

I'm sure some of you remember the blackout that rocked the Northeast back in 2003. On August 14th, 2003 about 4:30pm the electric power supply completely shut down in 4 U.S. states and two Canadian provinces. Detroit, NYC, Cleveland, Toronto, Ottawa, Toledo, Newark NJ, Buffalo NY, and all points in between; all of them were completely without even a spark of power. The subway systems, street lights, air-conditioning, computers and TV's they all just stopped working. So did elevators. I don't know about you, but I can live without a street light being on. I can live without watching Fox news, or surfing the internet. But one thing I'd have a hard time dealing with, is being in a pitch dark elevator alone for 5 hours. Can you imagine? Hanging suspended by a few cables, no telling how many floors from the ground, in a locked metal box with no way out and no way to tell anyone where you are at?

This actually happened to a man in NYC that day. He got trapped between the 52nd and 53rd floor of the Empire State Building!! That's over 525 feet straight up in the air. Let me tell you when I went with our teens to the pool at Michigan State, and they talked me into jumping off the top of the platform dive, that was scary enough for me. But trapped in a metal box with no lights, no cell phone, and being held up by just a cable, maybe two. Wondering if a terrorist bomb were going to explode, don't you think that would get to you?

When CNN interviewed this man after his rescue, they asked him what it was like. The following is his quote, "I have never been so terrified or so alone in my life. Those 5 hours were a living hell. I was trapped and I couldn't get out. I was trying to open the doors with my hands and they wouldn't budge, so I tried yelling but nobody could hear me. I couldn't see anything. It was like death in there. I felt like I was never gonna get out. But when Detective Moran repelled down from the 57th floor and opened the hatch on the roof of the elevator, I felt freedom like never before. All I wanted was that door to BE OPENED (remember that, be opened) When officer Moran pulled me up in the harness to the solid ground of the 57th floor I looked at my watch. It said 9:15pm, I will never forget what time it was, I felt alive again." The man in this story was set free from his elevator prison. The only thing that could set him free was a dramatic rescue, that door had to BE OPENED. And when it finally was, this man was free indeed.

There was another man similar to this guy in NYC who lived about 2000 years ago. No there weren't blackouts, elevators or electricity back then. But even so, this man was trapped. He was shut-in a place where he couldn't hear anybody. No one could perceive his cries for help. And he too just needed to BE OPENED. We see this man in our Gospel lesson today. He had been born deaf, or at least had been deaf, from early childhood. His deafness had led to an inability to speak. You see, we learn to talk through a process called mimicry. We mimic

the sounds we hear, and through that process we learn how to speak. Any of you that had ever had children, or been around them, know that this is true. That's why toddlers "goo-goo and gaa-gaa", they are trying to mimic our words and learn to talk. This man was unable to hear the sounds of others. He never went through the process of mimicry because in his ears there were no sounds to copycat. He lived shut-off from the world of sound-he couldn't hear sound and he couldn't make meaningful sound.

He had a fully functioning mind though. Can you imagine his thoughts and frustrations? Knowing that there was something going on out there, but never being able to be a part of it. He could see people talking, see them laughing, but he could never join in. And the times that he did try and speak and join in with the others, all that came out was monosyllabic grunts and unintelligible mumblings. Kids probably laughed at him. The adults most likely discouraged his efforts because they were embarrassed and ashamed for him whenever he tried to speak. He knew full well he was locked inside of his own world, alone with the thoughts that only he could hear. We can only imagine his hopes and wishes of maybe someday being set free. That maybe some day the door would be opened. Perhaps there would be a way for him to hear and then he would learn to talk and he could be a part of the world around him. Perhaps it would happen, he hoped, but not likely. Like the man in the elevator he may have even thought that he would never get out.

Have you seen situations like this in "real life?" When the effects of sin have isolated people from the world around them. When for all intents and purposes someone has been locked away in their own private, dark, lonely prison. One of the more vivid examples of this is when I visit a member of our congregation in a nursing home, who has had a stroke.. The person wants to speak to me. But they just can't get the words out. The person may have held out hope for the day that will talk again. that somehow their mouth would be opened and they would say normal words and sentences. But the day never comes. The person feels imprisoned. What about you and me? Does this ever happen to us? While we may be able to talk and hear and understand just fine, we still suffer silently. In many ways we are imprisoned.

Have you ever felt trapped by a sin you committed in the past? Something you did that you wish with all your heart that you could take back. You would give anything in the world to change what you did that day-but you can't change it and it still haunts you. The guilt and the shame you carry around feels like a trap. You wish you could open up and tell someone, but you can't, the risks are too great. You have been told you are forgiven, but the trap of guilt just won't let you go. You wonder if you'll ever get out.

