

“Beaten Down, Locked Up, Set Free!”

Acts 16:16-34

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I am a native New Yorker. I live in the marketplace of desire. I have a good job but I am pulled in so many directions I don't know which way is up. I think I know what's real---there's a lot of people and advertisements tell me what's real. I grew up being taught what's real (achievement, success, a good mate, a good reputation, material comforts). I have these things now but why then, why do I feel so beaten down? Why am I locked into a job I have no passion for, a marriage that can't possibly meet all my needs, and a future that holds little promise of anything different?

Today I walk down into Times Square. I don't go here all that much, but there's something I want to see. A good friend told me this off-off Broadway play was worth seeing. “Very unnerving,” she said, “in a good way, that is.”

I make my way down 43rd Street. People are out in full force. It's chaotic. Tourists ogle. Cars honk. Jackhammers pulse out a loud rat a tat tat. Cars compete with pedestrians. It's a marketplace right here on the street. Giant electronic billboards pull me in with their mesmerizing neon. What are they selling? Another investment piece. Investment in what? I **am** getting cynical. “A lifestyle enhancement” along with a “lifestyle” price tag. Exactly what are these things going to do for me anyway?

Foreigners hawk purses, leather goods, sunglasses. Name brand stuff at cut rate prices. Gucci. Vuarnet. Ray Ban. You name it, you can find it, but you can be sure it's not the real thing. It really looks like it, it has all the logos and the certificates of authenticity, but you know it's not real. It's too cheap to be real. Like they say, ‘you get what you pay for.’

What's that? There's a crazy woman shouting, see her over there? She's some sort of street artist. Wearing a silver bodysuit. She points to the street preacher perched on his usual box on his usual corner. She screams. “He is the one! He's going to tell you how to be saved.” She keeps it up. For what seems like hours. Men and women crowd around them with hungry eyes. Some egg them on. They wait for a fight to erupt. I can't even move along the street, so many people jostle each other. Finally the guy shouts back at her “Get away from me, you she-devil!” They are shouting at each other now. Will it come to blows?

The police rush in and take them both away. It's not a pretty sight. The cops are rough with both of them. I hear they book the guy for disturbing the peace and

they let the woman go. Disturbing the peace? That doesn't make a lot of sense, since she was the one screaming and he was the one with the Bible in his hand.

Somehow I manage to make it to the play. It **is** unnerving. "What is real?" it asks. "What's important?" "What saves you?"

I don't know. I don't like what bubbles up inside me. **I don't know.** And the fact that I don't know reminds me how trapped I am. I am 45 years old. I am supposed to know these things.

Meanwhile the street preacher guy spends the night in the clink along with winos and women of the street, next to punks and pimps. He is oddly out of place. He quietly sings to himself, all night long, one old hymn tune after another. *I Love to Tell the Story. What A Friend I Have in Jesus. Abide with Me.* Midnight finds him mouthing the Lord's Prayer when all hell breaks loose in the precinct building.

A huge water pipe has broken---How?---Why?---There's water everywhere! The halls and the jail are flooded! In the confusion, someone unlocks the cell doors! **That** wasn't supposed to happen! The water is rising fast! Winos and women, pimps and punks scramble out, but not the preacher man. He steps up on the bench and watches the water swirl around his feet, singing all the while. *Washed in the Water. Amazing Grace.*

I am the deputy police officer in charge of all this mess! Whoever lost their head and set these low-lives free---whoever it was, it's going to cost me my job! Heads are going to roll and one of 'em is going to be mine! I may as well jump off the Brooklyn Bridge. My work is my life. My life is over.

But this guy, singing in the corner. What's his story? What's up with him? How can he be so calm? And why is he still here? I seriously do not know what I am gonna do. My life is over. (Singing continues. . .)

"Come here, brother, all is not lost."

"How did he know?"

"Come over here. . ."

"Is this some kind of trap?"

"No trap. Just gotta sing. How can I keep from singing?"

"There's something about you---you're weird, that's for sure, strange. But there's something good, too. You're so calm. How did you get to be this way? How can I get what you have?"

