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St. James', Mt. Airy
5/1/16

Easter 6C
Acts 16:9-15
Psalm 67
Revelation 21:10,22-22:5
John 14:23-29

**Gracious God, take our minds and think through them;
take our hands and work through them;
take our hearts and set them on fire.**

Amen.

A certain woman named Lydia.

We don't know much about this woman. She was a worshiper of God – that is a Gentile who was studying Judaism, but not yet a convert. She was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth – which marked her as someone of status and wealth.

We are told that God opened her heart – and that after listening eagerly to Paul's teaching, she and her entire household were baptized. She then opened her home to Paul and his companions, prevailing upon them to stay.

It is her home where the church in Philippi is launched – the one to whom Paul's letters always speak of such joy – and it is her home where Paul and Silas return to for rest and encouragement after their imprisonment, before departing for Thessalonica.

We don't know much about this woman, but what we do know is enough.

A certain woman named Lydia – the first Christian convert in Europe. She stands before us today as a kind of narrative icon, contemplative Mary and active Martha in one – her heart set on God even while her work gets done.¹

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The story of Lydia is one of finding the God who was finding her.²

She was searching for something missing in her life. She had more than most – but her heart was open enough to know she needed to keep listening and looking.

So it was she found herself outside the city gates by the riverside gathered with other women to pray. We can imagine this was not her first time there. She was on a path – praying and studying and learning about God among the Jewish women of the city.

What a group that must have been. Philippi was a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. At that time, it had a population of about 15,000 people, and was diverse in its makeup. One scholar's analysis is that:

The elite comprised about 3% of the population

Landowning farmers and pensioned colonists (such as retired army officers) made up 25%

Skilled workers, merchants, and service providers amounted to 45%

The poor comprised 27%

And slaves (about 20% of the total population) were included in the first three groups)³

¹ Ronald Cole-Turner, Theological Perspective, *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 2*.

² Ronald Cole-Turner, Theological Perspective, *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 2*.

³ Paul W. Walaskay, Exegetical Perspective, *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 2*.

Those women gathered by the river would have included some from each of those social locations – prayer here was a great equalizer.

We aren't told why Paul gathers with these women. Yes, he was searching for a place of prayer – his usual missionary pattern was to go to the local synagogue and perhaps there wasn't one here – but it is worth noting that it was out of the norm for him to sit down with women, many of whom were presumably Gentiles.

But sit he did, and there he told the story of Jesus.

Lydia was searching for God, and God found here there.

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I am always intrigued by these stories of great conversion. Of people seeking God – or sometimes being bowled over by God – and having large transforming experiences. Paul on the road to Damascus – the Ethiopian Eunuch who encountered Philip – Lydia at the river.

For someone who grew up in a time and place where cultural Christianity was the norm, even if weekly worship wasn't, I had a sense as a child of always knowing about God. What more was there?

So my experience wasn't a blinding light or brand new stories that lit up my heart or a process of prayer and intentional seeking – at least not in the same ways they were for Paul and the Eunuch and Lydia.

But I've experienced moments of blinding grace.

I've heard stories that have opened my heart in new ways.

I have relied on prayers and sought God with every fiber of my being.

And I'm guessing you have too, in one way or another.

Because God is not someone locked away in a book, God is alive and on the move. This was the promise Jesus made in our Gospel reading from John today.

But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.

The promise of the coming of the Holy Spirit – which we will celebrate in two weeks at Pentecost – is how we continue to be sustained in faith.

The Holy Spirit is the way we continue to be met by God in prayer. The Holy Spirit is present whenever two or three are gathered and we make community. The Holy Spirit is who we invoke – *veni sancte spiritus* – when we baptize and bring new members into the family of families we call the church.

So it was for Lydia, and so it is for us.

It late in Eastertide. We have told all the miraculous stories of Christ meeting his friends after his death, and comforting them and reminding them of their mission. We are now preparing for the celebration of the coming of the Spirit.

And we are telling our best stories of how the people of God continued to seek and be found by God after the resurrection.

This week I invite you to think and pray about your story of knowing God, of coming to know God, of being found by God.

It may very well begin *A certain woman named _____* or *A certain man named _____*.

Listen to your story in your heart, feel the peace of God embrace you.

May the God whose love abides, abide in us, this day and always.

~ AMEN ~