

# *“Look for Lydia, Look to Lydia”*

*Easter 6C*

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Preacher

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From the Pulpit

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Not too long ago, I was having lunch with one of my coworkers. She likes to be called Artlady. Artlady is so passionate about her work. Some may even call her crazy about her work. I’m serious. If you’re passing by Artlady or have a moment or two to speak with Artlady, be prepared to listen!

She isn’t just passionate about art, though. She loves to share what work she’s doing outside her world of art, whether it’s with Central Ohio Rescue & Restore Coalition, the Salvation Army, or S.O.A.P. (Stop Open Adolescent Prostitution). Artlady enjoys recommending what she’s read lately, like *The Slave Next Door* by Kevin Bales. And if you were to give her one or two more minutes of your time, she would encourage you to be trained in administering Narcan. “Everybody needs to be trained in case of emergency,” she’d say.

During this meal we shared, Artlady’s telling me more of her work. How she’s traveled to Australia, Mexico, France and the UK to support and rescue women there. I was so amazed at what great lengths she would go to do this work, I worked up the courage to ask her, “Where does your passion to do this work come from. I’m

imagining you didn't just grow up wanting to do this sort of work." When I finished asking this question, she sighed and closed her eyes, as if she were going back in time to relive what she had experienced as a young girl.

This is what Artlady shared with me. She grew up in Louisville, KY with her family. At the age of eleven, while she was in the car with her dad running some errands late at night, she saw another young girl outside alone. Artlady figures the young girl had to be about the same age as her then, and she was outside on the side on the road, in a white cotton nightgown, all alone. Artlady says she knew then something was wrong but didn't know the words to describe what she thought was going on. When she got home, having told her dad what she'd seen, her family prayed for the young girl's safe return home.

After telling me about this childhood experience, Artlady came back to being present with me. Artlady told me she saw herself in that young girl she never really met that night in Louisville. She sees that young girl every time she meets and works with young women today. Ever since that experience, that young girl is been imprinted within Artlady. The young girl she saw that night drives who Artlady is – where she goes, the work she does, the friends and community she makes. Her life's work to help rescue, support, and house women came about, in large part, by way of that one night.

It was fascinating to learn of such an influential experience of Artlady's. Before we got the chance to finish our conversation, it was time to get back to work. I didn't even get a chance to ask her about the women she's met through her work - who the women are, or how they might struggle and persevere through life. I didn't get the chance to ask Artlady what comes of her meeting all the women she is able to meet and serve.

In today's first lesson reading, The story of Paul and Lydia's encounter tells me a lot, I imagine, of what I didn't get to ask or hear from Artlady. Where I didn't get a chance to hear of the women Artlady encountered, in Acts 16, I get to hear of and meet Lydia. Many scholars describe this reading in Acts 16 as "Paul's conversion of Lydia." Depending on which Version or Translation we look at, some bibles even title this pericope with a similar variation like "Lydia's conversion in Philippi. I do believe this passage has in it a lot to say about conversion, but I wonder what and how we might think of conversion. Conversion is happening all throughout the Acts of the Apostles, the Bible really. But here, it seems that conversion isn't just centered around Lydia's salvation as some might suggest.

Still, let's get started considering this central figure, Lydia of Thyatira, who Paul meets in Philippi. Lydia was a powerhouse, for sure. In a 1st-century Jewish world where Gentile women were made lower than low, Lydia thrived. Using her gifts and talents,

Lydia is able to gain housing for herself and her household. She is in business, maybe even for herself, as a dealer of purple cloth. And in her urging Paul and his companions to stay at her house, we know that she not only has the wherewithal to solicit and gain home ownership. Lydia also has the resources to extend hospitality and accommodate neighbors unexpectedly.

