

We Are Witnesses

And everything changed in that moment. Moment? Event, perhaps. Everything changed with that event. Easter is a new start, a new creation. We didn't go back to Eden, but the way to the kin-dom of God was opened on that day.

The problem is that not everyone saw it. You know how it is with amazing things. If you didn't see it, if you weren't there, it is hard to capture the experience. You've tried to share it, you've tried to tell your friends or family about this amazing thing that you saw, this amazing music that you heard, this amazing experience that you had. You describe it as imaginatively as you possibly can. You show them the motions, you talk about what happened to you, you relive the moment in front of them. You try your best. And . . . crickets. Then you shrug and say the only thing you can think to say. The only thing that anyone says faced with that lack of reaction: "I guess you had to be there."

That is what we might be left with when trying to talk about the latest movie we watched, or concert we heard, but it doesn't seem adequate for this. This Easter thing. This Resurrection moment, this being alive in a way that leaks into eternity experience. We can't and don't want to shake our heads and say, "I guess you had to be there" and sadly wander away. It is too good to keep to ourselves. Too wonderful to hide under a bushel. Too incredible to not share. Because we are witnesses.

Bearing witness is more than simply saying we saw it. Saying, with the disciples, "we are witnesses" is not simply a matter of pride, or worse yet, one-upmanship. It is claiming a responsibility, or better yet, an opportunity to be proclaimers. To share the experience, to offer the gift we've been given, to announce the kin-dom that has begun to take root in our midst – that's the Easter transformation and imperative that has taken place. We are witnesses.

This Easter season series dips into the Acts of the Apostles as a way of examining the witness of the one who first experienced the Resurrection. Their story, as they struggled to find a way to live out the implications of this amazing news, this

gospel event, becomes our story as we too seek to bear witness to the Risen Christ and to live that witness daily.

We suggest as a companion piece to this series a book the United Methodist Women used as a part of their Mission u experience in 2021: [*Bearing Witness in the Kin-dom: Living into the Church's Moral Witness through Radical Discipleship*](#) by Darryl Stephens, (United Methodist Women, 2021.) Dr. Stephens walks the reader through a well-constructed process to redefine what it means to be a witness for the Christian disciple of Jesus Christ. Yes, it means to observe, to see God at work in the world. But it also means to proclaim, to act, to announce with our hands as well as our words our commitment to God's kin-dom for which we pray whenever we say, "thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

The season after Easter is where we consider what it means to walk with Jesus into eternity. But it is not about life after death, or rather not only about life after death. It is very much about life before death, life in the face of death. It is about life and about bearing witness to a life that resembles a kin-dom existence right here and right now. It is this life, this justice and righteousness, this hope and this glory to which we can say with confidence, "We are witnesses."

Resurrection of the Lord – God Raised Him

April 17, 2022 – [John 20:1-18](#) or [Luke 24:1-12](#) ([Acts 10:34-43](#))

PLANNING NOTES

It's Easter. In many ways, this day plans itself. It forms itself. There are patterns and rituals and traditions to this day that are unique to you and to your congregation. It doesn't do to disappoint on this day. Easter, like Christmas, takes up residence in our consciousness and lives there almost as an entity of itself. And there are plusses and minuses to this. We might feel locked into a pattern that no longer speaks, but we might also tap into memories that open worshipers into a new and deeper faith. Go with it; meet expectations and then consider how to offer more.

Easter could be a standalone service, complete in and of itself. Don't try to over-complicate it with innovations. At the same time, it can also be helpful to point to something that goes on. Using Easter to launch a series can be a way of suggesting that this day, as wonderful and beautiful as it is, does not encompass all of the life of faith. There is more to be experienced; there is more to be lived; there is fruit to bear and a journey to undertake. Let Easter be the means by which we launch the community off with renewed vigor and passion, conviction and purpose.

The "We Are Witnesses" theme suggests both "seeing" and "telling." Claiming the faith that we have received is the beginning, but then offering this faith to the world at large is part of what it means to be witnesses. We are witnesses and we give a witness.

The Easter story should be told with power and passion in whatever ways that are meaningful to your community. But perhaps there is space to point beyond into the story of the apostles in the book of Acts, the foundation of the rest of the series. The subtext is that the greatness of Easter is found in the life that is lived in that light. So, even on Easter Sunday, we are pointing toward the future, toward what is coming.

