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May 9, 2010

Acts 16: 11-15, 40

LYDIA'S STORY

Greetings, sisters and brothers in Christ. I am Lydia: at least that's what they call me here in Philippi, because I come from Thyatira, in the ancient kingdom of Lydia, in Asia Minor. Although Lydia wasn't my birth name, I like being called that, because it reminds me of my homeland. My husband and I came to Philippi from the city of Thyatira, where we were merchants. We sold cloth that was made by local women, who did the spinning and weaving. Our home was a house of business where people would come for all kinds of fabric.

One of our sidelines was dying cloth with dyes that weren't locally available. The rarest was purple dye that was made from the ground-up shells of sea snails found along the coast of Syria. Because we had to pay a lot for the shells, our purple cloth was very expensive, but so beautiful. Those who could afford it, loved it.

For a while we did a good business in Thyatira. However, there were troubles in that area that made people nervous about traveling to trade, and after a while we were hardly selling anything. We had dear friends who had moved here to Philippi in Macedonia. They were sure that if we followed them there, we would find a good market for our wares, especially the purple cloth. So we moved our whole household. It was a difficult undertaking and a scary one, but our friends were right--people loved the cloth. We found local women to spin and weave, our suppliers shipped the materials for the dyes, and before long our business was in full swing.

Then tragedy struck: my husband was overcome by a fever and died. At first I wasn't sure how my children and I, and our servants and the women who worked for us, would survive. I thought about going back to Thyatira, and trying to live with my parents. However, we had so many customers—among the wealthiest and most powerful in Macedonia--and they assured me that if we would keep producing the purple cloth, they would keep buying it. So I stayed, and ran the business myself, and was able to support us all in that way.

After a while, when I saw that my household would survive, I began to be concerned about widows who, unlike me, didn't have enough to live on—young mothers and older women, reduced to begging in the streets. Some I was able to hire to be my spinners, weavers and dyers. To others I brought baskets of food. As I tried to help, I met Jewish women who were doing the same. They said that their God required them to act with compassion for those who were suffering, and to seek a world of justice for all people, especially the weakest. I liked the sound of that God—I wanted to learn more. Before long I was meeting with those women every Sabbath day, down by the river outside the city gates. The women and children of my household would come with me. Together we would pray and sing and share stories of how the women and men in the Jewish scriptures came to know the one true God, and I came to know that God as well.

Then one Sabbath something extraordinary happened. Two men came to join our worship. Their names were Paul and Silas, and they were Jews who came with news—*good* news. They said that the Messiah, whom the Jews had been waiting for so long,

had come! His name was Jesus, and they and many others were following him on “the Way.”

They sat down then, and told us the amazing story. It began with a young woman named Mary, and an angel who told her she would bear God’s child, who would be called “God with Us.” Imagine. A child who would turn the world up-side-down, so that mighty rulers would lose their thrones, and the poor and lowly would be raised up.

This child, Jesus, was born, while angels proclaimed peace on earth. He grew, and was baptized, and went about healing the sick and doing works of justice. He brought back to life the son of a poor widow, who had no one else to support her. He forgave the sins of a woman of the city who washed his feet with her tears. He healed a poor woman who had been bleeding for twelve years, and raised from the dead, the daughter of a synagogue leader. He blessed little children, and enabled a woman who had been bent over for eighteen years to stand tall once more. He taught that God loves all of God’s children, even the lowliest, and called on the rich to sell their possessions, give to the poor, and follow him.

This Jesus was always pointing out the hypocrisy of the religious leaders, who acted pious but robbed poor widows of all they had. Finally, when he came into the Temple in Jerusalem, overturned the tables of the money changers and said it was a den of thieves rather than a house of prayer, they had had enough. The religious leaders persuaded the Romans to crucify him, and they did, but death could not hold him. On that Sabbath morn women came to the tomb where they had laid him and found no body there, but rather two angels, proclaiming that he had risen.

Later, he appeared to many, including this Paul, who stood before us, and urged them to go out into the world and spread the good news of God’s Reign, in which there will no longer be Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, rich nor poor, but all will be equal in the Beloved Community, and peace and justice will hold sway throughout the earth.

I cannot begin to tell you how this story affected me, and all of us, as we listened there by the river. My heart stood open and responded with a resounding “YES!” Yes, this is the Truth, the Life and the Way. Yes, I will follow this Messiah; Yes, I will walk with him. I looked at the women and children of my household, and their eyes shone as mine did. “What must we do, to join the community of believers?” I asked Paul. “Be baptized,” he answered. So we were, right then, right there in the river, my whole household and every one of the other women present that day.

After the baptism, sitting on the bank of the river in the sun, infused by the Holy Spirit, I asked Paul and Silas to tell us about other followers of Jesus. Where were they located? How did they worship? How did they live their lives? Then they told us about the churches in Jerusalem, Judea, Galilee, Samaria, Phoenicia, Syria, Cyprus, and throughout my own Asia Minor, how the people held all things in common, selling their possessions and distributing support to widows and orphans and others in need. They told us how day be day the people worshipped together, praising God and sharing meals, and they said that most communities of believers gathered in homes, which they called house churches.

As soon as I heard this, I knew why God had blessed me with a successful business and large home: God wanted me to share what I had with the Followers of the Way! With joy, I invited Paul and Silas to come and bless my home as the first house

church in Philippi. Imagine my dismay, however, when Paul refused my offer. All the other house churches were headed by married, he said, it would not be seemly for a woman's household to be a house church. Women were vulnerable to abuse, or might even be suspected of trying to seduce the men who came to worship there...

I stopped him right there. "Brother, Paul," I said firmly, "You have just baptized me, my household and my friends into a Christian community in which there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, MALE NOR FEMALE. You told us that Jesus proclaimed the Reign of God as a world in which all were equal, and that we were to live as though that Reign were already real among us. I know that God intends for my home to be the first house church in Philippi. You will be my guests there this night, will you not?"

Without another word, Paul agreed. He and Silas blessed our home that evening, and immediately we set about making it into the house of hospitality, the abode of equals, and the center of a revolutionary new faith that the one true God, whose face Jesus showed us, intended it to be.

We learned how important it was to have the house as a center several days later, when Paul and Silas were arrested and put in jail. The arrest came after Paul's had healed a slave girl who was telling fortunes, whose owners could then no longer make money through her soothsaying. The owners stirred up a crowd, accusing Paul and Silas of disturbing the city by advocating customs that were illegal for Romans. Our friends were ruthlessly beaten and thrown into prison. All the Christians gathered at our house and prayed, while we tried desperately to find someone who could get them released. But it turned out our efforts were unnecessary: God sent an earthquake that night which broke their chains and opened the prison, and the magistrates ordered them released the next day. When they found out they were Roman citizens, they even apologized, and then asked them to leave the city.

To our great joy, Paul and Silas came to us then, and told us all that had happened, and after they had recovered from their wounds, we sent them on their way to Thessalonica.

That was the beginning—an unforgettable one. It has been a long journey since then, a journey of laughter and tears, of great gift and great sacrifice, of struggle and blessing. And now you are a part of it. Welcome. Welcome to the Way. What gifts do YOU bring? What must you give up to join this community? What will drive you crazy here? What will be the greatest reward? One thing is certain: you have made the right decision. For there is no more wonderful journey than this journey into God's embrace. Welcome, dear ones. Come and follow the one who loves you with a love greater than all the created universe. Come and live into the Reign of the Spirit of Wisdom, the Blessed Christ, the one true God. Come, and be welcome. Amen.