slave girl.
- What is it about Jesus' death and resurrection that changes Lydia from a cultural high roller to house-church planter.
- What is it about Jesus' name that frees this slave girl from her spiritual bondage and from her physical slavery?
- What is it about this gospel that Paul and Silas sing about in prison that compels this Prison Guard to ask "HOW CAN I BE SAVED?"
- **[PAUSE & QUIET] Well, you can kind of see it in Paul.**
- Do you know who Paul was?
- His name used to be Saul.
- He used to round Xians up to be tortured and killed.
- He was a religious zealot, who believed he kept the law perfectly.
- He had the respect of his peers...and his enemies feared him.
- Then on a road trip to kill Xians, the resurrected Jesus appeared before him and said, "Saul, why are hurting me? Don't you know I'm going to use you to tell the world who I am. And I'm not going to do it through power, or position, or charisma. I'm going to do it through your pain, and your suffering."
- And isn't that exactly what happens here?
- **V 22**
- When they free the slave girl in Jesus' name...they are beaten and thrown into prison.
- **V 28**
- And when he is rightfully freed, by the power of God, innocent of the charges this Roman government has brought against him...when those prison doors opened after that earthquake...he has every right in the world to run...to be free.
- But he stays...because he knows... he's already is free.
- He stays because he loves the jailer that tortured him.
- He stays because he's not afraid of death...and he knows that that jailer is.
- And did you notice this?
- So do all the other people in that jail.

- None of them run! Why?
- Because when Paul was at the Top of the Stairs. When Paul was in that moment in Prison staring death in the face...he wasn't suicidal... he sang songs.
- **V 25**
- He sang hymns of gratitude to God, even though his flesh was opened...as he bled...he sang with a heart of gratitude...and whatever it was he sang about. Whatever it was he thanked God for...it changed all the other prisoners...so much so, that when they could have run for their lives...they stayed for the sake of this jailer.

So, get this picture: Here stands Paul, who has been wrongfully imprisoned and tortured, and on his right hand is freedom--God-provided freedom. And on his left, this jailer, there's a jailer who had probably been the one to beat him the night before. • And Paul turns his back on his freedom to go back in for the jailer. • It WAS AN ACT OF INCREDIBLE, RADICAL GENEROSITY •

V 29-30

29 The jailer called for lights, rushed in, and fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. 30 He escorted them out and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved? "

The jailer seems to be more shaken by Paul and Silas' joy and their radical generosity than he had been by the earthquake!

And he asks the most important question of his life- "What must I do to be saved?"

Transition: This is the question I hope you're asking right now...And I want you to know—

3) Jesus is your only salvation at the top of the stairs.

- **Three very different people- but at the end of the day we aren't old, young, rich, poor, black, white, Republican, Democrat...at the end of the day we're all sinners in need of a savior.**
- The deepest longing of your soul is to love and be loved forever..
- But, the story of humanity is that we choose to pursue something other than the God that made us and loves us as our salvation. We try to find our own answer to death and disappointment in anything other than God. That is the heart of what the Bible calls sin. God-replacing.
- In fact, that's where death comes from.
- That idolatry...that sin...is what broke the world. Its what started to unwind everything.
- Its high treason against the King of the World.
- And the penalty for your sin...is death. Eternal separation from God and all the truth, goodness, and beauty that accompany him.
- But God when you were helpless, rich in mercy and grace, in an act of radical generosity toward you- he became human in Jesus and like Paul, when he was totally innocent, he didn't run away from us at our lowest...he sacrificed. But he didn't just risk his life...he gave it.
- For every rule we broke, for all our refusal to worship God, Jesus took the punishment...he took the curse. He went into the prison of death for us.
- He was mocked, whipped, beaten, hung on a cross...
- And that was my death. It was your death. Taken away from us... The innocent for the guilty.
- **TOP OF THE STAIRS PIC**
- **Imagine this is the way Jesus went to the cross-**
- **AND- Its a pic right before he busted out of the tomb.**

