

A photograph of a long, straight dirt road stretching from the foreground into the distance. The road is flanked by dry, scrubby vegetation. In the background, there are low hills and a clear blue sky with scattered white clouds. The overall tone is serene and open.

SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER | MAY 22, 2022

VISIBLE AND
INVISIBLE

ACTS 16:9-34

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Have you ever been on a road trip? The pack up the car and just go kind? With a final destination planned, perhaps, but where the journey to get there was at least part of the fun? I've done it a couple of times, out on the east coast; my grandparents used to drive an RV all the way to Arizona in the winter, and then back again come spring. Gas prices being what they are this summer, I expect most of us will be staying closer to home this year! Part of the adventure of travelling, whether by road trip or plane or train or however you do it, are the people you meet and the places and sights you see. The surprising vista as you crest a hill or turn a corner; the foreignness and challenge of a new city; interesting conversations and unexpected kindnesses from strangers. But in all my travels, with friends or alone, in Canada and the US and further afield, I can't say I've ever been thrown in jail; not so far anyway.

Paul and Silas's road trip sounds like a much wilder experience than any trip I've been on.

Paul and Silas, though, are not making this journey for fun or to see new sights. They are on a journey with a purpose, and that purpose is to introduce people to the gospel: to share the incredible true story of Jesus, what his life, death and resurrection mean, and how people can respond. The story of ultimate hope: of life-giving, life-changing power.

Our Scripture reading this morning offers us a picture of their evangelizing road trip, during their stopover in the city of Philippi. I love that Paul and Silas and their group look for a place to pray when the Sabbath day arrived.

Whenever I'm in a new city, if it's over the weekend, I like to find a church to worship at. In Europe, most big city churches are open during the week for tours; but a worship service offers a much richer experience. Paul and Silas don't go looking for a cathedral (since there was no such thing yet) and they don't go looking for a synagogue, which did exist as a place for Jewish religious gatherings. They go to the river. And there, they find the makings of a new Christian community.

Several women, including Lydia, a businesswoman from Thyatira, were also there at the river that Sabbath day. As they all got to talking to one another it turned out that Lydia was a worshiper of God, one of those non-Jewish adherents to the Temple and to God. Through Paul and Silas' conversation with her that day, her whole family was baptized into what we would call the Christian faith. She is widely- remembered by the Church as the first documented Christian convert in Europe.

Lydia was a woman of means and independence. Purple cloth was a luxury item, back then. And she had moved from Thyatira to Philippi, taking her whole household with her. She was able to offer the hospitality of her home to our wandering evangelists; eventually, she will even establish and fund a house church.

What a difference there is between independent, financially-comfortable Lydia, and the second, nameless, woman in this story.

After the bright and happy story of Lydia and her household, Paul and Silas enter into a much uglier experience on their road trip, complete with slavery and evil spirits, exploitation and anti-Semitism, violence and imprisonment. As they go about the city, they are followed by a girl who is doubly enslaved, first to her human owners and even worse, to a spirit that enabled her to predict the future - a highly marketable affliction in Greco-Roman society. This is a girl who desperately needs to be saved.

She kind of goes off book, though, when she sees Paul and Silas; rather than predicting the future, she proclaims what is: that the two men are "slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim...the way of salvation." Interesting that this enslaved girl saw them as slaves, too. Paul was annoyed by her; perhaps because she followed them around, day after day, perhaps because he didn't like the fact that the message of the gospel was being spoken by a less than reputable, less than holy, person.

Before we are too hard on Paul, remember that Jesus regularly told people possessed by evil spirits to be quiet, when they announced who he was. Whatever the reason for Paul's annoyance, the result of his actions was decidedly mixed. The girl is freed of evil spirit, but remains a slave to her masters, and a less valuable slave at that.

These awful men who had been getting rich by exploiting her terrible spiritual burden, go to the local Roman law enforcement.

Rather than accusing Paul and Silas of affecting their livelihood, they go for much more serious charges: they are Jews, they are disturbing the peace, and they are proselytizing for an illicit religion. If there is one thing you don't do in the Roman Empire, it's disturb the Pax Romana, the universal peace, enforced by Rome's army and Rome's laws. Paul and Silas are stripped, beaten and thrown in jail.

