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Acts 16:9-15

May 25, 2025 – 6th Sunday of Easter

***Acts 16:9-15***

***9During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.”  10When [Paul] he had seen the vision, we [Paul and Timothy and Silas and Luke] immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.***

***11We therefore[***[***b***](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=acts%2016&version=NRSVUE#fen-NRSVUE-27482b)***] set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, 12and 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. 13On the Sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed[***[***c***](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=acts%2016&version=NRSVUE#fen-NRSVUE-27484c)***] there was a place of prayer, and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there. 14A 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. 15When 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.***

Preaching about the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost Sunday in two weeks, will be a little awkward because for the last few weeks all through the book of Acts, we have been discussing the work of the Holy Spirit without actually naming it. We have talked about visions, flashes of lightning, conversions of many unlikely players to the early Christian Church, and the possibility that something you and I might do being the catalyst to the work of the holy spirit in someone else. We’ve discussed how any little step or any little ordinary holiness might just be the way that God is working in and through us.

First there was Saul, unlikely convert, and his early travels. Then we focused on Peter and his early teaching and performing miracles, including raising Dorcas/Tabitha from the dead, then Peter teaching Cornelius and the gentiles, the first mention of the holy spirit directly. In each case the sphere of influence of the story of God’s work in Jesus Christ began to spread farther and farther, to more and more unlikely places.

While the lectionary doesn’t cover enough of the book of Acts – there are 28 chapters in all – today’s text tells the story of the beginning of the Church in *Europe* – the farthest of all reaches to date in the 1st century. This is not the only time we have been led to the end of one thing only to realize that it is the beginning of something more. At the end of Deuteronomy Moses dies before reaching the land of Caanan, and the next book, book of Joshua picks up there, where Joshua is the one who leads the Israelites into the promised land.

Today’s story can best be understood by backing up just a little bit. In the previous chapter, the church in Jerusalem heard the reports of Peter and Paul and the others, and began to debate about where to send the disciples next. A council was convened, The Jerusalem Council, where it was decided who would go where. In the end it was Paul and Silas who decided to return to all of the places where they had already proclaimed the word and hoped to strengthen the churches in those cities. On the way they met Timothy who eventually traveled with them. On their way to visit the other churches, twice they were hindered from going to certain cities in Asia, and instead found themselves by circumstances heading to the port city of Troas. It was there that Paul saw a vision that led him to change the trajectory of their travels, and they headed to Phillipi, a Roman colony and port city in the area called Macedonia. Here in Phillipi they were able to teach. Whenever they went somewhere new, it was the habit of Paul and the disciples to take time to meet with any Jews in the area and teach in their temples. But since Phillipi was a Roman colony any Jews who met to worship and pray would have been outside the gate of the city.

Instead of meeting a group of Jewish men as he expected, when Paul went to the river outside of the gates of the city of Phillipi, he met a group of women. It’s worth slowing down just a bit at this point in the story, to imagine what Paul might have been feeling. Paul’s vision was of a man; he typically met in synagogues and with Jewish men; so if Paul was looking to meet the moment his vision was pointing him to, he probably did not think that meeting the women outside of the gate by the river was “it.” Remember, visions are not necessarily exact versions of the future. Paul’s vision sent him in a certain *direction*, but was not meant to point to a specific outcome. If Paul had gone in search of one specific set of circumstances, he might have made different choices along the way and completely missed opportunities. For example, Paul might not have sat down with these women to talk to them if he was single mindedly focused on his own expectations.

One of the women who was particularly interested in hearing what Paul had to say was Lydia, a Greek business woman, dealer in purple cloth, with her own household. Her conversion and baptism along with her whole household was the first European to receive the message of Jesus the Messiah. This lectionary reading for today leaves off with Lydia’s offer of hospitality to Paul and his companions.

Reading further in Acts we would see that Paul and company did much preaching and teaching but became enemies with some of the Romans. Paul and Silas were arrested, jailed, converted the jailers – went to the home of Lydia upon their release from jail. Lydia’s conversion and following hospitality was a major reason why Paul’s mission was able to continue even further than it had thus far.

This reminds me of a job I used to have. I used to be responsible for typing all of the manuscripts for publication from all of the faculty in the Chemistry department at my university. The first name listed on the paper would be the Principle Investigator, and maybe a few TA’s who did the lab work. When I read about Paul and Peter, and maybe Silas and Timothy and Lydia, I think about these Chemistry manuscripts. Paul and Peter are the famous guys, and we like heroes and specific personalities, but in reality any ministry is made possible by those who are often not seen and not named. In the following 12 chapters of Acts after today’s reading, there are so many who are never named. Paul is the famous guy, but at any step, Paul’s path could have been stymied.

This is how the holy spirit works. Something met Saul on the road to Damascus. Paul and Ananias had complimentary visions. Peter and Cornelius had visions that led one to another without a self-explanatory reason. Paul and some disciples tried to travel to parts of Asia but were prevented by the spirit of the Lord – maybe in the form of a broken ox cart, or a delayed ship, or lack of money. “Somehow” they made it to Phillipi, a Roman colony, and “somehow” they converted a woman, a Greek, who eventually took them in when they were released from prison, thus helping them continue the second missionary journey of Paul.

How do you and I fit into this journey of saints like Paul and Silas and Timothy and Lydia? Their complete trust in God to guide them sounds so impossible in our world full of schemers, false choices, and dead end paths to choose from. Even those of us who believe that humans are basically good and honorable people still have to navigate the bumpy roads of life with tragedy of death and illness, the insufferable angst of hurt that other humans do to one another, the overwhelming task of changing systems that pit some against others or systems that have no regard for entire populations of people. How do we stay hopeful? Do we have visions? Do we get messages from God in our dreams? If we rely 100% on God to the point of neglecting the sciences and human advancements, we fall behind and find ourselves isolated and noticeably far from the reality of being human in the 21st century. If we neglect our spiritual lives and are not practiced in the art of listening to God we may never be in the place where God can best speak to us.

I just finished a class as part of my study leave this year, called Discernment in Community. We learned ways of listening to God using a community to assist us with individual decisions. And we learned skills for helping a community listen to God in order to make community decisions. Discernment, unlike brainstorming, isn’t about coming to a solution to a single problem, but it is more like making one decision that can then lead to another and another and so one, until hopefully the problem changes or an outcome is reached. Listening to God, like Paul’s vision, is often just to send us in the right direction. Listening to God isn’t a one-time event or skill that one uses only at big moments. Listening to God involves constantly being open to what’s next and not stopping when we think we have “arrived.” Imagine learning the alphabet but never learning to read or write. What if Isaac Newton learned about gravity and stopped there? Nothing in life is ever the last word when it comes to God speaking to us, leading us, guiding us. Our Easter faith tells us that not even death is the last word from God.

This craziness is how God gets God’s work done in our world. You and I through some ordinary act of holiness become the means by which, just like that, someone is fed; someone is clothed; someone is sheltered; someone is warm; someone is loved.

Amen.

1<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/sixth-sunday-of-easter-3/commentary-on-acts-169-15-4> Jennifer Kaalund

2<https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2025-05-19/acts-169-15-4/> Meg Jenista

3Skinner, Matthew, Acts, 2025

4<https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2019-05-20/acts-169-15-2/> Stan Mast