

# The Sixth Sunday of Easter

## Acts 16:9-15

**May 22, 2022**

One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul.

Ac 16:14



### Purple in Easter

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.

How do we know it's Easter? We look for the signs, don't we? We look to a calendar to tell us when Easter Sunday falls every year, and then we see all the Sundays of Easter, and then Ascension, leading to the great feast of Pentecost.

There are other signs: we see the white paraments symbolizing Christ, we see the Paschal candle lit, we hear the familiar Easter hymns. There's the aroma of Easter lilies, the Easter Sunday breakfast, the cry "He is risen, He is risen indeed!" There are the signs of Easter dresses and ties and a people we might not often see in church. Then Easter goes away. Those things disappear. Things go back to the way they were before. But is that all there is? Do we just look for these outward signs in the church and then that's it, everything is gone? No. Today God's Word comes to you filled with the signs of Easter, and not just today but every Sunday. This morning the signs of Easter are made known to us

in the story of a woman named Lydia. Her conversion is a sign, a sign of the power of Christ's death and resurrection.

So in our journey through the Acts of the Apostles during this time of Easter we are once again with St. Paul in his missionary travels, and this time he is in the city of Philippi. That should sound familiar because of course we have the Epistle to the Philippians which Paul writes to them some time later while he is in jail, most likely toward the end of his life. This city is much different than some of the others he has visited. Most of the time when Paul and his entourage would come into a new city in order to preach the Gospel they would first seek out the synagogue and there start to proclaim God's Word of salvation in Christ. After all, in the ancient world you couldn't just go out on the street and start preaching. The authorities would have you picked up in no time. The synagogue was the normal base of operations during these missionary journeys. And in those synagogues some people would hear and believe, but then many others would be hostile, and there were often threats and violence made against the Apostle. Here in Philippi there is no synagogue for a base of operations. This is a Roman colony, so named because it was a city full of former soldiers, ex-military who served in the foreign wars of the Roman Empire. Paul, Silas, Timothy, and now Luke who has joined them—notice how he says “we” instead of “they” now—are walking into a situation where all kinds of forces are at work, and they will come rushing at them. In fact, Paul and his companions will soon be in prison. So there is no synagogue, and Luke tell us, “And on the Sabbath

day we went outside the gate to the riverside, where we supposed there was a place of prayer.”<sup>1</sup>

And now it's time to meet Lydia. We read that she was from a small city in Asia Minor which was a commercial centre well known for the production of purple dye. Logically enough then this woman was a dealer of this purple dye. Purple cloth was costly, it was purchased primarily by the nobility. So she was a savvy businesswoman no doubt of some wealth. Are these signs of Easter? You wouldn't think so. The colour is wrong. What does purple have to do with Easter? Also there is no hint of the resurrection. But the text also says that Lydia was a worshipper of God, a term that was often used for Gentiles who believed in the Jewish God. So she believed in God, she had a notion of the promise of redemption that God had made, which he would fulfill in His Son. Now we're getting closer to the Easter signs. Luke tells the story of her conversion very simply. “One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul.”<sup>2</sup> We don't know the exact words that Paul said, but we know the content: he preached the Christian faith, the same things that we confess in the Creed: that the Lord God is the creator of heaven and earth, that Jesus Christ is his only begotten son, born of the Virgin Mary, that He suffered and died for your sins and then rose again from the dead, This is the message of salvation freely given to all who

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<sup>1</sup> Ac 16:13.

<sup>2</sup> Ac 16:14.

would repent and believe. This is the pure and simple Gospel message, that Christ Jesus died for your sins and saves you from sin, death, and hell. This preaching is a sign of Easter, it is the sign of what God has done, and now he has left this message, His Word, with His Holy Church, to proclaim this sign every time we gather. So Lydia hears this Word, she comes to know the signs of Easter, and the Lord does the work of opening her heart. This is His divine work, she paid attention! She didn't fall asleep during the sermon! She heard! Her heart was opened!

And notice what happens next. She does not waste any time, she is baptized, with her entire household. Here is another sign of Easter. For in baptism as St. Paul tells us we are really and truly united in Christ's death, and then in the same way united in His resurrection. Faith is given. Faith was given to Lydia in the preaching of the Word and in the Sacrament of Holy Baptism. Salvation was hers. And it doesn't stop there. The faith sparked into existence in Lydia produced fruit. Immediately. She literally begged Paul and the others to stay with her in her house, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay."<sup>3</sup> And Luke says, "she prevailed upon us." Her new faith simply wouldn't allow her not to express it in works of kindness. Later in Acts we see Paul returning to stay with Lydia — obviously an active member of this new parish! In all these things we see in Lydia just how powerful this Easter message is—it brings life and salvation! We the signs of this working. We see a

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<sup>3</sup> Ac 16:15.

heart that is opened to hear and receive this gift of the Word. We see that receptive heart opened by the Holy Spirit to receive the gift of washing and regeneration in Holy Baptism. We see these things that create faith. And then we see evidence of new life, faith in action, serving her neighbours, helping the church.

