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*"A Story Worth Telling"*

## THE INTRODUCTION TO THE READING

You have probably heard of the book of Philippians in the Bible. It is a letter from the Apostle Paul to the church in Philippi. In it, we find familiar passages such as "Have this mind among you which was in Jesus," "the peace of God, which passes all understanding," "I can do all things through him who strengthens me," and "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice."

The Philippian congregation was a healthy church, comprised of interesting, committed, generous people. (Sounds like a congregation we all know!) It had affluent members like Lydia, whom we meet in this text, working-class members like the converted jailer, and ex-slaves like the fortuneteller, whom we read about in the next story. Paul could count on the Philippians, and he had great affection for them. Well, Acts 16 is where we learn how this church got its start.

Last Sunday, we read that Paul, Silas, and Timothy went to Philippi in Macedonia because Paul had had a vision of an anonymous person from there beckoning to them to come and help. So these evangelists traveled the straightest possible route, walked around town, assessed the situation, and went to the riverside where they thought there might be a Jewish group at prayer. They weren't yet looking to build a church, but they were looking for the persons in the divine vision – the ones who were open to the sacred story. Let's listen for what and whom they found.

## THE READING - Acts 16:4-15

<sup>4</sup>As they went from town to town, they delivered to them for observance the decisions that had been reached by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem. <sup>5</sup>So the churches were strengthened in the faith and increased in numbers daily.

<sup>6</sup> They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. <sup>7</sup>When they had come opposite Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them; <sup>8</sup>so, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. <sup>9</sup>During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us.' <sup>10</sup>When he had seen the vision,

we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.

11 We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, <sup>12</sup>and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district\* of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city for some days. <sup>13</sup>On the Sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there. <sup>14</sup>A certain woman named Lydia, a worshipper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. <sup>15</sup>When she and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, 'If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home.' And she prevailed upon us.

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## SERMON

Last week, a youth choir group from Quail Springs Baptist Church in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma dropped by our church. They were visiting historical sites here as they traveled around the country on their mission of singing at juvenile detention centers. They surprised our staff with a beautiful mini-concert, and afterwards, wanted to see our New England sanctuary. Judy did a magnificent job, off the cuff, telling our story of origin: in 1826 "a group from First Parish crossed the brook," in order to start a church that would keep the Trinity (God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit) as part of the congregation's identity.

Today you and I have the delightful and daunting opportunity to tell *another* story, that of these two-plus years of transition. **How shall we tell *this* story?**

**We could talk about it in terms of leadership.** So many histories are written in this manner, after all, – through the lens of presidents, mayors, principals, CEOs, and in the case of churches, its ministers. A former church of mine had a line of portraits of the pastors in the parlor; people would point at one and remember stories: "When Jean was here, we did this and that..."

If we were to take this approach, we would simply list, with a matter-of fact tone, the recent ministers, starting with John Lombard, senior minister for twenty-three years, then Bob Brown, first as "Associate," next "Acting," and now "Senior," me as Interim, and coming soon, Gail Miller. If you wanted to, you could add a bit more information: that Gail, for example, is an experienced pastor with a passion for the youth, and Bob, well, Bob is grace personified, creative, and one whom I have never seen in a bad mood! Remarkable!

**Yes, a story of leadership would be one to tell.**

**A second way to tell the story is to focus upon the people – to tell it as a story of church.** In *this* version of the last two years, we would focus upon all those who *participated* in the transition activities, came to worship, gave sacrificially to finance the ministry, taught children and confirmands, served communion, sang in the choir, volunteered at Open Table, cooked, went on the mission trip, moved furniture, worked on the search committee – # One and # Two – lit candles, and prayed. If you told the story this way it might look like the fun music video on our website that Bob Lawson put together.

**The Transition period as a story of Church** brings out the relational, mutual, emotional, and meaningful sides of what happened – the manner in which you held together in love and respect even across different views and dealing with the unknown longer than you wanted to. I think this is a much more interesting and compelling way to tell the story, especially in the context of our fragmented, selfish, materialistic society, in a country at an impasse, unable to dialogue constructively or to inspire.

Acts 16, by contrast, *does* inspire us when we look more closely. You see, Paul was *not* by himself! He was not a lone ranger leader. The mission itinerary belonged to Silas and Timothy too. It was a *team* that sailed to Macedonia and walked around Philippi hunting for the man Paul had seen in the divine vision, beckoning them – a man who turned out to be a group of women!

Because when Timothy, Paul, and Silas hiked *out* of town in search of a Sabbath praying place, they found the women's non-sanctioned worship service by the river (maybe like the hush harbors that American slaves created under the radar), and these female worshippers welcomed the immigrant strangers.

Then, contrary to his reputation, Paul entered a deep conversation with Lydia as an equal partner, as Jesus did with the woman at the well, *listening* to her as well as speaking. He found out that Lydia was a wealthy businesswoman, who manufactured textiles, traded with royalty, and loved the color purple. She also wanted to experience more of God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, and learn what it meant to be church.

**Yes, a story of church would be one to tell.**

During the Transition, I recall with fondness the handful of joint meetings that the outgoing Transition Team and the incoming Search Committee # One held. When these groups of members came together, the synergy was palpable; it was they who discerned and crafted the Vision Statement and Priorities. *I* couldn't have written one for you, nor by myself. But due to the "je ne sais quoi" that we call "God," "Christ," and "Spirit" – because of the work of the Holy – the resulting product was greater than the sum of the parts. In other words, when the leadership and church stories merge, you can tell that the Spirit is doing its 'magic!' **This is how the third story type of spiritual transformation is written, and this is the story worth telling!**

The author of Acts knew this too. The Philippian women eagerly listened to the story of Jesus; it led them into spiritual discovery and transformed them with divine energy. The Spirit also transformed Lydia's affluence into hospitality. She invited the missionaries to stay with her, and eventually allowed her home *inside the city* to become the church's public location. Filled with the Spirit, this infant church was transformed to take risks. In the rest of the chapter, we read how they accepted the slave girl whom Paul had healed, an act that got the team into trouble with the city, and the jailer who was converted by the missionaries' integrity while they were in prison.

As the old hymn goes: "I love to tell the story..." Of what? "*of unseen things above!*"

I hope that you love to tell the story of TriCon. And now, as we go down to 'the river' to pray and share communion, **I hope that your version of these two years includes how God has changed you! For *this* is a story really worth telling!**