

Singing
Sermon for the 3rd Sunday after Easter (Kantate)
Sermon Text: Acts 16:23-34



And when they had inflicted many blows upon [Paul and Silas], they threw them into prison, ordering the jailer to keep them safely. ²⁴Having received this order, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks. ²⁵About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them, ²⁶and suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken. And immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone's bonds were unfastened. ²⁷When the jailer woke and saw that the prison doors were open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped. ²⁸But Paul cried with a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." ²⁹And the jailer called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas. ³⁰Then he brought them out and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" ³¹And they said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." ³²And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. ³³And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds; and he was baptized at once, he and all his family. ³⁴Then he brought them up into his house and set food before them. And he rejoiced along with his entire household that he had believed in God.

Philipp, my son with Down syndrome, likes to sing. Not only does he love to sing, but he sings a lot and also very loudly, so loudly that sometimes you can't hear your own voice... and have to robustly sing against Philipp. These are not good conditions for a harmonious duet! I have tried a few times to teach Philipp to sing quietly. My attempts were all hopelessly unsuccessful... because Philipp likes to sing... and he likes to sing loudly! Actually, that's a good thing because the Bible is full of songs about singing. Again and again, people in the Bible sang about what they knew of God. I don't think that they always sang quietly and in perfect harmony. This can be seen in the Old Testament believers who composed Psalms, as well as in the stories of the New Testament. Jesus most likely also liked to sing hymns of praise! I wonder if Jesus could sing well? Or if He sang loudly? Today, we have set aside a Sunday specifically for singing and we are reminded of a special story from the book of Acts about singing.

In Philippi, Paul and Silas first spoke about the Gospel with some women. These women came to believe in Jesus and were the first Christians in Europe. Soon thereafter, Paul drove out a spirit of divination from a slave girl. Because the business of fortune-telling was abruptly ended, the slave girl's owners were extremely angry, and they had Paul and Silas thrown in jail. After being beaten, the two were sent to a cell block. At this point, they were at the end of their ropes. Even the proclaiming of the Gospel was hindered. It is very likely that the lives of the apostles could be crossed out with the stroke of a pen. And it's precisely at this point where everything seems hopeless that these servants of God begin to sing. They sing and praise God! They sing so loudly that everyone in the prison could hear their song. I wonder what makes the apostles sing like that in this situation, when everything appears to be so hopelessly lost. I think that we can learn from the singing of the apostles how we can praise God in our worship services as well as in our entire lives. In some congregations that I know, the singing is very quiet and timid. This could be because so few people come to church. The situation here seems to be hopeless because the current church-goers haven't managed to interest this new generation in faith or in God. But I know of other congregations that don't have the courage to sing loudly. In Iran, there are now several house churches. Such churches can only be organized under the most secret of conditions and in absolute secrecy. Loud singing could leak through into their neighbor's house and could be fatal for all involved. Naturally, there

are also church services that look very differently. In our church here in Leipzig, we have the organ with its magnificent old pipes and singing can now be heard through the whole neighborhood with songs of God and His deeds... And then there is the final song and the final hymn. I remember several situations where family and loved ones came before God in prayer and songs of praise in the last hour of life and gave the life of a loved one into God's hands. Oh, how wonderful it is to be carried by songs and prayers into the hands of God! All these songs that are sung throughout the entire world all have a single origin and source. This source was already the same for the apostles. Paul and Silas, who were in chains and prison, could look beyond their own situation. They could recognize that next to the power of the government and next to the pain of the beatings, God's hand was over their life and their work. Like the Old Testament psalmists had already sung: "Lord, You have been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever You had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting You are God." (Psalm 90:1-2) What an amazing and surprising example Paul and Silas have for us! In the midst of suffering and tribulation, these two make it clear to us who truly has all of life in His hands. Paul and Silas don't do this out of boldness, but they do it out of the real and genuine salvation that they themselves have experienced in their own lives through Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ Himself went to His death and always knew that God would carry Him through His whole life. Ultimately, Jesus rose victorious over death, the devil, and sin! And that is exactly what we can sing and pray about with one another at any time of day and at any hour. Therefore, our inadequate singing should not be a disadvantage at all. Paul and Silas certainly couldn't have delivered a more perfect operatic duet. No, beaten and tortured as they were, their praying and singing were probably partly muttering, partly crying or shouting out. But the singing was accompanied by a living faith in the God who raises the dead from their graves and gives us victory through Christ. And it is precisely this source that we can always draw on and be reminded of. If there is another conflict about modern or old music, Persian or German music, or whatever it may be, then we should always take a good look at ourselves and ask the question: What is all of this actually about? Certainly not just about our own personal taste, but most definitely about God's work that still happens among us here today. Jesus has saved me. He is still in my life today. That's what I want to sing about!

In Paul and Silas' prison, their little melody finally spread. Firstly, with the loud crash of God's own hand, which tore the prison doors open with a mighty earthquake. Secondly, the whole event must have led to loud shouts of joy from the prisoners. Maybe a prisoner or two even sang with Paul and Silas. But there was great singing when the jailer of Philippi was rescued. The jailer actually first thought that all the prisoners had run away. That would have been the end of his profession and maybe even the end of the jailer's life. When he made the astounding discovery that all the prisoners were still there, it moved him so deeply that he asked about the ultimate salvation.

How quickly can it happen that a person is torn from everyday life and can suddenly see the clear outlines of heaven and eternity before him. And then that this person asks the right questions about it all: *Sirs, what must I do to be saved?* And this jailer also had the right people there to answer his question: *Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.* And so it turned into a great party at the jailer's house! Paul and Silas were freed from physical captivity. The jailer, who moments before wanted to commit suicide, learned that he doesn't need to do that because all the prisoners were still there. And the last is still the greatest! A man and his family are set free from sin, death, and the devil! And all of this started with a simple song! O Lord! Let us sing! With harps! With instruments, in all languages. Let us sing of God's great deeds! Amen.