

Bruton Parish Church  
The Rev. Josh Stephens  
May 26, 2019

The Sixth Sunday of Easter

## Acts 16:9-15

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.

### Lydia's Lesson

There's a joke that people say about Episcopalians and it's that we grow up—our kids grow up—thinking that the Bible is quoting the Book of Common Prayer, rather than the other way around! And we certainly have all had moments when we encounter Scripture that is familiar to us only to realize that we have been saying it in our prayers for years. Imagine that: praying with the Scriptures!

Episcopalians do get accused by other Christians of not taking the Bible seriously. We love our prayers and our music. We love sacraments, especially the Eucharist, but we don't have the same culture around Bible study found in other branches of Christ's Church. I think it's mainly because we have a different theology around Scripture. You go to a lot of churches and for the sermon, the pastor will say, "Open your Bibles to Acts, chapter 16, verse 11" and then proceed with a verse by verse examination. As Anglicans, though, we lean towards a bird's eye view of it all. We tend to get caught up in the drama of God.

What we can say in this contest (which doesn't really exist but I have created specifically for this sermon) is that we not only pray with the Scriptures but we hear so much of them in our worship. We have four readings each Sunday with the Gospel at the center of it. What happens as a result of praying with the Scriptures—saying these sacred words in our liturgy and in reading so much of them—is, hopefully, we start to realize that this is our story, that we have a part in the drama of God's Kingdom breaking into the world. When we read and worship *with* Scripture—rather than *worshipping* the text itself—we are not looking at something that is other. We are looking at

ourselves and our God. We are remembering who we really are, who we are called to be, and where God is taking this “fragile earth, our island home.” We discover what it means to be members of the risen Christ.

With that in mind, you may have noticed that we typically read an Old Testament reading each Sunday, along with a Psalm, an Epistle, and the Gospel. Well, in Eastertide—in this season of fifty days in which we celebrate God making all things new—we step confidently into the New Covenant and, thus, leave the Old Testament momentarily behind. We read out of the Acts of the Apostles each Sunday instead.

And in Acts, what a story we have! What a story we are! In Acts, we find this unaccomplished motley crew of disciples—some fisherman, a rough, bar fighting kind of dude, an accountant, some day-laborers—who knows if they ever finished high school! They were scared out of their minds when their teacher and mentor was violently executed before them! And now, we find them believing and trusting in this risen Jesus. If he is alive, if death has been defeated, and Jesus says this was all about us, this was to save us and our world, then they must tell everyone that they don't have be afraid anymore, they don't have to be trapped in their old cycles of brokenness any longer. There's so much more that God has in store for us! Christ is risen and we have new life, too!

In Acts, chapter 17, just a chapter passed our reading today, there is a passage that captures so well what happens when the Kingdom of God is cut loose in a world of where Empires dominate. These unlikely Apostles, Paul and Silas, are traveling around, preaching the Good News in synagogues and on street corners, and it's causing all kinds of problems to the status quo. As people begin to believe and trust in Christ Jesus themselves, they are letting go of old ways that are binding them. They are being healed of brokenness and saying, “No more!” to those who capitalize from it.

Paul and Silas begin getting in trouble and believers are dragged before the authorities by a mob. There is shouting and conflict. Accusations are made. Do you know what they accuse these Christians of? They say, “These people have been turning the world upside down.” It gets better: “They are all acting contrary to the decrees of the emperor, saying that there is another king named Jesus!” That's Acts 17:6-7.

That about summarizes it. Drop the mic! End the sermon! Climb down from the colonial pulpit! Who are Christians? They are people who say that there is another King. His name is Jesus. Who are Christians? We are people who turn the world upside down.

And we know this happens structurally in our society and our world when God is on the move. We read in Revelation this morning about the ultimate, eschatological movement of God. That new Jerusalem which is structural change if there ever was one. But also, we know that when people of faith get to work as servant-leaders that education changes, health care changes, violence becomes history, environmental carelessness becomes unthinkable. That's all structural change.

Even structural change must begin in a personal way, as our story from Acts, chapter 16, would tell us. Every time God has changed a structural system, God first changed someone who looked a lot like me and you.

Check out the story of Lydia from our short Acts reading today. What can we surmise from the text about this Lydia? The fact that she is a woman and her name is given is significant,

especially when contrasted with the girl whom God liberates a few verses later. Lydia owns her own home. She owns her own business. “She is ‘a dealer in purple cloth’ from Thyatira, a city well-known for its textile industry.”<sup>1</sup> And not just any cloth, but purple cloth, that went to the rich and to the royal in the Roman world. She rubbed shoulders with society’s movers and shakers. Lydia has climbed the ladder of success and overcome much, especially as a first-century Roman woman.

We can surmise that Paul says something to her she needed to hear and perhaps that goes for us as well. We can imagine Paul saying, “Lydia, there’s no denying that you have achieved much. You know your success better than anyone. Your portfolio speaks for itself. You know everyone who is anyone in this town. You know what you’ve accomplished. You have invested well. But my question, dear Lydia,” Paul says, “is do you know that you are loved? Do you know that God has made the ultimate investment in you, to the tune of God’s Son laying down his life for you? Do you know that God loves you in spite of your success?”

The world is being up ended by the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Structures of predation and violence are falling, and yet it begins with our own lives being turned upside down. Imagine that, working hard your whole life to achieve something. Searching for meaning in success and stability, but never knowing that God loves you regardless of your success. Perhaps we need our lives turned upside down in this way, too.

I don’t know about you, but I see a world in which people like Lydia are still working and striving, and trying to be the who’s who of our day. I see families who think the worst that could happen to their kids is a bit of failure, every degree and career move carefully planned for their middle schoolers. I find in my life concern over trying to do everything and have it all to be a bit suffocating. Perhaps Lydia would tell us, now that her loyalties have changed, that success can blind us from the world all around us that God is turning upside down. Why do we need life in the Kingdom of God if we’re so successful in the Empires of this world? If I were raising a little girl today, and I am by the way so say this autobiographically, I would be fearful of her having every success but not knowing that she is loved completely by Christ and by his Church.

You might say to me, “Josh, it’s not a choice between success and salvation!” And I want to believe you. I want that to be true for my sake and for yours, but sometimes I wonder. Perhaps we should have a frank conversation about the price of success. Sometimes I wonder if we work and strive and achieve to gain the whole world, only to forfeit our souls.

My friends, the Kingdom of God is on the move and we are invited to be people transformed by the love of God. Paul and Silas and Lydia are people—we are people—who are turning the world upside down because we worship another King—his name is Jesus.

We are people who are turning the world upside down because we give up our loyalty to success. Why? Because we know another King—his name is Jesus.

We are people who are turning the world upside down because we give up our worship of wealth. Why? It’s because we know another King—his name is Jesus.

We are people who are turning the world upside down because we give up our addiction to busyness—to having to do everything. Why? Because we know another King—his name is Jesus.

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<sup>1</sup> *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol X, pg 231-32.

We are people who are turning the world upside down because we give up fear's hold on us. Why? You know why? It's because we know another King—What's his name? His name is Jesus.

Lydia got it. She welcomed the good news into her heart and into her home. Her world was turned upside down when she found out that she was loved fully and deeply. The best dyes on the best cloth couldn't bring about this kind of transformation. That was all stripped away in her baptism; she was clothed with Christ. They say Lydia was the first European Christian convert to the faith and God was about to turn the known world upside down. God is doing it again this Easter with us. We've got another King. His name is Jesus. And with his love, we've got a world to turn upside down!