Let our prayers be prayers of celebration of the gift that Easter is, but also for the strength to live into the promise of new life. Let there be a call to new life and new living. And that life is lived out loud in as public a way as possible. And the

light and life of Easter invites us to see all that is still of death in our world—not just in our individual hearts, but in our community and in our world. We give witness to new possibilities and new hope because of Easter. We give witness to the end of hate, the end of war, the end of division, and the end of injustice. Because of Easter, we are witnesses to a new kin-dom—because God raised Jesus from the dead.

PREACHING NOTES

There are, of course, lots of directions to take when preaching on Easter. No doubt you've done quite a few. As discussed in the Planning Notes, this is a day for tradition. It is a day for telling the story as powerfully and dramatically as you can. Whether you choose John's gospel account with the 100-yard dash between Peter and John or Mary's tears in the garden or Luke's account with the women "perplexed" over the loss of a dead body and the two men dressed like Las Vegas performers—either way it is a story worth telling again and again.

Perhaps, however, this year you'd like to try something different—not to neglect the story, but instead to consider what the story did to those who first heard it. What if we were to consider the impact of the story on those who were witnesses and lived their lives bearing witness to that story? What if we were to turn to the Acts of the Apostles and reflect on how to be a witness to Easter, not just on this one glorious day, but every day? Sometimes you tell the story best when you see what the story did to those who heard it—like Peter. Acts 10:34-43 is the Easter story borne witness through the life of one who heard what happened that day when God raised him. "We are witnesses to all that he did..." *Acts 10:39*

My daughter Maddie was for a time involved in competitive ballroom dancing. So we ordered her a dress online through my account since I was paying for it. And for years after that I would still get emails and posts and ads running on Google and Facebook, assuming that I wanted to buy more dance dresses. You know how we used to worry about the government keeping eyes on us and knowing more about us than they should? Well, George Orwell, it isn't the government; it's the Internet. Google and Amazon and Facebook remember what I bought a lot longer than I do. And they want to sell me more.

Dance dresses, for example. I'm pretty sure I wouldn't look good in the kind of dresses they're trying to sell me. Not as good as Maddie anyway. A little too slinky and smooth and feathery and slit open and flowing for my use. Preachers should stick to the little black number that we sometimes wear. Right? Mind you, I'd love to dance like that. Some Sunday mornings seem to call for it. Light and airy, the good news is about lifting us, like we could float, walking on sunshine. Easter is a dancing day, don't you think? On the other hand, some days are dark and heavy, weighed down by sinfulness, brokenness, a dirge, a lament longing for a Savior who could come and set us free. Or confident, a waltz or rumba reminding us that we are loved and capable of loving. Or a square dance that's all about changing partners and including all, from one to the other and back again, enriched by the whole community as we dance together. Yeah, that's what we need in worship, a little more dancing.

If any of the disciples had two left feet, it was Peter—always tripping over his own shortsightedness, stumbling around in his misguided certainties, leading with his sense of self-preservation instead of following the lead of the one he called Christ in a flash of grace that surprised even Jesus (“flesh and blood didn't reveal this to you”; i.e., there's no way you figured this out on your own, Peter!) No, Peter wasn't Lord of the Dance; he was a back row chorus line member at best. Yet, here he is, leading, headlining, finding the spotlight and trying to follow the lead of the Spirit, who still has new steps for him to learn.

Peter was preaching. Actually, he was giving his testimony, giving a witness to what he knew was true and how it had changed him. It was his own story that he was turning into a sermon that day. Back up in chapter ten of Acts and you'll see the story that he was telling. The vision on the rooftop that seemed to be about the dietary laws, but actually was about who was worthy of the gospel. Peter was a good Jew. He knew who he could hang around with and who he had to avoid. (We'll come back to this later in the series—stay tuned!) Sure, Jesus kind of messed with his head for a while there. He was still processing all of that. But he knew where the lines were. He could follow the steps in this dance he knew from his childhood. But now his foxtrot thinking didn't fit the salsa music he was hearing.