This is the stuff of travel nightmares - but Paul and Silas are remarkably cool and collected about the whole situation. They pass the night praying and singing hymns while the other prisoners listened. When a miraculous opportunity to escape presents itself, no one goes; the jailor, who thought suicide was the only honourable path left to him, is overwhelmed to find all his prisoners still there. Paul and Silas, clearly the ringleaders, are whisked away to the jailor's home, where they are cared for and fed. The jailor and his household, like Lydia and her household, become a church in a single night: redeemed, baptized, and in joyful fellowship, over a meal, with one another.

Paul and Silas, Timothy and the rest of the group travelling together - what an incredible journey so far. Paul and Silas in particular become heroic figures, winning over Lydia and her household, liberating a girl from an evil spirit in Jesus' name, continuing to put the gospel and their evangelistic intent first, ahead of their own freedom, while unjustly imprisoned. And when they are set free themselves, without missing a beat, yet another household is turned toward Jesus.

Paul and Silas are driving the action of this story, even when jailed; everything they do is on the public stage: travelling around, meeting people, preaching and proclaiming the good news by word and deed. They are out there, in full view, doing ministry in the public square, highly visible in their work and witness, as they evangelize and plant churches and get in and out of trouble.

But there's a lot going on behind the scenes that we don't see in this story, too.

Whole conversations are excised; I, for one, would love to know what Paul and Lydia spoke about, what got talked about around the table at the jailor's house. And some follow-up, an epilogue, would be great to read: how did Lydia get on with her house church? Did she and the jailor combine their households into one larger church? What happened to the girl after she was freed from the evil spirit? Did she find her way to Lydia's church too?

Church and our ministry today can be just like this. We focus on those individuals and things that are visible: ministers and pastors, worship leaders and team leaders, the high impact, high interest, highly visible roles at church; the exciting stories and the big successes. All of those roles are absolutely essential, as was the work that Paul and Silas and the others were doing. And the grand stories are good, too. But Paul and Silas and Timothy and the whole group wouldn't have had much success in Philippi without Lydia and her hospitality; Paul and Silas alone would have had a very different and perhaps much longer experience of prison without the kindness and courage of the jailor. Ministry, the good news-sharing work of the church in any century, then or today, is made possible by those who are often not seen and at times not named. Despite our tendency to love a good story with a solid, heroic lead character, this leg of Paul and Silas' journey reminds us that it takes a team for the work to get done and the church to flourish. All are co-labourers in Christ's saving work.

Paul and Silas do the flashy, adventurous and necessary work of introducing Jesus and church-planting little enclaves of believers. Lydia, the jailor and their households are doing the long, sometimes dull, always challenging work of church building; of demonstrating their faith each and every day to their neighbours and to one another, in word and deed, continuing in their hospitality, their generosity, and their every-day courage: constant witnesses, no days off or travelling on.

Paul and Silas will shortly move on, off to be visible proclaimers and persuaders of the good news in new and different places. By dint of history, Lydia, the jailor and their fellow believers have become invisible to us. But without them, we - the Church today - wouldn't exist, any more than we would without Paul and Silas's work. Both are absolutely necessary.

But the real driving and creative force behind everything that happened in today's Scripture reading isn't Paul or Silas, with their visible ministry, and it isn't Lydia or the jailor or the girl, in her need. The real agent of change, of growth and transformation, is yet more invisible; a silent co-labourer, or at least an unseen one. It's impossible to preach faithfully about the book of Acts without talking about the Holy Spirit.

Paul and Silas's road trip with a purpose began because of the Holy Spirit. It was Paul's Spirit-given vision of a man in Macedonia yearning for the gospel that sent them off on this journey. They haven't even made it there yet, and already the Spirit is doing the invisible work that no preacher, no evangelist, can ever do. When the Spirit is involved, there is no such thing as luck or coincidence.

Lydia and the other women were there, at the river that Sabbath day; and her heart was opened by the Lord, by the Spirit, so that she listened eagerly to what was said by Paul. And she believed - it changed her life.

The girl with the evil spirit, though, has occasioned significant debate: was she moved by a different spirit, God's Spirit, to harass and harangue Paul until he freed her? Or was she entirely in thrall to the evil spirit within her? Did she become unaffiliated, spiritually-speaking, once that evil thing was out of her? Or could she have responded to her new spiritual liberation by embracing the salvation on offer from the God who set her free? I like to think she did.

