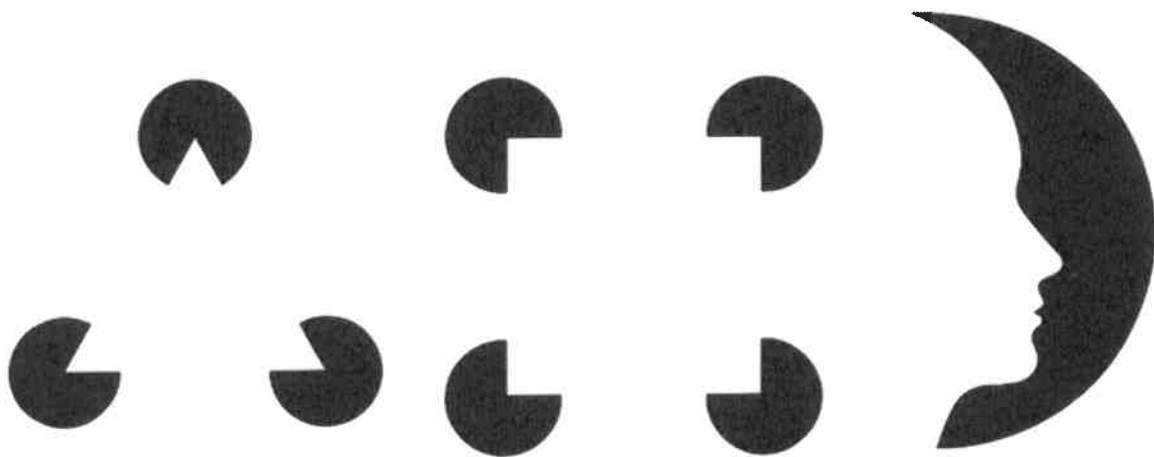


First Presbyterian Church
Acts 16:16-36, “Four Strange Shapes”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 4/26/2026

Sometimes when we read the Bible, we miss the forest for the trees.
We get so caught up in details and individual moments
that we don't recognize the big thing that all these smaller elements
contribute to.

And this matters greatly, because the individual pieces
are oftentimes relatively unimportant,
but the big thing, the larger pattern of what God is up to,
is very important.

Here are some visual examples of that:



If you were to purely describe the *individual* black shapes in each image,
you could say many accurate but ultimately uninteresting things
about the individual black shapes.

Pie shapes of a certain radius, with pieces cut out at a certain angle,
they are rotated by 33 degrees or 45 degrees
moving the missing piece on different sides.

With the third image, we could describe the black shape
as a smooth crescent on one side with undulating curves on the other side
at various thicknesses.

We could say the black shape looks like a talon
or a very poorly constructed boomerang.

But these images are examples from Gestalt psychology,
which studies how our brains identify patterns.

This is why the implied invisible shape within the black shapes
is much more intriguing to us.

When we take the whole thing together,
what sticks out is the triangle, the square, and the profiled face.

I use this illustration because the principle is obvious in these examples.

But when we're reading the Bible I often find that the individual shapes
are much more interesting and compelling on their own.

So I learn about them and study them and ask questions
about each one before moving on to the next.

But what is the bigger shape these individual stories reveals?

Whose profile is found in the empty space between them?

When reading the Bible, we might not ever notice the implied shape
within the stories we read
unless we take time to pay attention to it.

So let's pay attention to each of the strange shaped pieces we find in Acts 16,
but let's also keep our eyes about for the shape they make together.

Setting: Philippi, large Greek speaking city in the North Eastern part of Greece,
a region known as Macedonia.

There were Jews there, there's a synagogue,
but most people worshipped idols and they were entirely
unfamiliar with the message
that the Apostle Paul was bringing.

This is where we find these four unusual vignettes, or "strange shapes."

First, there's a girl with a spirit which "predicted the future."

Now, I have strong feelings about this, in that I do not believe
she was actually telling the future by virtue of an evil spirit.