“I truly understand,” Peter preached, in what turned out to be a bit of an overstatement, “I truly understand that God shows no partiality!” What was wrong with that? Well, the “I truly understand” bit. He didn’t. Not yet. In the moment, yeah sure, he was swaying to the beat. But later, he’d want to sit this one out; and Paul would beckon, and they would have a dance off, to re-teach him what he truly understood for a moment. That’s later. Let’s give him his due now. He’s got it down. That flow from the Spirit that takes him farther than he thought he could go.

He says that he was commissioned to preach to the people. He was commissioned by the life and death and Resurrection of his Lord, the living Christ, the Son of God, Jesus of Nazareth. Oh, yes, he knows the name now. He was reclaimed from his doubt and fear. He was gathered up from his denial and disappointment. He was called to preach to the people. What he still had to learn was who the people were.

See, he thought it was his people—the people like him, the people who looked like he did and spoke like he did and danced like he did. But Jesus opened his eyes to the people—all the people, the wonderful panoply of people, the glorious, created collection of people and traditions and languages and dances that there would be no way he could master without throwing out a hip! But he could watch and then learn and laugh and clap his hands as he welcomed them into the family.

Second Sunday of Easter – We Are Witnesses

April 24, 2022 – [Acts 5:27-32](#)

PLANNING NOTES

Now we turn to the book of Acts if we didn't already on Easter Sunday. Now we consider how we will live as the church in the new reality that Easter brings. Now we make our commitment to be witnesses of the kin-dom. As mentioned in the general introduction, the writing for the preaching notes in particular and the series in general is influenced by the work of Dr. Darryl Stephens, [Bearing Witness in the Kin-dom: Living into the Church's Moral Witness through Radical Discipleship](#) (United Methodist Women, 2021). This was the text for the Spiritual Growth Study of Mission u sponsored by the United Methodist Women in the summer of 2021. You might check with your local unit to see if any attended Mission u last summer and what they might share with you about the book and the course. A part of what that text was designed to do was to help us understand what it means to be a witness.

Now is the time to decide how you're going to invite the worshiping community to make the commitment to become witnesses for the kin-dom. It might be at the end of series or it might be here. Or it might be left as an open invitation with appropriate follow-up to provide the newly committed a way of keeping and living out the commitment. What challenges face your community that need a word or a presence from the faith community? What actions or statements might be made to show where you are standing and whom you are standing with in this complicated environment?

Behind this approach is the understanding that a life of faith is a life of fruitfulness. Even as we are in the business of changing the world, we are being transformed too. And wherever we are on the discipleship journey, we can make an impact; we can be witnesses for the kin-dom of God. Worship issues a challenge to live out our faith daily. It is where we make our promise to the God we praise that we will follow; we will represent the faith; we will be witnesses.

The worship team, then, works to put hands and feet to this desire, this commitment. The prayers get specific about what's really going on in the world and in the neighborhood. We include the individual faith journey but expand it at the same time. We invite people to look beyond themselves into a wider community.

PREACHING NOTES

A piece of the story, that's all we get here in [Acts 5:27-32](#). A slice of life it is sometimes called. We skipped over Ananias and Sapphira—probably just as well, what a mess that one is. We stopped before we get to Gamaliel, good old Gamaliel, a politician's politician. Maybe he was trying to do the right thing, or maybe he didn't want to get his hands dirty. Who knows, but he isn't in our story this week. We don't even get the whole trial, or the arrest, or the complaint. It's just a piece, just a slice of the story.

We don't even go one more verse and see how angry these words make the powers that be. Verse 33: When they heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them. Wow, overreaction, much? What had happened that caused such a reaction? "Wanted to kill them." Surely there is something in the rest of the story that would explain the explosion here. Well, root around in there and see what you find. Surely, you think, there must be a rational reason behind the level of anger and frustration with the fledgling movement on the verge of becoming a church. Surely.

But it doesn't seem so. Not a rational one anyway. And that's just the point: this whole event defies rationality. The closest we might get is acknowledging that the powers that be don't like change. And what is the Easter event but change in a dynamic and historic form? Therefore, Easter is unsettling. That's our thesis for this series. No, wait, that's a given. That's a foundational statement. The thesis is because Easter is unsettling for the world, we need to be witnesses to the Easter event. Witnesses in every sense of the word.