I find the challenging part of the girl's story to be that she was only partially freed from all the bonds that chained her; she remained a slave to her human masters. But perhaps, like Paul and Silas, who sang hymns in prison and remained captive even after their cell was unlocked and their chains broken, perhaps the girl likewise proclaimed and witnessed to her spiritual salvation in Christ even as her own captivity continued.

After all, the earthquake that broke their chains and shook the cell doors open had nothing to do with setting Paul and Silas and the prisoners free from prison. But it had everything to do with liberating their jailor.

The Holy Spirit comes very close to visibility with that earthquake - what an awesome demonstration of the Spirit's power and commitment to opening hearts and making it possible for men and women to truly hear the good news and be changed by it. Without that earthquake, without Paul and Silas' decision to stay where they were to save the jailor's life - that jailor and his household would never have been ready to hear the good news.

It's a real co-labouring moment, where the Spirit acts powerfully to make the way passable, and the disciples Paul and Silas follow through, witnessing to Jesus by their decisions, their words and their actions. And the result is a whole bunch of people turning to follow Jesus themselves.

I have a question for you: do you believe that the Spirit still acts today?

Now, don't give me a quick answer; really consider it. When you think about the church, or about your own, personal witness, when you think of a person you know whom you'd love to see become a real, dedicated Christ follower, do you believe that the Spirit still acts today?

To open hearts and make people ready to listen; to speak to even the most broken human spirits; to set all the pieces in place for us to follow through with our Christ-shaped actions and words to really show people what it means to follow Jesus? The book of Acts is all about the early days of the Christian movement, as it spread like wildfire from city to town to village, across the Middle East and parts of Europe. It's often called the "Acts of the Apostles", referring to Peter and John and Paul and Silas and the rest; it would more accurately be called the Acts of the Holy Spirit.

Because none of that extraordinary growth would've been possible without the Spirit's heart-opening, mind-changing, indwelling presence. The Holy Spirit, though, is hard to pin down; many of us who follow Jesus have probably had some sense of the Spirit moving in our lives, or working away in our hearts. But we may well struggle to talk about the Spirit, our ideas about the Spirit less fully formed.

Some branches of Christianity are very into the Spirit, very comfortable calling on and speaking about what the Spirit is and does. Although we Presbyterians are very spiritual, we shy away a bit from talk of the Spirit. And while I don't think we need to be uncomfortable or leery of the Spirit, a little awe and respect is no bad thing. This is the same part of God, after all, that moved over the waters of creation, that animated the mud and dust of the first humans when God breathed life into them; the same Spirit that spoke through prophets and kings; the same Spirit that appeared as a dove over Jesus and in wind and fire on Pentecost, a holy moment we'll be celebrating soon. And it's the same Spirit that Jesus promised would be with us, dwelling within our hearts and minds, our advocate, our comfort, our guide, when we become his.

Later this week, on Thursday, we'll be starting Thy Kingdom Come, a time of prayer and devotional reflection between the day honouring Jesus' ascension into heaven and Pentecost, the day the Spirit came. For the last two years, if memory serves, we've actually been in lockdown during this period of the church year, but we've participated in Thy Kingdom Come online together.

For those who don't know, it's a global prayer movement with the primary goal of praying for five people that we personally know, that the Spirit would open their hearts and make them ready to hear the Good News. There are Thy Kingdom Come devotional prayer journals to help you this year - you can pick one up at the greeter's tables on the way out - and I'll be sending the same devotional around by email each day, to help us reflect and dig a little deeper into the nature and power of the Holy Spirit.

But the central part is really praying that the Spirit will work in our five people; it might seem too small, but consider: there will be literally millions of other Christians around the world praying for five people they know, too, during those eleven days. If just ten million Christians prayed, that's fifty million people being prayed for; but it's a lot more than ten million people praying, spread out over 170 countries and over 80 denominations. That's a lot of people being prayed for, a lot of yearning for the Spirit to act.

So let me ask you again: do you believe that the Spirit still acts today, to open hearts and ears and lives to the saving power of Jesus? Do you really believe?

Then I invite you to pray, and to take some time over the next two weeks to learn more about the Spirit, who acts powerfully for change, working invisibly in every heart and situation, co-labourer and driving force behind all that we do and all that we hope for as the church together. Thanks be to God. Amen.