Why? First, because only God knows the future,
not the forces that are opposed to God.
And second, because we know that people have engaged
in this kind of “fortune telling” scheme to make money in every generation
including the present day.
You don’t have to actually foretell the future
to take people’s money – you just have to make the feel
like it’s real.

But I do accept that she had a spirit within her that was making / facilitating
these predictions, and that she was being exploited
by the two men who enslaved her.
If you stop to picture this whole arrangement and the powers at work,
it is incredibly disturbing.
Speaking of disturbing, this girl was highly disturbing
whenever Paul and Silas would walk by.
Imagine her yelling out, **“These men are servants of the Most High God,
who are telling you the way to be saved!”**
Again and again and again...

With exasperation, Paul finally decides to cast the spirit out of this girl
so that she will leave them alone!

That’s the first strange shape in this chapter.

The second strange shape arrives in the form of the angry men who have lost
their means of income and the city magistrates
who want to keep them happy.

This is like two pimps who have had their prostitute taken away from them,
but then the city council jumps in advocate on their behalf.
The whole town gets stirred up against Paul and Silas,
they are beaten and flogged and imprisoned.

Taken on its own, we could say a lot here about the nature of Christ’s ministry
and its reception in the world, the message of Jesus that
as the world treated him, so the world will treat his disciples,
and so on.

But no time for that: The third strange shape of this passage
is the miraculous earthquake that frees Paul, Silas, and all the other prisoners
in the middle of the night.

This is another fascinating piece of the puzzle that could soak up a lot of attention
on its own. What kind of spirituality does it take to sing and pray out loud
when your back is bleeding and your feet are bound by stocks?
What kind of an earthquake releases the shackles
on people's arms or legs?

There's much we could study and learn from just in this portion,
but I resist the temptation.

Because fourth, there's the jailer who takes Paul and Silas into his home.
He feared that he would be killed if all the prisoners ran away,
but despite being freed, they stayed there.

And the jailer, in his own home, seeks the salvation that they have spoken of,
sang of, and prayed for. He and his entire household is baptized –
symbolizing the washing away of sins. And, that same evening,
he personally washes the wounds of Paul and Silas.

Those are the four shapes. The demon possessed slave girl,
the angry slaveholders and magistrates,
the earthquake in the middle of the night,
and the jailer who comes to faith.

Each one can be looked at individually,
but what shape appears when you put them all together?
Liberation.

The picture that emerges from this collection of stories
is that when the Spirit of God is at work in a community,
liberation arrives in every facet of life.
Liberation from evil spirits. Liberation from oppressive economic conditions.
Liberation from injustice. And liberation from sin
that leads to new life in Christ.

It's not just *one* kind of liberation that the Spirit brings,
it's holistic liberation that touches everyone in the community.
And people who are invested in keeping people locked up under their thumb
aren't going to like this liberation very much.

Holistic liberation is the signature of what it looks like
when the resurrection life of Christ is revealed in our world.

This signature goes all the way back to the very first day of Jesus' public ministry.
You may know that Luke wrote both the Gospel of Luke
and the Book of Acts.

And he wrote them so that they were
in conversation with each other.

So back in Luke 4, we read that
**when Jesus was about to begin his ministry he went to Nazareth,
where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day
he went into the synagogue, as was his custom.
He stood up to read,¹⁷ and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him.**

Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

**¹⁸ "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.**

**He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free,**

¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down.

The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him.²¹

**He began by saying to them, "Today this scripture
is fulfilled in your hearing."**

Acts 16 reveals that the shape of Jesus' ministry
is also the shape of the church's ministry.

The things that were a sign of God's arrival through Jesus
are also a sign of God's arrival in the followers of Jesus.

So I wonder: are we open to God's liberation in every aspect of our community?

Or are there places where we benefit from oppressive economics?

Are there aspects of life where we indulge counterfeit
spiritual influence?

Are we hesitant to call the miraculous intervention of God a miracle
(because we think we know better)?

Are we ready to be reconciled to those who have wounded us,
to those who were our enemies? This is what liberation looks like
when we put all the strange shapes together.