All of this began because the Apostle Paul had a vision in which a man from this area that was without these signs of Easter told him to come, he beseeched Paul to come and “help us.” The help he was asking for is found in these gifts of the Holy Spirit, these means of grace. Everyone needs this help, for it is the power of salvation for those who would merely believe. This is the help of God. God calls. God opens hearts. God creates faith. God takes that faith and empowers for service. These are all Easter signs, as Luther tells in the catechism: “I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man...has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil...that I may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as He is risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity.” Even in the midst of that unbelieving culture and community in the area in and around Philippi, Lydia shows how God works. He sends one who brings His gifts, and in those gifts the miraculous presence of God’s love is made known. It’s proof positive that the effects of Easter linger on.

But the story does not end there. We do not stop with Lydia. Even in the midst of our own unbelieving culture, in the community around here, we see how God works. You too, are a sign of Easter, a sign of new life and sign that the power of the resurrection goes on living, living in hearts and minds and voices. Maybe right now, though, you don't feel much like a sign. Maybe the effect of Easter has left. Maybe you are looking to get it back but are struggling with doubt, or sin, or discouragement. That's all the work of the devil who seeks to steal away what is rightfully yours. He aims to cast doubt on the victory Christ has won for you, and instead lead you back into darkness, into despair. His goal is to turn your eyes away from the empty tomb and turn them inward to yourself and the desires you have for this world. Maybe the discouragement comes from the state of our parish, that we continue to just bump along. Or perhaps discouragement comes from family struggles, or relationships with friends and family, or a feeling that life just hasn't gone to plan. It seems like this season between our rejoicing at the Resurrection of Our Lord and the Ascension is fertile ground for the devil to sow his seeds of doubt. The Church can grow lifeless and quiet, we seem rudderless and uncertain. Let it not be so!

Thanks be to God he is patient and merciful toward all of us. In our Gospel reading we heard the Easter promise: "I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world."<sup>4</sup> In His dying and rising Jesus has indeed overcome

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<sup>4</sup> Jn 16:33.

this sinful, broken world, and now He sits at the right hand of the Father as our mediator, our brother. He has not left you on your own. He has not left you without defences against the power of the devil. God prepares hearts through confession, and absolution is pronounced in the stead and by the command of Jesus Christ Himself. Your sins are forgiven, they are wiped away as if they never happened. Do you believe it? In that forgiveness hearts are prepared to hear and receive the Word, in the Holy Scriptures and in the proclamation of the Gospel. In that proclamation and in that hearing the Holy Spirit works to build faith. It happens each and every Sunday, even though Satan would do his worst to try and distract us, or to even convince us that we don't need to be here—it's been a busy week after all, perhaps I really just need a break? But still God works. And having heard of the forgiveness of sin, having heard the proclamation of the Word, the wondrous love of Christ comes to you today in His very Body and Blood right here at this altar. Faith is strengthened. We have communion with our Lord, we are united with Him in His body even as we are united together in one confession. Like Lydia, our hearts are opened, and through the power of the Holy Spirit faith is strengthened. That's why we gather. We are not here because this is a social club, or because it's nice to be around people who think and believe the same way that we do, or for a superficial idea of fellowship. The story of Lydia, the seller of purple dye, reminds us that, yes, even purple is a colour of this Easter season, because like her God has given unto us our salvation in Christ Jesus.

So too then, with Lydia we seek to serve others. The victory of the empty grave goes on forever, so therefore let us then show others the love of Christ as He bends our will to His. God still works in hands that help, arms that comfort and provide, voices that tell of our Saviour, and legs that take us where we need to be. This is what the Gospel does. This is what the resurrection brings. There is no way to cover up and silence the signs of Easter. Because Jesus lives these signs will never go away, even unto that day yet to come which we hear about in Revelation, when we are gathered together before the Lamb in the new heaven, the holy city of Jerusalem. That day we will be in His presence, and there will be no more discouragement, no more despair, no more temptation into doubt. Jesus is risen from the dead. He lives. Alleluia. Amen.

And now the peace of God which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

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✠ Soli Deo Gloria