

Lucia Lloyd's sermon
May 9, 2010
Acts 16:9-15

Sixth Sunday of Easter

Who was the first Christian in Europe? Do you know? I'll give you some hints. A wealthy merchant. Someone whom John Calvin calls, "the chief of a great number, in whose house all the godly were assembled." A convert in 49 A.D. on Paul's missionary journey to Greece. Someone all of you have heard of. Does anybody know? The first Christian in Europe was Lydia. Not what we expected, is it? Even though we just heard about her six minutes ago. But scripture is full of surprises.

I didn't get the answer myself until I read a book entitled Help My Unbelief, a collection of sermons by an Episcopal priest whose work I admired, and whom I studied under at a conference at the College of Preachers. This preacher has written about the passage from Acts that we just heard today.¹ Her name is Fleming Rutledge.

She notes that Paul is what we would now call "an extreme traveler." As he writes in his second letter to the Church in Corinth, he perseveres despite shipwrecks, hunger, beatings, sleepless nights, persecutions, robbers, thirst, exposure, and all sorts of danger. Rutledge describes the background of the scene we encounter in today's reading from Acts. When Paul and his companions arrived in Philippi, they "went quietly to a local inn and began to take stock of the town, to see where they might begin their evangelistic work. After a few days, they had ascertained the lay of the land. Apparently there was no real synagogue in Philippi, for Acts tells us that on the Sabbath day, Paul went with his fellow missionary Silas to the place near the Gangites River, outside the city gate, where Jews gathered for Sabbath worship. When they arrived at the place, what did they find? A bunch of women. What did that mean? It meant that there wasn't even a minyan...the minimum number of Jewish men that constituted a quorum for worship. No wonder there wasn't a proper synagogue in Philippi; they didn't even have ten men."

"Here is Paul...newly arrived on the continent of Europe....There are no Christians at all. He is the person who has been called by God to bring the gospel to the Gentile world....He has a clear sense of his mission to evangelize the whole continent...Paul was a strategic planner; we may assume that he has chosen Philippi as a place to begin because it is a Roman city of no mean distinction. However, he now finds

himself outside the city walls, for Jews of the Diaspora were not always welcome to worship publicly. Paul's little band goes out to this possibly bucolic but certainly off-track and non-elite spot along the river. This was definitely not a grand beginning for a new mission. It was not in the town Forum. It was not in an amphitheater. It was not in a public space. It was off in the scrub with a handful of women. It was not an auspicious setting for a man like Paul; whatever else may be said of him, he was a man built on a heroic scale."

Still, Rutledge goes on, "Paul has placed his trust in the Lord of the gospel, and he knows that power comes not from men but from God. He and the others go over to where the women are, sit down with them, and begin to talk to them about the One of whom they have never heard, the man of faraway Galilee who was 'crucified under Pontius Pilate' put to death by 'the rulers of this age' but now raised in power and alive in the Holy Spirit as the good news spreads and brings new life into being. A [worshipper of God] named Lydia was among those gathered there. She felt her heart and mind being opened to the message that Paul brought. The Spirit of the Lord moved in her as she listened. Jesus Christ made himself known to her that day by the river, and she believed in him. Lydia of Philippi was the first Christian in Europe."

"Now who was this Lydia? Since so many of the early Christians were lower-class, poor, even slaves, it may come as a surprise....that Lydia was well-to-do. We are told that she was originally from Thyatira, which was known all around the Mediterranean for its purple dye. You know that this color was the most expensive of all. Prosperous Roman senators had purple borders on their togas. Emperors and kings wore purple. Lydia had come over to Macedonia as a trader in purple dye. Like Paul, she had made a long, arduous journey to get to Philippi. Thyatira was far off in Asia Minor, and you had to have plenty of capital, as well as gumption, to become a purple-dye agent in Europe."

She is not referred to as the wife of someone or the daughter of someone, she is simply called by her name. And when she becomes a Christian, she has *her* household baptized with her. This doesn't mean just a nuclear family; it means her servants and her business organization. This is a woman. And as Rutledge points out, "One of the aspects of the story that is so striking and so significant is that all this is told as if it were the most

natural thing in the world for a woman to have this much clout. Her distinction isn't commented upon. No feminist lessons are drawn...It just happens. It is particularly noteworthy that fifteen hundred years later, John Calvin, in his commentary on Acts, praises Lydia extravagantly for her greatness...He doesn't blink at Lydia's being a woman, who, as he writes approvingly, 'had all her household obedient'."

Not only that, as Rutledge notes, Lydia even ends up bossing the Apostle Paul around. She tells him to quit staying at that inn and come to stay at her house instead. Normally Paul was very scrupulous about not accepting gifts from his congregations, but Lydia urges them, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home." And as verse 15 puts it, "She prevailed upon us." She seems like the type of personality that usually gets other people to do what she wants, and even makes them feel good about it.

Paul values this woman's leadership, as he values the leadership of several other women, named and unnamed, whom he writes about in the New Testament epistles. Luke also recognizes the value of her role and records it as part of the Acts of the Apostles. It is later generations who have largely ignored her. But if I were starting a church plant and looking for a name for it, I would call it St. Lydia's Church in honor of her and her good example in starting a new church. On this celebration of Mother's Day, we can give thanks for her as the mother of the church in Phillipi.

Paul continues with his ministry, ends up getting put in jail for it, then miraculously released, and on his way out of the city the last thing he does is to visit Lydia and exhort the new Church that has formed in her house. We know from Paul's later letters that the Philippians were the church which sustained him spiritually. Also, as he writes in his second letter to the Corinthians, the Philippians were the only church that he allowed to support him financially, because he knew their love and faith motivated them. Paul's letter to the Philippians has some of the most beautiful and affectionate passages Paul has ever written. It is to the Philippians that Paul writes, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let all people know your forbearance. The Lord is at hand. Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God,

which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.” (Phil. 4:4-7)

The Philippians generosity, faith, and joy have been an inspiration to Christians throughout the world and throughout the centuries. They have a special place in Paul’s heart and soul. As he writes to them, “I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all, making my prayer with joy, thankful for your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. And I am sure that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion.” (Phil. 1:3-6). We know now that it all began with Lydia’s partnership in the gospel from that first day. The whole flourishing community of faith grew from the spark of faith and initiative in Lydia. They begin with a small band of believers and seekers who worship God in a house. And the Holy Spirit goes on to do amazing things in their lives and in the lives of the people they meet and the lives of people who are inspired by their example.

I asked at the beginning, “Do you know who the first Christian in Europe was?” And the important thing to remember is that Lydia herself did not know that she was going to be the first Christian in Europe. She didn’t know that an invitation to some men she’d just met would turn out to change her life, and change their lives, and that it would be the founding of the first church in Europe, and that it would go on to change the course of history.

We often think of the uncertainty of the future as something that causes anxiety. But Lydia strikes me as a person who does something much more valuable: she embraces the future as an opportunity to do the next good thing. She welcomes the future with hope and faith, just as she welcomed Paul with hope and faith. And because she welcomes Paul and she welcomes the future, she goes on to welcome more and more friends and seekers to the faith family that worships God in her house. Embracing the future as an opportunity to do the next good thing enables God to do the next good things through us. Welcoming the future enables us to welcome the Holy Spirit. And who knows what it might do in us!

¹ All quotations from Fleming Rutledge are taken from the sermon “Lydia, The First Christian in Europe” found on pages 247-255 in her book [Help My Unbelief](#).