Peter declares in his defense, "We are witnesses." They told him that he wasn't supposed to teach in the name of the crucified one, and yet he did it. So, what is the defense? We are witnesses. He says we saw something, and we have to talk about it. We participated in something, and we have to talk about it. More than that, he says we became something and there is nothing we can do but be proclaimers of this word. "We are witnesses" does not simply mean they are telling what they saw or what happened to them. It also means they have now become something new, something more, and they have to live out that proclamation every day of their lives. With every word, every encounter, every

action, they are witnessing to that which defines their lives in a new and profound way.

You can almost picture Peter's confusion as they challenge him on this point. In his mind, they are telling him to stop breathing, telling him to stop being Peter. He's not angry; he's not belligerent or defiant; he just is who he is. As if his simple statement explains it all: "We are witnesses." This is who we are, your honor, we are witnesses. It is our life's purpose, the meaning of our existence. It is what we do—what we will do despite the impediments that might be thrown in front of us.

Neither is he pleading for his life, asking to be let off with good, or at least explainable behavior. He is wise enough to know that judges are going to do what judges are going to do. Courts and laws are going to do what the status quo demands that they do. Likewise, he declares, we are going to do what we are going to do. Get used to it.

Okay, he doesn't say, "Get used to it." He doesn't need to. It's implied in his simple statement of fact: "We are witnesses." Simple? Well, no, it isn't at all simple. It is the opposite of simple, as Peter himself will discover as he continues to walk this path—as we are discovering as we seek to be made disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. There is nothing simple about it; or maybe better, there is nothing easy about it. It is simple, "We are witnesses," but it is not easy, living every day representing the one you proclaim with your words, living a life of hospitality and invitation, living a life geared toward reconciliation and grace. No, it isn't easy.

Thankfully there is more to Peter's declaration than we've drawn attention to so far. Indeed, Peter says, "We are witnesses" as the whole of his defense against those who would defend the status quo. But there is more that he declares in that moment. Did you hear it? Did you see it? Do you know it even now?

What does he say? "We are witnesses . . . and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him" (5:32). Well now, that just changes everything, doesn't it? If we focus on the first part of the declaration, we make it sound like it's all up to us, that we have to make ourselves into the witnesses, into the disciples that we are trying to be, knowing that we are going to be lousy at it. But we keep trying and keep failing and keep trying and then maybe, after years of effort, we might be inches closer to our goal. If we start with the second half of

the declaration, then it isn't up to us at all. It is not our work that makes us who we are, who we are called to be, who we can be; it is God's action through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Pressure's off, then, right? Well, no, not really. There is still pressure, but it is a joyful pressure. Call it a desire, or a passion, to be a witness to the good news of Jesus Christ. It is a privilege to be a living pointer toward the kin-dom of God. There's a both/and quality to this task we undertake, or this new identity we claim. There is effort on our part, work to be done, a harvest to gather: "We are witnesses." But there is also the support and strengthening, the equipping that comes from the Holy Spirit. There is the divine presence that is with us always and is most often experienced in the community of faith that gives us the ability to continue the journey in all its ups and downs.

Declaring, with Peter, that "We are witnesses" may be an identity statement, but it is also an action statement. Dr. Darryl Stephens in [*Bearing Witness in the Kin-dom: Living into the Church's Moral Witness through Radical Discipleship*](#) (United Methodist Women, 2021) writes, "the moral witness of the church encompasses our participation as Christians in God's response to suffering and injustice in light of what we believe about God and God's intention to reconcile all creation" (p.3). To be a witness is to step up to the plate and acknowledge that the kin-dom looks different from what we see around us today. And we want to be part of the effort that moves us closer to what God intends for human community to be. Stephens declares that this is not an optional task, but the responsibility of all who claim a place in the family. "Beginning with the sacrament of baptism," he argues, we focus "upon what it means to follow Christ in a broken world and to join in God's mission. Moral witness is a ministry of all of the baptized" (p.4).

When challenged, when asked why we continue in the charade of faith, as some are calling it, what will you say and how will you say it. Peter suggests we start with the simple declaration, "We are witnesses."

Third Sunday of Easter – Who Are You Lord?

