

Scriptures: John 14:23-29; Acts 16:9-15

Witnesses

Since Easter morning we've been talking about witnesses to that first Resurrection, and about witnesses to Christ's Resurrection in the ancient church. We've spent a lot of time in the Book of Acts, examining the immediate results of Christ's resurrection, and how instrumental the Holy Spirit was – and is – in the exponential growth of the Church. Last week we talked about a couple relatively minor Bible characters, both Gentiles, who showed up in Scripture – Simon the Tanner, and Cornelius the Centurion, and how Peter preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ crucified and resurrected impacted Cornelius. He and his whole family were baptized, and I believe that there were others not mentioned – slaves, maybe even men in his unit – who also came to know Jesus Christ and His work of salvation through knowing Cornelius.

Today we're going to examine another Gentile found in Scripture who also comes to know Jesus Christ by hearing the Gospel, this time presented by Paul. If you have your Bible or a Bible app handy, turn with me to Acts 16:9-15. I'll be reading from the New International Version. **Read Acts 16:9-15.**

Just prior to the passage we read, Luke records that Paul, Timothy, and Silas have been traveling around Asia Minor – modern day Turkey – preaching the gospel. They had intended to head into the area of Bithynia – an ancient kingdom which became a client state and subsequently a province of Rome – along the south coast of the Black Sea. Today it's in Turkey, directly across the Black Sea from the current war in Ukraine. They kept trying to get into this region to preach the Good News, but Scripture records "the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to," (Acts 16:7). Instead, they end up in the seaport town of Troas, along the coast of the Aegean Sea.

Come Help Us

Have you ever heard of the Trojan War? In ancient Greek mythology and history, there was a city in Asia Minor, whose prince kidnapped another king's wife. Homer wrote about it in the *Illiad*. To get Helen back, the Greeks surround the city of Troy for a long time, and try to starve out the city. Their siege fails, so by night they build a gigantic wooden horse – the Trojan horse – and the soldiers climb inside, and the people of Troy think it's a gift, bring it into their city, and by night, the Greek soldiers climb out and demolish the city, freeing Helen and returning her to Greece. The city of Troas mentioned in Acts 16 is in the same location as the original city of Troy.

The first thing that we read today said, "during the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us,'" (Acts 16:9). God spoke to people in the ancient church in visions and dreams. He still speaks to the Church today in visions and dreams – and through other people, of course. We just have to be tuned in to listen to what He has to say.

Macedonia is a region in Europe. Today it's actually split between the countries of Greece and North Macedonia, a former province of Yugoslavia. What kind of help

could Paul give the Macedonian man? In other words, what does Paul have that the Macedonian doesn't? Salvation! He has a relationship with Jesus Christ, and they don't in Macedonia, because they haven't heard the Gospel!

Going to Philippi

"After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them," (verse 10). Did you notice that little "we" in there? At Troas, Luke, the author of the Gospel which bears his name and the Book of Acts, has come along beside Paul, Silas, and Timothy. Anytime from here, to the end of Acts, when you see that "we," just know that Luke is telling a first-hand, eyewitness account of the event.

"From Troas we put out to sea and sailed straight for Samothrace, and the next day on to Neapolis," (verse 11) we heard next. Samothrace is a Greek island roughly 100 miles to the northwest of Troas. The part of the Aegean Sea these guys are crossing is only about 125 miles wide from the coast of Turkey to the coast of Greece, however the coasts are rocky and hard to navigate in the dark. So before electric lights were invented – all the technology we take for granted – ships would anchor near the island of Samothrace. In the morning they sailed to Neapolis, a major seaport which was about ten miles from Philippi.

"From there we traveled to Philippi, a Roman colony and the leading city of that district of Macedonia. And we stayed there several days," (verse 12), Luke says. Friends, you've heard of Paul's letter to the Philippians, right? He plants a church there, and eventually wrote a letter to them, which we have in the Bible. The Bible's a pretty cool historical account!

A Gentile Named Lydia

Since Philippi – Macedonia – is in Europe, most of the people who live there are Gentiles. We talked about the tension between the Jews and the Gentiles last week, and how that spills over even today into some our "us" versus "them" prejudicial mind-sets. Notice what happened next in the passage. "On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there," (verse 13). They're there on Saturday morning – that's the Sabbath from a Jewish standpoint – and they want to find someplace remote to pray. In the Gospels, Jesus is often seen going off to pray in remote locations, away from people.

Instead, they find a place, but it's already occupied by some ladies. So what does Paul, Silas, Timothy, and Luke do? They tell these ladies the Good News of Jesus Christ! "One of those listening was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message," (verse 14).

Lydia's an interesting person here in Acts. She's a dealer in purple cloth. She's a businesswoman. It would have been an uncommon thing at that time. It really was a man's world in those days. Women had fewer rights, and she's apparently successful at what she does.