Sista' has it going on, you hear me? And that's not all. Lydia not only was a homeowner, she was a leader in her community. Down by the riverside outside of the city, Paul and his companions did not discover the Man of Macedonia who cried for their help. They found women! Lydia was there as a member of this gathering of women. The women at this gathering were not there for a social. They weren't there passing time, waiting around for the men to come lead them in worship or rituals. The original language for our English word "gathering" suggests this gathering was both formal and purposeful. Their gathering was, in fact, an act of worship. Lydia and the women there were being servant-leaders in their community, for their community. They might have been praying for their community. Or they may have been organizing services and programs for the needs of their neighbors. Whatever the gathering there included, we can be sure it was meaningful and of significance. What these women did at that gathering mattered to their community.

Who Lydia is and who she represents is important as we consider Paul's encounter with her. Lydia is an immigrant in Philippi who cares for, protects, conducts, and administers what might have been a significant number of peoples in her household and her community. She does all of this in a setting where women, immigrants, and a god-fearer were marginalized. In this social setting, Lydia's faith community and household are found, here in Scripture serving, thriving, overcoming.

It takes great hope, great dedication, great fidelity, to be a transcendent powerhouse like Lydia. Let it be known, let's set the record straight: Lydia exhibits the great gifts of hospitality, hope, and fidelity *before* Paul walks into her life. These gifts are evident in her social, economic, and religious life. Lydia represents life resting not on dominance, but on community and participation. Lydia represents life in which a despised and humbled people can become transformed into a people of solidarity with one another, encouraging one another in the faith, strengthened to overcome and even thrive. This is who Lydia is, who she is before meeting Paul. A Powerhouse. What does change in Lydia's life is, in meeting Paul, she encounters one she had not yet met. And I don't mean Silas or the others who accompanied Paul on his mission. Lydia met Jesus!

When Paul comes and meets the women at the gathering, the Lord comes and opens Lydia's heart. When Scripture says "the Lord" in this passage, Lord refers to the risen Christ. The same risen Christ

who came down to speak and call Paul near Damascus. The action of the risen Christ links the events here in Acts 16 to Paul's call story in Acts 9. Scripture makes it quite clear: Lydia's heart is introduced to God's Love, in the person of Jesus Christ, not necessarily the content of Paul's teaching. What may have made all the difference in the world is Paul's willingness to sit and be present with Lydia and the women, which vastly contrasts Paul's custom of going first to the Jew. Paul's willingness to develop new friendship, new relationship is groundbreaking in his ministry and Christ's church.

Lydia responds, promptly and unconditionally, to the risen Christ by being baptized. You see, I'm willing to boldly dare that Lydia's baptism is not a chronological history to recall, but is Kairotic for both Paul and the church of Christ. Lydia's life truly changes when her gifts and talents are recognized and affirmed by the distinguished, the honorable Apostle Paul. Better stated, Lydia's life changes when Paul concedes his customs and realizes that our loving God, in the person of the risen Lord, recognizes and affirms Lydia's leadership, her life and her work. When Lydia prevails over Paul and his companions, walls are broken down, customs are adapted, boundaries erased.

The elements present in this conversion narrative suggest that rather than being converted from one discrete religious practice to another, Lydia is instead called to bring others into relationship

with the likes of Paul and his companions as well. And that first group of people is Lydia's entire household. The same way Paul extends God's welcome to Lydia, Lydia insists her household be baptized and experience recognition and affirmation too. This was a great and true day of restoration and reconciliation where Jews and Gentiles, men and women, patron and client came together in unity and friendship.

And Lydia isn't finished when both she and her household are baptized. She convinces Paul and his companions to stay in her home. Paul agreeing to lodge in Lydia's home isn't just about a housing arrangement. In Philippi, Lydia is the one who's been working for the advancement of her faith community and household in her space and time and Paul is faced with a choice - is Lydia and her community part of God's plan and mission? And the answer is, to no surprise, Lydia, the Powerhouse, prevails. Paul's custom of spreading the good news to the Jew first and then, through the Jew, the Gentile nations is changed. As Paul agrees to lodge with Lydia in her home, what prevails is a new way to understand God's plan and mission. People like Lydia and her community are God's plan and mission! The Holy Spirit teaches Paul and us this: the risen Lord - not us, not our customs - will lead in how God's home is made known in heaven and here on earth.