May 1, 2022 – [Acts 9:1-6, \(7-20\)](#)

PLANNING NOTES

One approach to this week's theme would be to talk about call. How do we hear the voice of God and how do we respond? This dramatic story of conversion seems to set a standard that not many are able to meet. Yet, we believe that the voice of God comes to each of us and to all of us. Sometimes we hear that voice through the voices of others. The call can be communal at times. So, attention during worship to listening for God's voice would be helpful here. Prayers focused on listening for God would direct the attention of the worshipers to that theme. Maybe even an appropriate time for silence during worship would be helpful. We aren't always comfortable with silence and want to fill it with something—background music or movement of some kind. But perhaps this week is time for “be still and know that I am God” to be the watchword for worship.

It would also be appropriate to focus on our commitment to Christ again. Let's provide space to make and remake our commitment to be disciples, followers of Jesus the Christ. Saul needed to be introduced to the one who was calling. We might need to be reintroduced to the one who directs us. What does it mean to say we are followers of Christ? Let's explore that together today.

Our songs are songs of praise of the Christ who calls us. Our prayers are invitations to Jesus to come and lead us, to walk with us, to guide our feet while we run this race called life. Christ is still calling; we aren't one and done on this journey. Let's renew our call, revive the passion we once had to service in Jesus' name. Perhaps there could be a way of renewing our covenant to follow, an altar call, a prayer card, some way of saying “Yes, Lord” once again. We might find our mission and ministry reinvigorated by this moment in worship.

If possible, provide an opportunity outside of the worship moment to take that step and be a witness to the one we chose to follow. A march, perhaps, a hands-on mission moment, a protest or affirmation of something in your community. A show of support or challenge to change: There are all sorts of ways to give a witness in the name of the Lord who calls us. The more we do it, and do it together, the further we travel on the discipleship path.

PREACHING NOTES

Last week, we stood with Peter as he faced his accusers in court. This week, we stand next to Paul as he seeks to root out the weed called “The Way” and the followers of this upstart from Galilee named Jesus; then he receives his invitation to join this movement that will change the world, even as it changes him.

“But wait,” you’re saying, “this isn’t Paul; this is Saul; this is before the name change, right?” Well, maybe we should hold on there on that one. There are plenty of stories where the character receives a change in name to signify a change in essence or something significant about his/her life. We think of Jacob who was renamed Israel because he wrestled with God. We think of Abram and Sarai who become Abraham and Sarah to signal their parenting a new people. We think of Simon, who was renamed Peter, the Rock, so that Jesus could build a church on him. And we preachers love a redemption story so much we talk about Saul who became Paul because he gave up his former life of oppression in favor of a new walk with this Jesus. But the name wasn’t changed. Paul/Saul lived in multiple worlds before he encountered Christ and continued to do so afterward. The first time the new name is referenced is Acts 13, verse 9, where it simply says “Saul, who was also called Paul.” He was both and remained both. Some might say that he was Saul in a Hebrew context and Paul in a Gentile or Roman context. But he was both.

That is not to say that there wasn’t a change or a redirection in the trajectory of his life. There certainly was; he refers to it many times in the letters he writes to the churches he helped to launch or wanted to help shepherd. Here are the bare bones of that encounter without Paul’s interpretation. Whether you take the shorter text assigned for this week or add in the full twenty verse description, it is a powerful story, and it is centered on identity.

Who is this Saul and what motivates him? It isn’t really all that clear from the thin outline that we are provided here. More will be revealed as the story unfolds, but here there isn’t much. Back up to the end of chapter 7 and the beginning of chapter 8, and you’ll get more about Saul. His bloodthirsty nature and his zeal to purify the faith are in plain view. Our text today begins with Saul “breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord.” The image is one of a mad

bull, snorting after the cape-wielding adversary, a rabid animal panting after its prey. It's not a flattering picture, to say the least.

You can't help but bring to mind the fervor in the faces and voices of those caught by cell phone video attempting to rid their neighborhoods of "unsavory characters" of a different race or religion, the self-proclaimed Christians threatening to take down a "demonic" school board who would dare impose a mask mandate on their children.

