

A Near Miss!

Text: Acts 16: 9-15

Rev. Dr. Geordie Campbell

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*Open my heart, God, loosen the threads.
Unfold my life and weave within:
oh take my tears and my rejoicing
and spin their tangle into thread;
entwine their colors with your brightness
create through me a fabric of love.*

Kathy Wonson Eddy

A story that almost didn't happen . . . the mammoth role that one individual played in the birth of Christian faith . . . and the mysterious ways that God works with the likes of human beings to move the world. These are the steps we take today.

Let's start with the nearly missed story. It's at the heart of our scripture passage today. Come to consider, it's mysterious how some things in life can be that way – stories that almost don't happen. You know, when against all odds the moving parts intersect, and the world changes because of the connection made – or maybe not.

The Apostle Paul was on his way to Bithynia to spread the gospel of Jesus. He was strategic, and had it in mind that such a key city in Asia Minor would give him a significant foothold in evangelizing for Christ. But in the midst of that certainty, that goal, that intention, something dissuaded him and shook up his travel plans.

Luke, who wrote the book of Acts, reported that it was none other than the Spirit of Jesus who made that sudden change in Paul's itinerary. But, whatever the case, Paul changed direction and headed across the Aegean Sea instead to the Macedonian city of Philippi, which was, like Bithynia, a leading city in that region.

The story almost didn't happen, a destination almost missed entirely. But by that diversion from Asia Minor to the instead port of Macedonia, Paul's mission for Christ made the continental leap into Europe for the very first time. God works in very mysterious ways, and this is a stellar instance, and the gospel grew in leaps.

Still, the sequence tells us that the story almost missed its landing. Getting Paul to cross into Europe, I mean – one small change that became hugely significant as the church came into being. But stay with the theme here because next part of the story almost didn't happen either.

It was just by happenstance that Paul heard about a clearing by the river in Philippi where people came to pray. In fact, those who came were women – as this was the safe place they had found away from the patriarchal structures of their day. It was their word-of-mouth practice that early the Sabbath they would to would gather to pray.

They were faithful people, seekers after God we are told. And there was a certain woman among them that day. Her name was Lydia, a business woman of significant success and wealth; a dealer in purple fabric which was the most expensive and valued color of any garment. She sat and listened, at first uncertain and on the edges.

Still, in those very brief moments God opened her heart to Paul's words. It can happen in an instant. She heard about the love of Jesus as if never before and for the first time. It so overcame her that she wanted to become a follower. And so she was baptized with all of her household, the first European convert to Christianity.

On that day Lydia became the woman who gave birth to Christianity on an entirely new continent. And her faith quickly translated to action as Lydia opened her home to Paul. She provided hospitality and resources and home base and center to the movement of the Good News of Jesus in a gateway setting for the western world.

Kathy Wonson Eddy, a UCC pastor in Vermont, now retired, once wrote the loveliest song as Lydia told her story: *"Open my heart, God, loosen the thread/unfold my life and weave within/oh take my tears and my rejoicing/and spin their tangle into thread/entwine their colors with your brightness/create through me a fabric of love."*

But it almost didn't happen. Had it not been for Paul's frustrated itinerary and a shift in his mission; had it not been that Paul heard about this safe gathering place for women to pray; had it not been for Lydia going down to the river; had it not been for God opening her heart . . .

We just never know the various chain of circumstance and connection, the twists and turns that move the world forward. Is it the hand of God moving discretely through the common instrument of people's lives? Is it a combination of an open moment, where and when God can break through? Is it divine and human? Is it random or is it more?

And think of your own life, as I think of mine. Isn't it true that there are some moments when we are more open than closed; more willing than willful; more responsive than resistant; more ready for the new leading of God and open to dare; more inclined to get up and serve and less so to sit and savor?

Today, most especially, I want us to hold the mystery of faith's movement close. And in particular, I want us to give thanks for the overlooked and underappreciated role that women have played as our forebears in faith – close and distant in the spread across the years. But also, truly as near as this room, and as close as our hearts.

One: Let us remember and celebrate twelve of Jesus' disciples, people who were touched by and who tended him.¹

Many: Remember Mary, the girl from a country town, the poet and singer, who became pregnant with God, by God, for God's sake.

One: Remember Elizabeth, Mary's older cousin, who shared Mary's excitement, who herself bore John, the friend and baptizer of Jesus.

- Many:** Remember Anna, the old widow and faithful believer who saw an eight-day-old baby and recognized that the Messiah had come.
- One: Remember Martha, the cook and housekeeper, the plain speaker, who gave Jesus her anger so that he could give her his love.
- Many:** Remember Joanna, who with Susanna and many other women, provided the hospitality, which Jesus saw as crucial to the Gospel.
- One: Remember Peter's mother-in-law, who was so grateful to be healed that her first act after recovery was to make a meal for Jesus.
- Many:** Remember the Samaritan woman whose conversation with Jesus was full of double-entendres, but whose life was so changed by him that she became the first real evangelist.
- One: Remember the Canaanite woman, who gave Jesus a hard time, taking his exclusive language to task, until he saw and admired her toughness and devotion.
- Many:** Remember the poor widowed woman who, in giving the smallest coins to God, gave Jesus his model for generosity.
- One: Remember the woman caught in adultery, who let Jesus show how the grace of God is greater than the moralizing of men.
- Many:** Remember the woman whose perfume filled a room with fragrance, and who let her costliest gift be offered to Jesus in love.
- One: And remember that the first to witness the empty tomb and the Risen Christ, were not the men who were also disciples, but the disciples who were women.
- Many:** Thanks be to God. Amen.

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First Church
12 South Main Street
West Hartford, CT 06107

¹ Present on Earth: Worship Resources on the Life of Jesus. Wild Goose Publications, 2002, pp. 76-7.