

+ Acts 16:11-15 + Big Words of Easter: Service + 5th Sunday of Easter + 24 April 2016 +

**CIR HIRI!**<sup>1</sup> Dear Fellow Servants of the Living Savior,

As a pastor, I get the privilege to enjoy certain unique experiences. Part of that has to do with the unique perspective that I have as a pastor. Pouring the waters of Holy Baptism over the head of a fellow soul is a joyful experience, yet one of my favorite tasks as a pastor. Giving someone the Lord's Supper for the first time is another one of those joyful, yet favorite tasks, especially when it comes after months of instruction in God's Word. Encouraging someone with the comfort of Christ before the Lord calls them home to heaven is no less a privilege. Then there are those "light bulb" moments when suddenly Scriptural truth clicks in the middle of a class or counseling session or when sharing Jesus. There are also those times when I get to observe years of quiet spiritual growth burst into bloom.

Yet it's not just my unique perspective as a pastor that makes those experiences such a privilege to enjoy. It's getting to observe firsthand what the Lord is doing. It's not just pouring baptismal waters over someone's head, but seeing the Holy Spirit perform a miracle in the heart of that soul through his powerful Word connected to that water. It's not just communing someone whom I've spent months instructing, but giving that person Christ's body and blood with bread and wine for their forgiveness. It's not just comforting that soul heading home to heaven, but watching the Savior strengthen that soul once more to finish the race.

It's not just enjoying the "light bulb" moments in class or counseling or sharing Jesus, but seeing the Holy Spirit work through the Word to bring light into darkness, knowledge where there was misunderstanding, and life where there was death. It's not just watching souls "grow up in the faith," but seeing the Lord cause their faith to blossom with spiritual maturity, fruits of faith, and a willing eagerness to serve. It's the privilege of seeing what happens when faith in the living Savior takes root. As a pastor, I get a front-row seat while the Lord does amazing things.

The Apostle Paul and his companions had that same privilege as they traveled from city to city spreading the good news of Jesus across Turkey and into Greece. They had front-row seats as the Lord did amazing things in hearts and lives across two continents. This morning we find Paul and his companions on the northwest coast of Turkey. They're in a port city called Troas. At the time, it was the last city before you crossed from Asia into Europe. They didn't spend much time there, since they were sailing to the northern region of Greece known as Macedonia and the coastal cities there.

Luke, the writer of Acts, doesn't make a big deal about it, but their short voyage was one of the most important trips in history. Why? The Gospel, the good news of Jesus, was extending from Asia into Europe for the first time. The world would never be the same, but for Paul and his companions, their focus was simply on getting to **"Philippi, a Roman colony"** and **"leading city of that district of Macedonia."**

Philippi was a prominent colony of the Roman Empire and a popular retirement spot for Roman soldiers, but it was missing something—a synagogue. Now why would that be a big deal? Well, when Paul visited a city, he went to the Jewish synagogue first. They had the Old Testament. They knew about the Savior to come, but they didn't know Jesus. So Paul would preach there until God made it clear that he should reach out to the non-Jews, the Gentiles, but Philippi didn't have a synagogue.

So where did he go? Luke describes what happened. **"On the Sabbath day we went outside the city gate by the river, where we thought there was a place of prayer. We sat down and spoke to the women gathered there."** There were few Jews in the city of Philippi, especially Jewish men. In fact, when Paul and his companions arrived at the riverside, they only found a group of godly, Jewish women. So Paul and his companions took the opportunity to talk to them about Jesus the Messiah—God's long-promised Anointed One sent to save all people from their sins.

Now one of those listening was **"a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth...who also worshiped God..."** Lydia was from a city in Turkey called Thyatira. It was one of the only cities in the Roman Empire that manufactured purple dye. You see, purple was the color of royalty and wealth, because it was very expensive. The dye could only be produced from a certain kind of shell from a certain coast of the Mediterranean Sea. So

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<sup>1</sup> "Christ is risen!" "He is risen indeed!" This is known as the *Paschal Greeting*, one of the oldest and most widespread traditions in the Christian church. Throughout the weeks of the Easter season, whenever the minister says to the people, "Christ is risen!", they automatically respond loudly and boldly, "He is risen indeed!"

if you were **“a dealer in purple cloth,”** you could make a lot of money—and Lydia was a wealthy businesswoman.

Yet she was also a faithful worshiper of the true God. She may have once been a Gentile, but there was no doubt that she trusted in the true God. She had come to know the true God and the coming Messiah through the Old Testament. She regularly met with those godly women by the river outside Philippi’s city gate, but then Paul showed up. What Paul shared with Lydia and those other women was nothing short of amazing! You could say it was a “light bulb” moment for Lydia—one Paul and his companions got to observe.

