

Year C
Sixth Sunday of Easter
May 22, 2022
Acts 16:9-15

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

You've probably noticed that, since Easter Sunday, we've been having readings from the Book of Acts as our first lessons instead of an Old Testament reading. In the Episcopal Church we do that so we can see the apostles' response to the resurrection. We can see **how** they spread the gospel of Jesus Christ, their risen Lord. How they told people about The Way, which is what the Jesus movement was originally called. In seeing how the apostles responded, we can think about how we want to respond in this Easter season, and in the months to come.

In today's lesson we see Paul having a vision of a man in Macedonia asking him to "come over and help us." So Paul **immediately** sets sail with Timothy to go there. Now, in order to appreciate what a huge leap of faith this is, it would be helpful to have a map, but let's visualize this together for a minute. Paul is in Troas, which is in what we now call Turkey—so Asia Minor. Macedonia on the other hand, is in Greece—so Europe—and they've never been there before. So they have to sail across the Aegean Sea. They sail the first day to the island of Samothrace, then the next day on to Neapolis, which was on the coast of Macedonia. Then on the third day, they go overland for 10 miles to Philippi, which was a large, important city at the time.

Interestingly, there is no record in the book of Acts of anyone saying, "wow, Paul—that trip sounds really dangerous," or "you know, we've never done that before—that's not where we've been evangelizing. We don't know anything about those people. What do you say we form a committee to study that for six months, and we'll get back to you." No—they went immediately to Macedonia, because Paul believed that was where God was leading them to go. Now, admittedly Paul was extremely open to being guided by the Holy Spirit, and we might see why, since you remember he had that amazing conversion experience on the way to Damascus, where Jesus struck him blind. Paul knows through *many* experiences that Jesus is active through the Holy Spirit, and he is eager to follow the Spirit's lead.

Once he's in Philippi, Paul intends to go to the synagogue to find other Jews to preach to, which is what he often does in a new place. He's also probably looking for the man in his vision, but instead, he finds a woman. Not only that, but a gentile woman. Now Acts has already established that preaching to gentiles is okay. But it was still new. And for Paul, talking to strange women, especially women who had no husbands with them, would have also been unusual. Preaching to them would definitely be along the lines of things Paul didn't usually do. He finds a group of women down by the river who are "worshippers of God," which means they worship the Jewish God, but haven't converted to Judaism.

One of the women, named Lydia, was greatly affected by Paul's preaching, and it says that "she and **her** household were baptized" as a result. For a woman to be named without her husband was extremely unusual, because it meant that she was independent, and owned her own property. And, the fact that Lydia was "a dealer in purple cloth" also meant that she sold fabric to the elite of the area, because only the emperor, and his representatives, were allowed to even wear purple. So Lydia is wealthy and well-connected, and she becomes a supporter of The Way, and in her home we have the beginnings of the new church in Philippi—the Philippians.

So Paul goes way outside of his comfort zone at the prodding of the Holy Spirit. But so does Lydia. What might it mean for her business, and her clients that she has embraced this new religion? It's hard to know. And as a successful businesswoman, she had to have wondered about that aspect of her conversion. But she took this big risk, because "the Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly."

Unexpected things, and taking big risks reminds me of my grandparents—my father's parents, who came to this country from Norway in the late 1920s. That alone, was the first big risk—moving to a foreign country because they wanted new opportunities. They met in New York City, where they both worked, Granddaddy as an electrical engineer, and Grannie as the foreign correspondent for a Norwegian home economics magazine. They met in the Lutheran church which they both attended, they married, and because they were both city people, they settled down to build a life together in New York. But of course, then the stock market crashed, and we had the Great Depression. That was not the plan. After a while, there was no work to be had, and not enough food in the city—which was also not the plan, so after much prayer and anxiety, my Grannie and Granddaddy took what little money they had, and moved north to Maine—to be farmers.

In Maine they raised goats, and farmed, and foraged in order to survive as best they could. The winters were long, and harsh, but being Norwegians they were used to that. Of course, neither of them had ever farmed before. But they had faith, and they were determined, so they read everything they could about goats, and bees, and growing things. I still have their brochures from the USDA on raising goats, keeping bees—and on rearing children! My uncle Oscar was born during this hard time. Grannie told me that they usually had enough to eat, but it often wasn't completely nutritious. In fact, malnutrition became a problem, and she said their teeth were getting loose as a result. But they prayed, and they worked very hard, and they trusted in God.

And then in 1933, miraculously, there **was** work, in the form of the Tennessee Valley Authority. TVA need electrical engineers to work on the rural electrification project in East Tennessee. So Grannie, Granddaddy, and Oscar moved to Knoxville, and suddenly they had a comfortable home, enough to eat, and money to buy the things they needed. It was another move outside of their comfort zone, but definitely an answer to prayer. And it was an adjustment that was probably easier to make than becoming farmers. My Grannie was not a person to talk a lot about God, but she once told me that she took strength in the knowledge that Jesus was constantly with her, and

that she could always ask him for help. That stuck with me, as a young person, because she was fiercely capable and independent, and I saw her as a tower of strength, even though she was only 4'11".

So if we take Paul as our model, answering God's call, and doing difficult things that might have been far outside of his comfort zone—what does that look like for us? Well, right now we ARE taking risks. You have called a new rector. And I have answered a new call. There are things that we need to do together: grow this church, and continue to support our community. This work is probably going to take some forms that we don't expect, and that will take us outside of **our** comfort zones. The old saying about doing God's work is that it goes in three stages: impossible, hard, and done—with God's help. Change is not easy. So please pray with me for discernment. And if you come up with ideas, share them! Even if they seem impossible, or really hard, please tell me about them. We need to think outside the box, and let the Holy Spirit lead **us** to new places. And we're going together—we will with God's help.
Amen