"Believe in God, put yourself in with Jesus, that's all it takes."

"That's all?"

“That’s all. Jesus is the Real Thing.”

This isn’t just a story of a jaded New Yorker or a desperate deputy. It’s your story and mine. We are all beaten down, locked in, confused about what is real and what is not. How can we not be? We hear things all the time that we are supposed to believe, then we find out they’re not true. Advertisers lie to us. Politicians lie to us. Company executives steal the public trust. We even lie to ourselves.

So many competing voices call out, “I’m the real thing! I am real! Believe in me! Trust me! Believe in my idea, my product, my service!”

Underneath this cacophony of voices, God silently waits. God waits, to gain entrance into our prisons. God waits, to unravel our confusion. God waits, to show us what is truly Real. The Real Thing wants to unlock the prison of our desires. The Real Thing wants to dig us out of the grave of self-fulfilling prophecies.

What must *I do* to be saved from all this? What must I do to be saved from my peculiar bondage? From my oppressive addiction, from my emptiness, from my boredom? From myself?

It’s not an “I do” that is needed. It’s an “I accept.” I accept the saving that is already offered. I accept the saving that is already promised. I accept the sacrifice that’s already been made. I want the Real Thing. The Real Thing! Not Coca Cola. The real Real Thing.

The Real Thing disrupts business as usual, upsets the status quo, drives us way out of our comfort zone, shakes us to the core, creates the unexpected, goes against the grain, throws us into places we’d rather not be.

But the Real Thing also gives courage and contentment, opens our eyes to new horizons, frees us from fear, converts and convicts us, creates us anew, unveils the unexpected, gives new life and hope, defies marketplace mentality, undoes the powers and principalities, invites us to sing and shout, captures our imagination, loosens our grip on things, opens our heart to possibilities, draws others into His embrace, frees us so we will never be captive again.

The Real Thing washes us free of our past, baptizes us into our future, feeds with the Bread of Hope and the Cup of Sweet Life. Taste and see how sweet the real Real Thing is. Sweeter even than the 16 teaspoons of sugar in a can of Coca Cola.

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What’s it going to take? We live in the marketplace of desire, but we also know the Desire for the Real Thing. We accept we cannot save ourselves. We give up trying to save ourselves with the usual suspects: money, power, achievement,

love, connections. We lay ourselves bare, allow ourselves to be seized instead by the REAL THING who longs to free us.

Things look pretty much the same on the surface, but inside something really big shifts. Like an earthquake, a seismic shift. Nothing is the same. Like a dam broken open. The inner landscape of our lives forever marked now, changed. The Real Thing is present with us and we know it. Like falling in love. We can't stop singing.

People look different. Possibilities, not obstacles. We see beyond others' pride or anger and we sense their hurt instead. We slow down, too. We listen more. Strangely, we get more accomplished. We are at peace.

Pain looks different, too. Something to be endured, yes, but also something to be accepted. A teacher, a tool, a lesson, there's something beyond our pain, our boredom, our discontent.

Things look different to us. We enjoy less stuff. We appreciate what we have. We get a big kick out of giving it away. We laugh at the advertisements and the false promises and we see them for what they are----just a shadow, just a flimsy facsimile of the Real Thing.

We don't need our old crutches anymore. Free from depending on "more." Free from filling ourselves up with food, wine, overwork, gambling, drugs, overspending, distractions.

What's it going to take? We accept. We accept and THEN because we accept, we respond. We are baptized. Washed in the water. We wade in the water. Along with others. We join a faith community. We serve. We wash others' hurts and bind their wounds. We feed them. We share what we know with those who don't yet 'get it'. We sing. We can't stop singing about the Real Thing.

God set us free no matter how imprisoned we may be.

I want people to release their hold on that which beats them down and lock them up (things that aren't real), to allow God to open their prison doors and release them to something more real than they can imagine.

By means of a narrative roughly paralleling the story in Acts but set into a modern day urban setting and using the metaphor of "the real thing" (aka coca cola).