Perhaps a significant aspect of conversion we sometimes overlook is the change that happens is not within the other, but within

ourselves. Conversion towards God comes as we live beyond our norms, outside our cultures and traditions. Conversion towards God comes as we understand hospitality and community anew. Paul's encounter, our encounter with Lydia and the women in Philippi depict just this sort of conversion.

More than seeing Lydia converted, might we see Lydia as being presented to us. It's as if the Holy Spirit wanted Paul and us to find Lydia. Maybe, it is part of God's plan and mission that we look for Lydia (and it's not just to convert *her!*). According to Luke, if it were not for the Spirit of Jesus, Paul might have never encountered her. We may have never encountered Lydia! In the verses leading up to Paul's vision, it's important to note that Paul had not been planning to go to Philippi, or any part of Macedonia for the matter. At least not yet.

After visiting some of the churches Paul and Barnabas founded on their first missionary trip, Paul attempted to spread the good news throughout Asia Minor in cities like Phrygia and Galatia, Mysia and Bithynia. But scripture says "the Spirit of Jesus" blocked them from visiting these places. This is the only time in Acts, and I believe Scripture, where the Spirit is announced as Spirit "of Jesus." Only after receiving this vision does the mission move fluidly and take shape. The relative ease with which Paul and his traveling companions to travel Neapolis stands in contrast to the resistance and challenges Paul faced in v.5-8 where there was a divine

mandate and obstruction against preaching. It is almost as if they wander around Asia Minor until God grants them a direction.

As Paul and Lydia gather together in Philippi, both of their communities learn hospitality anew, extravagant welcome anew, and the peace of Christ anew. In meeting Lydia, Paul learns that Christian communities arise out of the common experience of the Spirit and he takes this experience with him going forward. In the Pauline epistles, we come to know Paul is all about partnership. He travels and ministers with others, people of every background, who he often times calls “coworkers.” He writes his letters with others, with people he lists as co-authors or co-senders, and he develops partnerships with these churches and all of their ministers.

Lydia is front and center in God’s movement in the early church, as a Powerhouse. The powerhouse who may have play a large role in opening Paul’s eye to see what the church can become as she comes to extend great hospitality and welcomes the gifts, talents, and leadership of people like Lydia. Thinking back on the conversation I didn’t get to finish with Artlady, I don’t know that I have to ask her those question I wasn't able to get to. Knowing of Lydia helps me to feel I know Artlady well enough to know what her answer might be. Her answer would not be made with just words though, her answer would paint a picture. My bet is Artlady would run to her car, grab a book and bring it back to me.

She'd open the Shutterfly book she probably spent hours putting together with her husband and begin to point to the women she's met over the years. She'd tell me some of the wonderful accomplishments they've made together, or another art-piece that's going to be displayed in an exhibit at a museum nearby or far away.

Artlady would smile the entire time she's telling me of these powerhouse women she's met, and once she's done, she'd hold the book close to her, as if she were hugging the book. As if she were hugging those women in the book. Artlady found friendship in places she never thought she'd go, with people she had no clue she would meet. My bet is she's found a home in God anew, in the person of the risen Christ, by way of these relationships. That's what happened in Macedonia when Paul and his companions unexpectedly met the women at the gathering by the riverside. My bet is God's home is being made anew in our communities too.

So, let us take our cue from Paul and Artlady. Consider how the Holy Spirit calls us to open our eyes to look for Lydia today. Look for new friendships, look for new community, and look for how this newness might change our lives. Look to Lydia for her gifts, her talents, her leadership. Look to Lydia as the risen Christ opens our eyes to God's home being made known in heaven and here on earth! Amen.

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