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## “Down by the Riverside”

A SERMON on Acts 16:6-15 for the 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter, Year C  
Preached 25 May 2025 by the Rev. Matthew Emery, Lead Minister  
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It was a warm afternoon, late July. I had just eaten lunch together with the man who would soon become my boss and colleague. I made my way out of town, got on the Interstate 90 freeway, and started heading back to Chicago, where I lived at the time. About 15 minutes down the road, I pulled off at the first service plaza, a “tollway oasis” as they’re called in Illinois, just outside the town of Belvidere. My mind racing and running, hard at work, I wandered around the little picnic area beside the building, watching cars and semi-trucks whiz by at full speed through the little tunnel formed by the main building of the oasis as it stretches like a bridge across the roadway.

I was standing there alone, not talking to anyone. But words, real words, came to my mind as I watched the traffic go by, words that really seemed to be a *response* to something. It was a sentence that only fully made sense if *someone* or *something* else had spoken to me. All I could think of at that moment were the words: “But I don’t wanna go to Rockford.”

You see, that late July day was almost 19 years ago, back in the summer of 2006, and I had just been up to the small city of Rockford, Illinois—about an hour-and-a-half to 2 hour drive northwest of Chicago—to interview with the search committee that eventually decided to put me forward as the candidate to be the new associate pastor at their church. I had just finished up seminary a couple of months earlier, and I was eagerly waiting to see where I would begin my journey in ordained ministry. At that time, though, I simply did not imagine that journey beginning in Rockford, Illinois. Having spent an internship year out in the Washington DC area, there was a part of me that imagined going back out to the East Coast. Or, if not there, then maybe in one of the major cities like Chicago or St. Louis, or at least a bit closer to one. It wasn’t that I had anything against Rockford, per se, but it admittedly is not a place that makes many top 10 lists of most desirable places to live.

To tell the truth, I wasn’t quite sure about the position either. It wasn’t anything about the church itself, but rather, having already done a full-time internship year, I was thinking that something more along the lines of a solo pastorate might be in order. I didn’t really think I was looking to be an associate pastor, and certainly not one who had leading the high school youth ministry as key responsibility. I even remember one of the search committee members, as she toured me around the west side of the city, asking me point blank: “Is this even the type of position you want?”

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Well, sometimes what we *think* we want and what we actually *need* to do—what we are *called* to do, what we later figure out *does* meet with our wants and desires—sometimes these are *not* the same thing. Certainly that would seem true for the apostle Paul in today’s scripture reading. Coming off a successful debate at the Council held in Jerusalem, where the efforts to welcome new people who were not already Jewish into the early Christian church were affirmed, Paul and his companions are eager to set off to new places to spread the good news about Jesus Christ. But a curious thing starts popping up in the text of the book of Acts as we read here. Verse 6 of this chapter tells us that “they went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, *having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia.*” So, it would seem that Paul wants to go to

Asia—which, I should note, is not the same Asia we know today, but was a term used for a region that today is in the country of Turkey. Anyway, Paul wants to set course for Asia, but is “forbidden” to go there by the Holy Spirit. The next verse tells us that they then “attempt[...] to go into Bithynia, *but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them.*” Hmmm...

Actually, it’s sort of a curious thing to think about what the real story is here, the deeper story behind the words the book of Acts gives us. What does it mean that they were “forbidden” to go somewhere by the Holy Spirit? Or that the Spirit of Jesus does not allow them to another? Do they see some sort of heavenly thunderbolts, or traffic lights in the sky? Or maybe is it possible that the author of the book, writing about the events after the fact, with the benefit of a bit of hindsight and knowledge about where the story did end up taking them, recognizes the work of the Spirit in much more mundane things? As one commentator ponders:

Could it be that as [the author] tells this story in retrospect that the machinations of the Holy Spirit were a bit more mundane than we often think? It is certainly possible that the way the Spirit “kept” them or “did not allow” them to go where they had planned was because the ox cart in which they had hitched a ride broke a wheel. Or maybe a key bridge had been washed out in a storm the week before. Possibly what kept them from going where they had planned to go was that someone ate a bad piece of meat and spent a whole day sick in bed. In other words, maybe what kept them from making the trip they wanted was not so different from what keeps us from fulfilling our plans sometimes: freak snowstorms, flat tires, a bad cold, a death in the family, a cloud of volcanic ash over our hoped-for vacation spot.<sup>1</sup>

Well, regardless of how exactly it happened, Paul and his companions sense that the Spirit is at work preventing them from going to Asia. But even in the midst of that preventing work, there does seem to be another way, the way forward given to Paul in his vision.

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Now, I will admit that as I stood at that highway service plaza in northern Illinois watching the traffic go by, I would not say I had what I would call “a vision.” I did *not* look out and see a ‘man of Rockford’ pleading with me, saying “Come over to Rockford and help us.” Nevertheless, as I said, those words running through my head—“but I don’t wanna go to Rockford”—were like a response to someone or something speaking to me. I can only believe that God was at work, calling me to that church, to that city, to that next season for my journey. I may not have known much at that time about Rockford, or have any sense of all the good things that would end up happening because I followed that sense of call, but, indeed, I did come to experience it as a good thing. I’m very thankful for that sense, that voice, that calling that led me there.