It's enough to make you hope for a flash of light from heaven and the voice that asks, "Just who are you persecuting?" I know, that isn't what it says. But that's what is behind it. We think the identity issue in this text is who is Paul/Saul. But he knows the identity issue is, "Who is this Lord?" That's his question when the light and voice come and knock him down. "Who are you, Lord?" He knows it isn't about his identity, at least in that moment, there is someone more powerful, more present than he has been, even in his search for meaning and purpose and the purity of his faith. Don't read too much into the "Lord" in his question. Read it as sir or something polite but not necessarily a statement of allegiance. That will come later. For now, he needs to listen.

Notice, in the extended text that Saul is now blind. He who was so driven, he who was so sure, he who made distinctions, he who sized up the enemy at a glance, now has to be guided, now he has to listen to a voice other than his own. Darryl Stephens says that despite what we might think, being a witness doesn't always mean speaking; that in fact, the moral witness of the church begins with listening. "To bear witness is to unburden our neighbors from the agony of an untold story. We are called to be present and attentive, to hear one another's stories. And then, to care for that story as if it were our own." (Dr. Darryl Stephens in [*Bearing Witness in the Kin-dom: Living into the Church's Moral Witness through Radical Discipleship*](#), *United Methodist Women*, 2021, 35.)

What voices do we need to hear the voice of Christ today? What voices have been silenced in our certainty? What stories have been ignored in an age of shouting and anger? Do we know the Lord we seek to follow, the one whose name we take and whose path we follow? "Who are you, Lord?" is a question we need to ask as fervently as did the blinded, frightened Saul lying on the side of the road to Damascus.

He needed to listen to others who would help him know his own story or the new story that he was writing with his life even now. He was to be a witness to the one who called him, but he needed to learn that he finds that one by listening to many others. Those who will help him find his way on the journey begin with a question: "Who are you, Lord?"

Fourth Sunday of Easter – Get Up!

May 8, 2022 – [Acts 9:36-43](#)

PLANNING NOTES

This Mother's Day, celebrate those who have nurtured, no matter if they are mothers or not. We have all been shaped and cared for by a variety of people, not just mothers. And remember, as you give thanks for those whose experience of mother was positive and healing, that you need also to acknowledge those who have a different experience. Mother's Day is always a delicate celebration; wounds can inadvertently be opened. Hurting hearts can be further wounded if you aren't careful—you give the impression that all mothers are shining examples of faith and family or that being a mother is the highest or even only calling a woman could have. That may be true for some, but not for all.

So, listen to the text for today. Celebrate a life not by titles but by labors. To celebrate a teacher, for example, gather the students and show the impact. To celebrate a knitter, gather the prayer shawls contributed. To celebrate an engineer, show the buildings built or systems employed. We celebrate a life by talking about lives touched. Some may be less visible, more difficult to gather in one place; in which case, you tell the story or stories. Celebrate the ripples that radiate out from one life and intersect with many others.

This is a celebration of community, the village that it takes to raise a child or make a disciple. That's how we raise those who have gone before (not physically, but in terms of influence). Those who were mentored now mentor others; in so doing, we say to the one who has gone before, "Get up!" Maybe it isn't as dramatic as Resurrection, but it's important, all the same.

So, let this day be one of celebration of community. It's time to find someone to thank, someone who might have been overlooked—perhaps the nursery workers, both those who serve now and those who have served in the past. Whom can we celebrate for "mothering" all those babies years ago? Whom can we raise up in the minds and memories and consciousness of the congregation today?

Celebrate kitchen workers, or cleaners, VBS team, children's choir leaders or directors and volunteers of student ministries. It is a good day to say "thank you" to those who have helped to raise up disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. It is a good day to be reminded that we are the

village that the proverb speaks of; reminded that we are one in caregiving and support.

Of course, some of the more traditional Mother's Day observances can be appropriate too. But Jesus redefined family in significant ways, and we can embrace that hope and that joy too.

PREACHING NOTES

One day out of the blue, I got a phone call that startled me to my core. It came from Paris Health Care, the facility in Paris, Tennessee, where my mom resided. There had been an incident there; Mom wasn't hurt, but they needed to let me know as her power of attorney that something had happened. They are investigating and would have to determine what would be next. It involved my dad and the care he provided my mom while she is there. They said it was hard to tell what had really happened that day in May many years ago. Happy Mother's Day.