Paul explained how the entire Old Testament pointed to Jesus of Nazareth, who came and fulfilled all those prophecies—born in Bethlehem in poverty, lived a holy life, suffered and died on a cross for the sins of the world, and rose again three days later to conquer death forever. He helped Lydia to connect what she knew about the Old Testament with her newly-discovered Savior. Luke tells us, **“The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was spoken by Paul.”** On that Sabbath morning, the Lord led Lydia to pay attention and carefully consider what Paul was teaching.

In doing so, the Lord changed Lydia’s heart. The Holy Spirit graciously and powerfully planted faith in her heart through his Word—and then through the waters of Holy Baptism. Lydia **“and the members of her household were baptized...”** What started as an ordinary Sabbath morning for Lydia and her household became a day that changed her life and their lives forever.

Paul and his companions were privileged to see the Lord turn on that lightbulb of faith inside Lydia and her household through their teaching. They were privileged to pour baptismal waters over the heads of fellow souls welcoming them into God’s family with his forgiveness, but there was even more that they had the privilege to see on that Sabbath day. They saw what happens when faith in the living Savior takes root.

Luke explains, **“After [Lydia] and her household were baptized, she urged us, ‘If you consider me a believer in the Lord, come and stay at my house.’ And she persuaded us.”** Paul intentionally didn’t earn any money as a proclaimer of the Gospel. He didn’t want anyone to accuse him of doing it for the money. So he had a side job to pay the bills. He made tents, but Lydia wasn’t going to let him do that. You see, Lydia’s faith in Jesus had already taken root, and she saw an opportunity to serve her Lord. She wanted Paul and his companions to be able to spend all their time in Philippi teaching and preaching that wonderful news of Jesus that she had heard. So Lydia invited them to be guests in her home. She practically pleaded with them for the privilege—and she persuaded them. The Lord caused Lydia’s faith to bear fruit!

Now what does it look like when faith in your living Savior takes root? What does it look like in your life? It starts with how we look at God’s Word. Sometimes you and I take for granted the wonderful, life-giving good news that we get to hear week in and week out. We take for granted that we get to study God’s Word at home and here at church. Given enough time, you and I can easily forget how life-changing the good news of Jesus really is and how that message of the Servant-Savior who suffered for your sins impacts every aspect of your life.

When we do that, then we start coming to church on Sunday morning with my father used to call “dropsy” and “heart failure.” We drop into our seats and don’t have the heart to do anything else. You listen. You think, “That’s nice, but I’m glad church is finally over because I have other things to do and other places I’d rather be.” You grab some snacks afterwards, say hi to a few friends, and go home, but did you take the time to pay attention? Did you carefully consider what you heard? Did you stop to listen so that good news of Jesus could establish strong roots in your heart which would then lead you to look for ways to serve your living Savior? Or did you forget that our Christian lives aren’t just on Sundays? Did you forget that you and I live as Christians all week long—eagerly and willingly serving our Lord and one another?

The glaring mirror of God’s holy Law shows quite clearly that you and I have taken God’s Word for granted, that we have not let faith in our living Savior make strong roots, that we have not eagerly and willingly served our Lord and one another. Yet you and I have a Savior who eagerly and willingly left his heavenly home to serve you and me. In fact, he came **“to give his life as a ransom for many”** (Mark 10:45)—as the payment price for the guilt of all your sins and mine, for all those times when we went through the motions or grudgingly served him. Yet Jesus also came to be the living Vine—as we heard in John 15. He came to connect you so closely to himself that his life flows into your life.

What does it look like when faith in your living Savior takes root? It impacts how you view life—not just grudging obedience to God, but willing and eager service to the Savior who lived and died and rose for you!

Faith in the living Savior leads you to seek opportunities to use your gifts in his service. How beautiful that is when you see it! We've seen amazing examples here at Cross of Christ from faithful believers who've gone before us to fellow believers who spent weeks, even months, helping us build our church or helping us reach out to our community, but none of them were any more extraordinary than you and I are.

When faith in the living Savior takes root, it blossoms into action. It bears fruit—healthy and abundant, but that looks different in every one of our lives. Think for a moment what that looks like and what it can look like in your life. Every one of us has different gifts, different talents, different abilities, different interests, different experiences, but we all can serve the Lord with what our gracious God has given us. Why? Jesus lived for us! That impacts how and why we serve! Now with our building finished, we actually have a unique opportunity to use our gifts and talents together in Christ's service to go forward as a congregation. So how can you use your gifts to serve Jesus?

It is a humbling privilege to watch the Lord do amazing things in your hearts and through you, as he did through Lydia so long ago. Maybe someday some of you kids will get to have the same privilege as you serve God's people as a pastor or teacher. We have a living Savior who has changed our lives forever. May that good news drive deep roots into your soul and move you to eagerly serve him all the days of your life! **CIRHIRI!** Amen.