Are you imprisoned by a sin you just can't let go of? This is your own private little sin, no one knows about it but you. You've tried to stop doing it, but you can't. When you come to church sometimes you feel bad about it and you vow to change. But it is always right there, tugging at your sleeve. No matter how hard you try, this habitual sin always ends up pulling you back down. You can't break away. Every time you try, the door to your private prison of sin slams shut in your face. You wonder if you'll ever get out.

Maybe you suffer from a sin that isn't yours. You didn't do anything to deserve what happened to you that day. You know it wasn't your fault that it happened. Someone chose to inflict this pain upon you, you were only a victim of their darkness. But it doesn't matter because you still suffer from it. What that other person did stays with you, and you feel like you are pinned down by it. It won't let you go. You wonder if you'll ever get out. We all have our own prisons. We all need to BE OPENED.

We all suffer from the blackout of sin in our lives. Ever since the Fall, humanity has been trapped in this prison of sinfulness. Where there should be light, there is darkness. Where there should be joy there is pain. Where freedom should be ringing, the moans of tortured captives are heard. Where God's perfect Creation stood all that remains is a hollow, tainted shell of what was. Into the darkness steps a man. They say He came into the world by being born of a virgin. They say He is the very Son of God. He is coming to do something about the blackout of sin! He is coming to OPEN the Kingdom of God for those who are trapped!

We see Him doing an opening in today's Gospel lesson. He takes the deaf and mute man off to the side. He pushes His fingers into the man's ears. He spits and places it on the man's tongue. He uses His body parts and bodily fluids as the physical means to heal this man of his ailment. He looks up into heaven and lets out a great sigh. Then He speaks the word Ephphatha, BE OPENED! Those are the first words the man has ever heard. And it is those words that set him free. Released from his prison by the Word of Jesus, BE OPENED!

Not only did the man hear those words but he understood what they meant! The door to his prison hadn't just been cracked open a little, it had been completely swung wide OPEN. He didn't have to go through the process of learning the language, he was healed so completely that he knew it already! He didn't have to go through the process of mimicry to learn how to talk, it says here that he immediately began to speak clearly!! No "goo-goo's or gaa-gaa's" here, he was so completely OPENED, so completely set free, that he could understand and speak a language he had never even heard before. That's what happens when Jesus uses His chosen physical means (here

it was fingers and spit) and attaches the power of His Word to them. People are completely healed and completely OPENED.

What about the trapped sinners of today? What about the people around us that are helpless to help themselves. What about us? Christians who are still trapped by sin? We need to BE OPENED just as much as the man in the lesson today. We need to be set free as well. Jesus knew that, that's why He came in the 1st place.

He knew that you couldn't possibly make it on your own. Just like the man in the elevator who tried to open the doors from the inside, trying to claw your way out of the prison of your sin doesn't work. Jesus knew that left alone we would die without ever being set free. And He loves us too much to just sit by and watch it happen, so He did something about it.

To rescue us from the trap of guilt and shame over a sin of the past, He walked into a trap willingly when Judas brought the men to the Garden that night. Jesus knew what was going on but He let Himself be trapped so that you don't have to be.

Remember that prison of habitual sin? To pay the price to post your bail and get you out of your prison of private sin, He allowed himself to be taken to a prison and beaten. He walked into a prison so you could walk out of one.

To free us from the sin of others that pins us down, He let His own body be pinned down by iron spikes to a rough piece of wood. He chose to let himself be pinned down by the sins of others so you could be free.

To end the blackout of sin, the Light of the world allowed His life to be snuffed out. Why? Why did He do this? It was the only way for heaven to BE OPENED for us. Through His sacrifice on the cross, the doors of heaven that were locked have been swung WIDE OPEN! Jesus uses His body and His bodily fluids again to perform an OPENING. For you and me, its not fingers and spit, it is the body and blood we see hanging on the cross on the Friday they call Good. The very same Body and Blood offered here today in the Lord's Supper.

Three days later we see the Grandest Opening of them all. The stone is rolled away!!! The tomb is empty. Christ is alive again! And He promises that our graves will look like that on the Last Day. WIDE OPEN! Empty, because when Jesus opens you and sets you free, He frees you from death itself!

Today-for all those who are trapped by the burden of guilt and shame-for all those imprisoned in the bondage

of habitual sin-for all those bearing the scars of the sins of others-look at what Jesus has done for you! His life, His death and His resurrection has set you free-Believe it, even if you don't "feel" it-believe it! Because it is true!

The man in the elevator in NYC said it best. When his rescuer came and let him out he said, "I have never felt freedom like that before, I felt alive again!" We have a new freedom like never before. We have new life in Christ. The sin blackout is completely wiped out! That's what our Rescuer does for us, that's what it means to truly BE OPENED!