Lady in Purple

In those days, the color purple was used almost exclusively by royalty. The coloring used to dye fabric was expensive, hard to find, and hard to produce. They basically had to find and smash a specific type of sea slug to get the juices used to create the dye. In those days it was more valuable than gold. In the days before Internet, TV, radio commercials, and billboards, how do you suppose a business person, in this case, Lydia, advertised her product? She probably wore it, right? She's a walking, talking billboard.

In 1986, British singer, Chris de Burgh wrote a popular song which hit the top three in the US during the spring of 1987, called *The Lady in Red*. It's about him seeing a lady in a nightclub dressed in a red dress, who would eventually become his wife. He says in part, "I've never seen you look so lovely as you did tonight, I've never seen you shine so bright." I'm certain the same thing could have been said of Lydia. She was a well-to-do lady in purple, and gave the appearance of affluence and success in business.

Lydia was also a worshiper of God. She wasn't Jewish, but she had heard of the Scriptures – the Old Testament in those days – and believed what it said about Him. She knew how pitiful the human condition is with regards to sin, and broken relationships – the first one being between us and our Father. And as she's listening to Paul tell her things she already knows – because she's already been worshipping God – she hears something unique in what Paul says. She hears something she's never heard before.

She hears that God sent His Son to live a perfect life, to die for our sin on the cross, and then rose Him again to life three days later. In hearing the Gospel of what Jesus had done for her, Lydia's heart was opened. She was able to respond to Paul's message. So what does she do? It ends up being very similar to what Cornelius did last week.

Lydia's Baptism

"When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. 'If you consider me a believer in the Lord,' she said, 'come and stay at my house.' And she persuaded us," (verse 15). She gets baptized – along with her whole family. Just picture that. Lydia's dressed in her expensive purple dress, probably wearing gold earrings, bracelets, and a necklace, and she gets baptized by Paul in the river. Baptized by immersion. She comes up out of the water dripping wet, her purple dress likely ruined, the color streaming down her arms, leaving crimson puddles as she walks up the river bank.

There used to be a show on TV – it may still be on – called *Say Yes to the Dress*, where these young women spend a small fortune on their wedding gowns. I've heard people talk about it over the years. Some of the contestants get pretty grumpy because things aren't exactly as they expect them. Despite the dress being ruined and her hair dripping wet, Lydia was joy-filled and probably smiling. She knows that Jesus loves her! We all should be able to smile knowing that!

On Easter morning I had the privilege of baptizing a young lady down the road in Michael's pond. You could see the joy on her face afterwards. When we let Jesus be

King – let the Holy Spirit take up permanent residence on the throne of our hearts – He changes us. Sometimes that’s evident even from our outer appearance.

Lydia shows Radical Hospitality

After Lydia’s baptism – her whole family’s baptism – she invited Paul and company to come stay at her house. We don’t know how big her house was. We don’t know if she had fancy guest rooms. We don’t even know how long they stayed with her. The point is, though, that “she persuaded them.”

They went to her house and stayed for awhile. That’s what I really want to focus in on with the time we have left today. Lydia shows these brothers in mission what we would call today “radical hospitality.” Friends, that’s what we need to do a better job of here at New Hope. Showing hospitality.

There are many times when visitors – seekers – show up here. Where do they sit? They sit towards the back of the Sanctuary. They sit on the sidelines, so to speak, to see what we’re all about. What do they see? Do they see a welcoming church? Do they see a church that’s looking beyond what’s right in front of their faces, which welcomes them? Or do they see a church so focused on “maintaining,” that they’re not even noticed when they come in and sit down? Do they get greeted by the majority of you – by most of us – or by just a couple people?

While we’re on the topic of “radical hospitality,” let’s also talk about our young people. For years we’ve had a designated Graduation Sunday, when graduates would be honored during the worship service. Before worship started on that Sunday, graduates and their families, would celebrate their accomplishments and hard work by having a good, home-cooked breakfast in Fellowship Hall. COVID messed that up in 2020, and none of our programs were quite the same.

Next Sunday we’re going to recognize our 2022 Graduates. We’ll recognize them during the worship service, as usual, and have a breakfast with their families to celebrate their accomplishments. That being said, we need volunteers to help put this together. Church, I know you have great cooking skills and are talented hosts – let’s not let those talents go to waste! I’d love to see some of you help with this, just like I would like to see more of you step up to take on leadership roles in various programs in the church – especially with VBS coming up this summer.

When we lose focus on being welcoming, and by extension – on being plugged in to Jesus – people neglect what they’ve been called to do. Those coming here as seekers then fall through the cracks and they don’t come back. Every one of you in this church needs to be a doer of the Word, not just a hearer of it. That’s how we further God’s Kingdom. I know we can do better. We need to do better. The world – and Jesus – is counting on us to be the witnesses He’s called us to be.

Prayer: Gracious God, through a vision You sent Paul to preach the gospel and called the women to the place of prayer on the Sabbath. Grant that we may be sent like Paul and be found like Lydia, our hearts responsive to Your Word and open to go and do that for which You call us. Amen.