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St. John's Episcopal Church, Mount Pleasant
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Easter VI, Rogation
Acts 16:9-15; Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5

"A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us." (Acts 16:14a)

In the world of Luke's narrative, women are given greater prominence and independence than what was going on in his social and political world. Lydia is a literary example of a theological truth: God's saving grace dismantles social barriers.

On close reading, Lydia is an example of the countercultural nature of the church. She and some other women gather to pray by the river – they don't need a male figure to lead them, there are no husbands or boys mentioned, they simply gather to pray. Not unlike our own Red Tent women. Lydia worships God but she's not a member of the Christian community. Lydia is an outsider – she is not from Philippi, not even a European – she is from Thyatira in Asia Minor. Lydia is a businesswoman – she sells purple cloth, fabric dyed from the most expensive of dyes, extracted from the fluids of an unusual and fairly rare sea mollusk. She's independent, with an income that allows her to have a household – and a home to which she may invite guests.

And her heart is open. Soon, she will open her home, which will become a center for missionary activity in Philippi.

But first – first, her heart is opened.

I'm so very curious about this story, and about its place in our lectionary – indeed, about its place in the Christian Bible.

I'm curious because so much of Holy Scripture is centered on the men: A male God, Adam, Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Jesus, the twelve disciples, the Gospel writers, Paul. Think of the stories you know from the Bible – with the exception of Eve, Mary the mother of Jesus, and Mary Magdalene, you might have a hard time remembering any women in the Bible. And yet here is one of the central figures in the early church – and we know so little about her, but Luke is very intentional in bringing her to our attention.

I think there are a couple of things going on here.

First, Luke speaks more often of women than the other Gospel writers. Women seem to have a more important place in his literature than elsewhere in the New Testament.

Second, the prominence of women is important to Luke's conviction, as I said earlier, that God's saving grace is available to all – regardless of social distinctions, regardless of class or gender. I really don't think it matters at all to Luke that the early disciples were men – that's

simply a fact of the times. But it does matter to Luke that a woman anointed Jesus' feet, wept, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair (Luke 7:38). It does matter to Luke that that woman's sins were forgiven. It does matter to Luke that Jesus healed Mary Magdalene, that Joanna and Susanna joined the disciples (Luke 8:2-3). And it matters to Luke that it was the *women* who saw to the burial of Jesus – and it was the *women* who first learned of his resurrection. And Luke says that they went to tell the others. The men.

So it makes sense that Luke would bring to our attention Priscilla, Lydia, and the heads of other households in the early church. Remember that in the beginning, we didn't have actual "churches." No, there were no cathedrals or basilicas in the early church, no parish churches, no charming country chapels – they didn't all of a sudden spring from the earth in the first century.

Instead, people worshiped in houses. Yes, they actually prayed and celebrated and praised God in houses – and often those households were led by women. Lydia, for example.

Imagine it. A woman knows a few Christians and invites them to her house. A small group of followers of The Way gather in the evening. They fear the Romans, for they are still a very small minority. But they yearn to worship the risen Lord, they yearn for communion with one another, and they yearn to break and share the bread that is the Body of Christ. They sit around a table and give thanks. They hear the stories – the stories of miracle healings, the sayings of peace and God's love, and from time to time they hear the story of his crucifixion and his resurrection. Then they break the bread and share the wine.

It's really not much different from what we do, is it.

Face it: Without the women, the church, even this particular church, might not exist. For remember, when St. John's Episcopal Church was so broke in the early 20th Century that the doors had to be shut the women's guild kept the community together and scraped together enough dollars to bring in a priest to celebrate the sacrament. Without those women, this church might not be open.

And without the women of the early church, where would the first followers gather?

Going back farther – without the women at the tomb, would we even know of the resurrection?

There wasn't really any precedent for Jewish or Greco-Roman women to be leaders, or to speak in public – and so it appears that for Luke, at least, the role of women was to be first converts, because they could inspire (or require) the conversion of their household, and second, to be hospitable – to provide gathering places for the followers of Christ, to provide food and welcome.

And while we have made significant gains in the role of women both in society and in the church, don't we also too often relegate women to the same roles? The mother who needs to

see to the spiritual upbringing of her children, the women who provide the hospitality of the home and church?

I don't think the women who owned the houses were simply providing coffee and cookies, in effect, for the Christian community. I think that this quite possibly gave them some avenue to power in the church.

What happened?

Well, the men took over, and women were very specifically excluded from the new hierarchies of the early church. But that's another story for another time.

I'm not sure there was a lot of egalitarianism back in the very early church, but we have to remember that it was a new, diverse, untested, and threatened movement that allowed for some fluidity in the roles of women and men. I mean, if you were Paul, you needed to take what you could get! If that meant women converts and wealthy women providing hospitality, so be it!

And Lydia's heart was open.

She's an interesting character, this Lydia. Born on the margin, living on the margin actually, due to her unusual wealth and privilege, a prayerful and a worshiper of God. And her heart was ready to be transformed. And so it was.

And from that simple transformation - from the breaking open of a heart that yearned for grace - a small community of believers grew. The church at Philippi, meeting in a woman's house for prayer and communion, would grow to the point where it could actually send money and gifts to the missionary Paul.

They probably didn't have a heater or air conditioner to maintain.

All because Lydia's heart was open to the Holy Spirit and the mercy of God's redeeming love. All because Paul didn't hesitate to tell her the amazing story of God's mercy. All because the Spirit that is God moved the hearts of a household.

And a new church was born.

It is particularly important that we remember today the mothers of the church. Lydia and Priscilla, and the mostly unnamed mothers of our own parish. Women whose hearts were opened and whose desire for a Christian community kept the faith alive.

Thanks be to God for the mothers of our church.

Amen.