- He reversed the curse. When Jesus walked out of the tomb...he was allowing you to turn back to God. So that God no longer sees the way you've abandoned and forgotten him...instead, when he looks at you...he sees a son or a daughter...and he says "I love you forever".
- You know why Lydia was so attracted to this gospel?
- You know why she was so eager to follow Jesus?
- Because of Grace.
- In Jesus, Lydia didn't find a list of religious rules to follow...she found a God who obeyed the rules FOR HER...and then credited that obedience to her account. ...She found in Jesus a God who left his riches and entered our poverty...because he loves us forever.
- And on the cross...they mocked him with a crown of thorns...and a purple robe.
- Lydia's purple cloth. All the hope of gain she had in riches...all the ways she rejected God to find her meaning in money...was on Jesus as he died.
- Jesus was beaten until he was unrecognizable...He became ugly so Lydia could be beautiful in God's sight.
- In Jesus- she found a God who finally loved her without her doing a thing.
- **You know what the slave girl found in Jesus?**
- She found a God who who though he controlled the universe, became a peasant.
- And like the slave girl, those closest to Jesus abandoned him. His friend sold him for 30 pieces of silver. And when he needed help, no one came to his aid, though he was innocent.
- And he did it all because Jesus knows and sees this slave girl. We don't know her name, but Jesus does. And when he died- he was dying in her place so she could finally be loved forever.
- In spite of her past...in spite of her shame.

CONCLUSION: Acts 16:30-31

- You know, when the jailer asked Paul...what must I do to be saved...
- Isn't his answer interesting?
- He doesn't say, "Here's the rules."
- Instead...he just says BELIEVE.
- Believe this story.
- Believe that God has forgiven you in Jesus. Believe that he resurrected...and you will too.

I want to talk for a second to those that identify with that slave girl. Maybe this girl describes where you are: There are things about Christianity that attract you, but you feel a barrier between you and God:

Addictions you can't shake
A spiral of bad relationship choices that have left you feeling trapped. You don't know how you got here and don't know how to get out.

Shame over past decisions. You think, 'You know, I'm surprised God doesn't strike me dead just walking in here. If other people could see the real me, they wouldn't even want me here.'

Maybe you just found out you're unexpectedly pregnant.

Or maybe your wife just left you.

Or maybe you feel like you're simply UNABLE to follow Jesus.

The GOSPEL MESSAGE is not 'GO and CHANGE' and then God will accept you; it's that God accepts you as you are; and if you'll let him come in, he'll change and heal you.

What Paul offered to this slave girl, I offer to you this morning: FREEDOM. The good news that God loves and accepts you as you are and if you let him, HE will change you. You just have to make the decision at the top of the stairs to take the step towards life...instead of turning around to head back into death.

Hear me- A church is not like a waiting room for a job interview where people try out for Jesus' team; it's like the waiting area for the Emergency Room, where you bring all your brokenness and shame to Jesus, and you find out he is ready to ACCEPT and heal you.

Only difference is- in the ER waiting room- you have to wait until they are ready for you. Jesus is always ready...he's waiting on you to realize you're ready for him.

Look- maybe you thought you might find what you're looking for in the sorority or in the frat parties or the job or the perfect body or the boyfriend or the marriage or the kids or the drugs--but you've spent your whole life loving things that don't love you back.

What you're looking for is found in the resurrection of Jesus; it's found in the forgiveness and eternal life he offers as a free gift; it's found in the God who loves you forever.

That's why the early church father AUGUSTINE said: "Our hearts will always be restless until they find their rest in you."

The message of Acts 16 is that the risen Jesus meets every kind of person in every kind of place-- with a love that won't give up on you.

I love that word "believe." In Greek, it's the Greek word pistis, and it means more than just mental assent. It literally means "to put your weight on."

Think about a chair: Faith is SITTING DOWN.

But there has to come a point where you accept Christ for yourself. (SIT DOWN) Where you receive Christ on your own.

A relationship with Jesus is not something you can be born into, or something you even grow into over your life.

It's like getting married. I got to know Keva for a long time, but there was a glorious day one May when I stood before an altar and I said those two life-defining words to her: "I do;" and she said "I do" back to me.

And in that moment, all my earthly possessions became hers and all of hers became mine...all of her blessings became mine...and all of my curses became hers.

In the same way, salvation is when you say "I do" to Jesus. And then all that is yours becomes his... (your sin, your shame, condemnation); all that is HIS becomes yours (righteousness, relationship with a Heavenly Father, freedom).

2000 years ago Jesus said "I do" to you. Have you ever officially said "I do" to him?

Have you ever officially sat down in the chair?

Top of Stairs pic

what are you gonna do at the top of the stairs? Will you go back to the life you know- or will you step out in faith and embrace Jesus who loves you forever.

TALK THROUGH RESPONSE- Baptism Sunday Slide