

Acts 16:9–15 New Revised Standard Version

During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them. We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, 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 for some days. On the sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there. A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. When she and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, “If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home.” And she prevailed upon us.

We are in the Great 50 days of Easter when we think about what we do now that Jesus is risen. We have been looking at different stories in the Book of Acts as we see what the first followers of Jesus did with the news that Jesus had risen. Today’s story is about Lydia. We know almost nothing about Lydia but she fascinates me. I want to know more about this woman who was making her way independently in a world run by men. Who was this Gentile who sought the God of Judaism? We know that she was a dealer in purple cloth, which means that she designed for the rich and powerful in the Roman world. Due to travel and trade routes, there is a high probability that Lydia was a woman of color. Lydia was a businesswoman who worshipped God.

Lydia goes to the river to pray. She meets Paul and his companions. But, Paul didn’t go to visit with women. Paul went because he had a vision that a man from Macedonia needed his help. We don’t know if Paul ever met the man of Macedonia. But, he met Lydia and she was interested in what he was saying. Lydia wasn’t who Paul was looking for. She wasn’t what he expected or what he imagined. I wonder what might have happened if Paul had only been willing to see that man from his vision. What if he had not been open to another encounter, to someone whom he didn’t expect and couldn’t envision? An independent Macedonian businesswoman of color was probably well beyond what Paul could imagine when he thought of the church. But that didn’t stop him from talking to her, and it didn’t stop her either.

I love the next part, “The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul.” How often do I close my heart because I am not open to listening to someone new, someone unexpected? How often do I close my heart because I don’t like the person who is speaking? How often do I close my heart because I don’t think that the person speaking has anything valuable to say? How often do I close my heart because I have already judged the person speaking and found them wanting?

To me this is story of grace. Grace right there on the river. A woman willing to open her heart to hear about God’s love. A man willing to share with someone unexpected about God’s love. It is a story that reminds us that God is always with us, and it is an invitation for us to keep our hearts open. Our hearts might struggle with being open. It is easier to judge people and keep them in the assigned box that we have placed them in. Maybe you have been hurt, maybe you are tired, maybe you are cynical. It is hard to open our hearts. How can we take a detour and give someone a chance today?

Paul had to go outside the city gate to find someone open to his message. He found Lydia who was open to listening to a foreigner. Sometimes we have to go outside of our comfort zones. We have to go outside our own city gates to find someone open to our message of God’s love for all. We might have to go to unexpected places and meet new people. It is hard work.

Lydia's story is about one woman coming to faith. God always works to change the world one life at a time. Lydia, just like the rest of us, has a choice of whether to listen and follow when she hears God's Word for the first time. Did you catch what Lydia did at the end? She gets baptized and offers her home to Paul and his companions, but she puts a qualification on it. "Come and stay, if you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord." I love her confidence! She claims her identity as a beloved child of God. Lydia and her generosity creates the spread of Christianity in Europe.

Lydia welcomed the needs of others and she responded. We are called to do the same. Writer and theologian Walter Brueggemann talks about a vision of God's kingdom coming on earth as it already is in heaven. God's rules are the practices of justice and mercy and kindness and peaceableness. These are what we do every day. It is a vision of the world as a peaceable neighborliness in which no one is under threat, no one is at risk, no one is in danger, because all are safe, all are valued, all are honored, all are cared for.¹

Since our story today is about a woman, I wanted to share that in our world today the rights of women have made huge strides. According to the United Nations, women and adolescent girls are completing more years of school than ever and the number of girls not in primary school has been cut in half since the early 2000s.² There are stubborn gender gaps at the secondary level because adolescent girls face unique barriers. Organizations working to make a difference and educate more girls still struggle with larger structural issues like addressing gender norms and expectations that come when a girl reaches puberty or helping school-aged mothers or child brides reintegrate to school.

When a girl receives an education, it lifts the entire family out of poverty. It is hard work and it is easy to get tired. For the last 20 years even with all of the work that has been done, 2/3 of the illiterate adults in the world are women. That gender disparity remains persistent. We are Christians who believe in prayer and action. When we hear that less than 40% of countries provide girls and boys with equal access to education, may we be reenergized for the work ahead.³ When we learn that 54 million of the 76 million illiterate young women live in only 9 countries, may we not give up. A child born to a mother who can read is 50% more likely to survive past age 5.

Around our world in so many ways, women and girls are trapped. As Christians we work to make society better for all. How would our world be different if every woman had access to medical care and paid maternity leave? Or if every abused woman was offered a safe refuge? If the prospect of juggling work and childcare were never an issue? What if we welcomed women with their babies at work, or in restaurants or while nursing their babies? What if there weren't systemic, institutional, and personal racism driving up the maternal mortality rates for women of color? Can we imagine a world where our focus is on being a pro-woman, pro-child society?⁴

We have heard a story from the Bible today about the power of relationships. Lydia opens her heart and opens her home which becomes a base for the spread of Christianity in Europe. She experiences grace and is moved to action. We are called to do just what Lydia did, to welcome the needs of others and respond simply because we call ourselves Christians.

¹ Brueggemann, Walter. Inscribing the Text

²<https://borgenproject.org/importance-of-girls-education/>

³<http://www.unesco.org/new/en/unesco/events/prizes-and-celebrations/celebrations/international-days/international-womens-day-2014/women-ed-facts-and-figure/>

⁴Much of this paragraph taken from https://www.patheos.com/blogs/suspendedinherjar/2019/05/its-time-to-move-past-the-pro-life-pro-choice-dividing-line/?fbclid=IwAR3zSbPMF4Kyrzint2J7SdglPduyAm-eilXPxbJ1d16xxTmczegM4_-Fds

We still struggle to accept and celebrate those who look or live differently than we do. We talk about who is entitled to equality and justice. We wonder who is indispensable and who is disposable. We still fall into the trap of believing we know how things are, how they should be, and what and whom they're supposed to look like. Our world is more connected and more diverse than ever before, but we are plagued by barriers of distrust and discrimination. It is costing lives and hope and so much possibility for goodness and healing and growth.

Lydia's story reminds us that God's church is bigger and broader than we expect. God's church is built and served by and serving those we might overlook or discount if we rely only on our own understanding. Whether we are like Paul struggling to follow God's call past the limits of our own dream or like Lydia, called to serve and speak to a world that does not always fully see us, this story is a promise that the Holy Spirit is alive and at work all over this world and she is not contained by the limits of our humanity or own imagination. Lydia was the first European convert. The first follower of God who invited the church into her home. There have been other firsts too in the church and beyond. The first person to cross the ocean. The first person to walk on the moon. The first LGBTQ pastor. The first black president. These firsts and many others teach us that our knowledge of what can be is not the limit of what should be or will be.⁵

Easter shows us that our faith is built on the unexpected and unimaginable: A God who meets us in a tiny child named Jesus. Jesus who preaches a world of justice beyond any that had been or has been known. Jesus who dies to meet us in death so that we might know that even there we are never alone. Jesus who overcomes death, returns to new life, and offers new life to us, with the incredible promise that there is no limit to God's goodness or love, whether we can imagine it or not. May we open our hearts so we can see what God sees. Amen.

⁵ Much of this paragraph taken from http://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/2016/050116_4pm.html