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Setting out on his journey to Philippi, the leading city of Macedonia, the apostle Paul doesn’t know what all will be in store for him and his companions, either. In other places where they go, they often start their efforts among an already existing Jewish community. They often go

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<sup>1</sup> Scott Hoezee, “Acts 16:9-15 Commentary”, *Center for Excellence in Preaching*, <https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2022-05-16/acts-169-15-3/>

first to the synagogue in an area, counting on finding there at least a few people there that would form the core of a new Christian community. However, in Philippi, this large and leading city of the region, we hear that Paul and his companions don't end up going to the synagogue on the Sabbath, but instead go out to the edge of town by the river. For some reason, *that* is where they "suppose[...] there [is] a place of prayer". We don't know why; perhaps there wasn't even large enough of a Jewish community in Philippi to form a synagogue. If that is indeed the case, then, without that kind of core community that Paul is used to starting from, it's not hard to imagine those words "but I don't wanna go to Macedonia" crossing Paul's mind a time or two.

Whatever Paul's initial reaction, we know from today's scripture reading that Paul's journey to Philippi and his trek out to the river-side on the Sabbath is not in vain. Down by that river-side, Paul comes to meet a woman named Lydia.

We don't know much from the Bible about Lydia, and most of what we know is contained here in the passage we've read this morning. But even in these few short verses, we learn some important things about Lydia, details that might be easy to overlook. One of those is the reference to her being a "dealer in purple cloth". But what seems like a random little detail to *our* ears may actually tell us quite a bit about Lydia's social status. In that society, purple was a colour reserved for wearing by the elite classes—the rich, the powerful, the leaders of Roman society—mainly because purple dye, and thus purple cloth, was expensive to make and hard to come by. And so, if Lydia deals in purple cloth, that means her circle of acquaintance is pretty high up in society. She probably has some financial means of her own at her disposal, which is pretty rare for a woman of that time.

But even with the place in society she has—the people she associates with, the financial means she has access to—nevertheless it seems that perhaps Lydia is searching for something more, something deeper. Lydia, you see, is a "worshipper of God," the story tells us. Again, that may seem like an ordinary, unremarkable detail, but in the context of that time and culture, that phrase actually means something quite specific. It means that she is not a Jew per se—she isn't Jewish by heritage, probably doesn't keep all of the Jewish law, and hasn't gone through the arduous process of an official conversion—but even as a Gentile, a non-Jew, she worships the God of Israel. Something about God as known by the Jewish people attracts her and compels her loyalty, amid a society with many options for religions to follow and gods to worship. In fact, being part of the Jewish community and worshipping their God was not, for the most part, seen as one of the more respectable religious options in Roman society. The Jewish people and their God were tolerated, but not exalted. I mean, otherwise, why would a powerful woman of means in a leading Roman city need to trek out to the outskirts of town along the river in order to worship and pray?

So she's not a "worshipper of God" out of mere custom or as a social obligation. Rather, in the midst of all she already had, Lydia is seeking—seeking something deeper, searching to know and be known by the one true God, open to the life God had in store for her. And in that openness, the Spirit brings her together with someone else open to the Spirit's leading, namely Paul and his companions. In her openness and her regular devotion to engaging in the practice of prayer, God opens her heart even further, to hear and receive the good news that Paul was proclaiming. And, it would seem, in Paul's good news, she finds what she has been looking for.

What is that good news that Paul proclaims? Well, Paul testifies to a different group of early Christians, those gathered together in Corinth, that he "handed on to [them] as of first importance what [he] in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time ... Then he appeared to James, then to all the

apostles. Last of all, as one untimely born, he appeared also to [Paul himself].”<sup>2</sup> Paul also eventually writes to that early Christian community that springs forth from Lydia and the others in today’s story, the Philippians, some many years later, testifying to Christ Jesus, the one “who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and become obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”<sup>3</sup> Or, to put it another way, borrowing words I’ve shared with you before from preacher and teacher-of-preachers David Lose, “Week in and week out, we proclaim a gospel story that asserts not only that there *is* a God who has created and still sustains the vast cosmos, but that this God not only knows that you exist, but gives a damn, actually cares, deeply and passionately about you and your hopes and dreams, successes and failures, cares enough to come into the world to be with us and to die with us and to rise for us, all that we might have life.”<sup>4</sup>

The Holy Spirit opens Lydia’s heart to recognize that the “peg” of this good news fits right into the “hole” of her seeking... the same Holy Spirit that leads Paul and his companions her way in the first place, even though they do not quite know why.

The Spirit is, of course, leading us all. I see the Spirit at work among us as a congregation. And the Spirit is likely at work in your life personally, too. Sure, we don’t all have visions with men of Macedonia asking us to come help them. But perhaps, like Lydia, something is at work causing us to seek more deeply. Something is at work leading us out to the river, even if it *is* out on the edge of town, out to the river to pray. And, my friends, even if it seems at times that we are being led out to the margins, or being called somewhere we’re not sure we want to go, I, for one, trust that the Spirit is ultimately leading us to yet another river we’ve heard about:

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. ... The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 15:3-8, NRSV.

<sup>3</sup> Philippians 2:6-11, NRSV.

<sup>4</sup> David Lose, “A Promise Big Enough to Save Us,” Dear Working Preacher, *WorkingPreacher.org*, 26 November 2012; <https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/a-promise-big-enough-to-save-us>

<sup>5</sup> Revelation 22:1-5, NRSV.