

Top of the Stairs

How You Are Loved Forever

March 27, 2016 // Trevor Atwood // Acts 19 // Church GO

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. Let's just admit it up front. This story can be a little creepy. As evidenced by these pictures.

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 longs for new life.

There's a picture in this book, that's stayed with me for a long time. 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 11 years ago. 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 this 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. And let me just lay all my cards on the table.

I want you to walk out of here today believing that you cannot really face these top of the stairs moments...without deeply believing, in every part of your life, that Jesus Christ died in your place and rose from the grave.

And if that is anything other than the driving force behind every moment of your life...the Top of the Stairs moments will crush you.

If you see yourself as one of the 3 people I'm going to show you today, at the end of this service, I want you to pick up this card, write your name on it, and check the box that "I want to talk to someone about becoming a follower of Jesus and being baptized."...because this church wants to love and care for you...and walk with you as you follow Christ.

My goal is that by the end of this service, you walk out not only believing that Jesus died and resurrected, but knowing why that matters to you.

Acts 16:9-34

And a vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing there, urging him and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." And when Paul had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

So, setting sail from Troas, we made a direct voyage to Samothrace, and the following day to Neapolis, and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city some days. And on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to the riverside, where we supposed there was a place of prayer, and we sat down and spoke to the women who had come together. One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul. And after she was baptized, and her household as well, she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay." And she prevailed upon us.

As we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners much gain by fortune-telling. She followed Paul and us, crying out, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation." And this she kept doing for many days. Paul, having become greatly annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, "I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And it came out that very hour.

But when her owners saw that their hope of gain was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the rulers. And when they had brought them to the magistrates, they said, "These men are Jews, and they are disturbing our city. They advocate customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to accept or practice." The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates tore the garments off them and gave orders to beat them with rods. And when they had inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison, ordering the jailer to keep them safely. Having received this order, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks.

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them, and 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. When 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. But Paul cried with a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." And the jailer called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them out and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" And they said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds; and he was baptized at once, he and all his family. Then 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.

Today, very simply,

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 & drugged-up child prostitute.

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. See, the Roman government provided civil service jobs like this to their ex-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 just middle class.

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, race, culture, and socioeconomic backgrounds?

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 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 Christianity simply because you think it's what good, southern, white middle class people believe...you aren't a Christian at all. Likewise, if you've rejected the gospel of Jesus, and his church, because somehow you've gotten the idea that it's "Not for you"...I'd like to invite you today to reconsider...

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 do you care that your soul is dying. See, God didn't make you to die. He made you to live. Death is not natural. It's 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. You see where it says that Lydia is a "worshiper 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 abandoned 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 in the city of Philippi. 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 verse 14b. You see where it says that the LORD opened her heart to "pay attention". That phrase in the original Greek language is written in a way that means that she was deeply attracted to this gospel message. It's 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.

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...he preached Easter. 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 ones 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

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 nursery rhyme...but if you are 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.

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!" 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. 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' death and resurrection. 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 good life...or maybe you're still shooting for it? Have you tried religion...And it's 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.

Then there's the slave girl. 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. 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 are 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. And then there's the jailer. He's different.

See, Lydia and the Slave Girl both had come to situations where they 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. 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. But then, the world he thought he had control of was turned upside down. An earthquake. 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. See, 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.

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? 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?"

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 Christians 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. In fact he was a little like Lydia. He was the upper crust of society. But he was a little like the slave girl...he hated Christians and their message about Jesus' resurrection...so he followed them around and mocked them. and he was also a little like the Jailer...until Jesus showed up and shook his world down...he thought life was pretty good.

Then on a road trip to kill Christians, 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? When they free the slave girl in Jesus' name...they are beaten and thrown into prison. 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 staring death in the face...he wasn't suicidal...he sang songs.

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. I don't know exactly what they sang, but you can be sure it was all about Jesus' death and resurrection. See, for Lydia, the slave girl, the jailer, Paul...and for you...

3) Jesus is your hope at the top of the stairs.

The deepest longing of your soul is to love and be loved forever.

But, the story of humanity is that even though God created us and continues to love us... even in the darkest times...even at the top of the stairs...we choose to make our lives not about looking to him, not about loving him...but we make it about pursuing something else in his place. We try to find our own answer to death and disappointment in anything other than God.

In fact, that's where death comes from. That idolatry...that sin...is what broke the world. Its what started to unwind everything. But God, rich in mercy and grace, he put on flesh in Jesus Christ, 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. And then he rose from the grave. He defeated death. 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.

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 on the cross, His heavenly Father looked away as he cried "My God, where did you go?". But the father didn't look away because of Jesus' sin. But because of ours. And

because Jesus was separated from his Father, we could be brought close to the Father. We are adopted. We have a heavenly Father, who in the emptiness and the absence of love in our lives, because of Jesus...looks at us and says "I love you forever."

And he doesn't give us the spirit of fear and slavery, not a spirit of divination, like the slave girl had...but he gives the Holy Spirit. His own presence that testifies to us when we are at the top of the stairs... "Don't FORGET You are a child of God. And though it feels your world is falling apart...Remember...Death could not hold your big brother Jesus...and it cannot stop you." And of course, when Jesus overcame our sin...he overcame the effects of our sin. He overcame death. When Jesus resurrected, he was showing you that all his work on the cross, to buy you back, out of slavery, out of the inevitability of death...was accomplished.

From the cross Jesus said, "IT IS FINISHED." And now, death is short term...and life is eternal. Now, in Jesus, we can really love. Not like the Stoics. Because Jesus died in our place and resurrected, it means that when we kiss our children, when we say "I love you Forever"...we aren't just being sentimental...we can really mean it.

And unlike the Epicureans, we don't believe that your best life is now. So, like Paul, we can give our lives so others can live. We can suffer for the lives of others... Because we don't say "Eat Drink and Be Merry for tomorrow we die"...No...because of Jesus we can say "Eat drink and be merry, for yesterday we were dead." ...and when death comes. To those you love. When death comes...to you. Or when you lose something that hurts you to the core... When you find yourself at the top of the stairs...You can lift your head...look death in the eye and say, just like Paul did, you can say...

"Death is swallow up in victory."

"O death, where is your victory?"

O death, where is your sting?"

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. And do you notice how the jailer, and Lydia respond? They both went to their households...to their families...and to their community...and they told them about what Jesus had done...and they were baptized as a profession of their faith.

So that's how we'll end today. 2 simple questions. 1) Do you believe Jesus did everything necessary to bring you to God? 2) If so, will you follow him by showing others what he's done for you in baptism?