

**“Dramatic Baptism Stories”**  
**Acts 16:16–34**  
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**First Baptist Church, Raleigh**  
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All baptisms are dramatic in their own way, but some seem to be more dramatic at the time, or at least more emotional. The story behind two young people I baptized in Richmond, Virginia, in the 1990s made that experience pretty emotional. They were the children in a missionary family staying in our furlough residence. Dana got to know them right away because she was on the furlough residence committee. Having lived in church-owned property, she wanted to be an advocate for timely maintenance and care.

At the first meeting of the committee with the family, Dana discovered that the woman had taught English and French literature at Jefferson Community College in Louisville, Kentucky, while her husband was in seminary. Dana asked what years she had taught there, and when the woman said the late 1970s, Dana asked if she knew Kay Chapman who also taught English literature there at the time.

The woman said that Kay had been one of her closest friends. She threw a baby shower for her son Logan when he was born. She said she had noticed the name Chapman, but her memory of Kay was of a very bold personality who entered the classroom, throwing a scarf from her neck, and taking charge! “She couldn’t have been related to Chris, could she?” she said. “Oh,” said Dana, as only a daughter-in-law could say, “That was my mother-in-law.”

I ended up baptizing Logan, whose birth my mother had helped celebrate years before, along with his sister, Alexandra. Because of our shared history, and because my mother was no longer living, it was a dramatic day filled with much emotion for all of us.

The story we have read from Acts 16 presents another dramatic baptism story. As the story begins, Paul and Silas are in Philippi, sharing the gospel. They have just baptized a devout woman named

Lydia, along with everyone in her household. Now they are going to a place of prayer and they are being followed by a slave-girl who has a spirit of divination with which she is making her owners a great deal of money through fortunetelling.

As she follows Paul and Silas, she cries out repeatedly, “These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.” While the message seems supportive of their work, Paul is annoyed by the girl, perhaps because she is an instrument of another spirit, perhaps because he doesn’t think he needs her help, we don’t really know. All we know is that Paul removes the spirit, thus freeing the girl from its control but cutting off her owners’ source of income.

Needless to say, the owners are not happy. They bring Paul and Silas before the magistrates, saying they have disturbed the peace. “They are Jews, after all, they are not like us,” they say, “They have customs that Romans should not allow and Philippi is a Roman colony!” Technically speaking, it’s not clear what the formal charge is, other than that Paul and Silas come from a different culture and have different religious beliefs. The real issue is that these two outsiders have cost the owners income, but they don’t include this in the charges.

It may not seem like they have much of a case, but insiders with wealth and influence always have a case. So, Paul and Silas are publicly stripped and beaten with rods and then put in jail, the innermost cell, in fact, and their feet are put in stocks.

Around midnight, while Paul and Silas are praying and singing hymns to God, an earthquake shakes the prison and sets everyone free. When the jailer wakes up — apparently, he is a heavy sleeper — and realizes the jail cells are open, he assumes everyone has escaped, on his watch, and so he prepares to kill himself rather than face embarrassment. But Paul stops him, saying they are still there; they haven’t left.

The jailer is shocked at this reality, he realizes these are not ordinary criminals. Some force has freed them, yet they have not run away. “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” he asks from his knees, trembling in fear. Paul says he must believe in the Lord Jesus. The jailer washes their wounds, he is baptized, along with his entire family, without delay, and Paul and Silas share food with their newest converts.

It is a whirlwind of a story filled with great ups and downs for Paul and Silas. They go from the exhilaration of faithful ministry to the brutality of public torture and incarceration to the relief of deliverance all the way back to exhilaration — all in a day’s time and in the space of eighteen verses! But it is no less an emotional roller coaster for the jailer who begins just doing his job, then thinks his life is over, only to experience salvation and share it with his family. Thus, the baptisms that take place, and all that surrounds them, are filled with emotion for everyone involved. This is a dramatic day for all!

Reflecting on my experience in Richmond, as well as Paul and Silas’ in Philippi, we may feel like our baptism story is not very dramatic. While some people have dramatic conversion stories, after leaving destructive ways of life, for many of us who have been raised in the church, baptism seems like just one more small step on a long journey of learning about God and following Jesus. It’s what we do when we get to a certain age. We understand what the ritual means to a certain extent, and we are making our own faith decision, but it may not seem very dramatic. In fact, our primary desire may be to avoid drama, but while our life experiences vary, all baptismal stories are dramatic.

For one thing, it is *our* experience, *our* personal relationship with God, *our* faith, no one else’s. There is nothing more dramatic than that!

Then, we are opening our lives to God’s mercy and love. When Jesus is baptized, the Spirit descends on him like a dove and a voice says, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” It is an experience of affirmation and blessing unique to Jesus. And yet, in baptism, we also have an experience of blessing and affirmation. That too is pretty dramatic.

Finally, in baptism, we are doing a rare thing, proclaiming our faith in public, in front of the people who have nurtured and supported us, taught us and shown us what it means to follow Jesus.

Ali got emotional after Ian and Brittany’s wedding in April. Through the tears, she explained — her brother had expressed love for someone else out-loud in public. In baptism we express our love for God and Christ out-loud and in public. Even though our stories vary,

and every baptismal experience is different, expressing our faith cannot help but be dramatic!

In the end, what makes baptism dramatic is not a specific set of issues and realities. It's that it is our baptism, or that of our child or grandchild, our spouse or friend.

I know a lot of crazy baptism stories that are memorable — one where the minister spun around in a circle a woman being baptized in a river, because she was being chased by a water moccasin; one where a candidate slid down a muddy bank into the river, wiping out the minister on the way; one where the waders I was wearing sprung a leak while I was baptizing.

I have also seen in films or read about in books many memorable baptisms: Delmar in “O Brother, Where Art Thou?” who says he has been forgiven of all his sins, even knocking over that Piggly Wiggly in Yazoo; a young boy from a troubled family named Bevel in a Flannery O'Connor short story who is told that he counts, now that he has been baptized.

These stories are all memorable, but none is as memorable as my baptism, because it is my story.

I trust the same is true for you. I hope and pray the same is true for you. All baptismal stories are dramatic. It's not about whistles and bells nor voices and bright lights. It's about knowing deep down that we are loved just as we are and realizing that we have what it takes, in God's grace, to offer love back to God and the world around us. These things are whispered in our ear when we are dedicated and blessed as children. They are taught and modeled for us in many ways along our journey. Then, we claim them fully in baptism. That's the kind of drama we all need.

Prayer: Thank you, O God, for loving us and allowing us to love you in return. Thank you for the gift of baptism and our ability to remember all the joy we felt in that moment. Strengthen us now to honor the commitment we made to follow Jesus in service and love. For it is in his name that we pray, amen.