It was, in part, further evidence that dementia has a communal effect. The ripples circle out and wash over many of us. The threads that bind us together get tangled and twisted, sometimes broken or at least frayed to a breaking point. Sometimes we say and do things, even to those we love, that have nothing to do with them. But the threads have us so tangled up that we don't know where the pain is coming from. All we know is that we hurt and wish it would stop. And every question feels like an accusation, every comment like a threat. It isn't logical; it isn't rational; it isn't even right; but unless we are Vulcans like Mr. Spock, we rarely respond purely to logic. Those threads that bind us to others, family and friends and members of the body of Christ, get us so tangled up we don't always think straight.

Take Mother's Day, for example. You know that to ignore the holiday on a Sunday morning is to commit something akin to blasphemy in the minds of many people. You've had your ear bent by passionate souls on that score. Mothers are certainly due all the honor we can give them. I know I want to honor my mother, and I want to honor my wife as the mother of my children. And there are so many mothers who occupy our pews who deserve a little thank you, a little symbol that

we know how important they are to us and to the community as a whole. What's wrong with giving a little honor?

At the same time, I know that an emphasis on saintly mothers would grieve those who suffered with a mother who didn't epitomize the kind of love that Hallmark sells to us on their cards. I know that calling motherhood the desire of God for every woman would wound those who have chosen to be childless or who suffer from infertility, or who lost their children in some heart-rending tragedy. And because within our community there are some from all those categories, a Mother's Day celebration in worship is a tricky proposition. The threads that bind us together make us want to be sensitive to those to whom we are bound.

It's hard to navigate among all these competing themes, hard to bring a word of hope in every situation. But there it is. And the more you wrestle with it, the more the only sensible response is the Monty Python *Holy Grail* response: "Run Away!" Cut loose those binding threads, shake off those relationships. "I am a rock, I am an island," sang Simon and Garfunkel many years ago.

Except . . . I don't want to live as an island. And rocks are just too . . . hard. I don't want to cut the threads that tangle me into the lives of those I love. If anything, I want them to be stronger, tighter, more binding. I know it doesn't make sense; it is potentially too painful. But oh, how I want those threads to stay connected. The threads from my mother that were growing so thin they were almost transparent—how I wish they were strong and vibrantly colored with her love and her teaching and her reproof and her forgiveness. The threads from my kids that are stretching longer and farther with each passing day it seems, how I wish they were shorter and younger and so full of the life we used to share. The threads that bind me to a congregation and are strained to the breaking point, how I wish they were like it was before so many mistakes, so many decisions, so many choices were made putting us in different places. How I wish we could hold on to what was.

Like the members of a little church on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea, Joppa First UMC lost one of the pillars of the church; no, of the whole community. And they decided to grab a desperate hope. You know their story.

The threads that bound Tabitha to the community were many and they were strong. And when the illness and death came to sever those threads, the

community was bereft. Their hearts were broken, so they reached out to one who might be able to retie those threads, to reweave the tear in the tapestry of their community. They sent runners to Peter the apostle, who had just performed a miracle. And they thought maybe . . . possibly . . . But you notice they didn't ask for anything in particular—just that he come, quickly. It wasn't like that father who hoped Jesus could get there before his little girl died. No, Tabitha was dead. They washed her and laid her out in the upper room. They just wanted Peter to come.

They washed the body but didn't prepare it for burial. They didn't anoint it, didn't wrap it. Maybe they did hope, a wild desperate hope. Maybe they hoped for something they couldn't even bring themselves to speak out loud, or the sheer ridiculousness of it would ring in their ears and cause them to lose heart. Just come quickly, they asked. And, well, just come.

He did. Drawn by their threads, Peter came, quickly. And they fell all over themselves trying to tie him to her. She was a servant, they said, a devoted servant, lived in two communities, didn't just care for us in the church, but for folks in the wider community. They called her Dorcas, 'cause that means "gazelle" in Greek, just like Tabitha does in Aramaic. They called her gazelle, the folks out there, the ones she clothed. "Like this," they pointed to the clothes that they wore, proudly pointing out the straightness of the stitch and the line of the seam and the perfection of the fit. They did a twirl like they were on a Paris catwalk. Peter smiled at their love for their sister and friend.

But then they stopped twirling as they caught sight of the body lying on the table in the middle of the room. How dare they smile; how dare they take pleasure in anything, even the work of her hands, in a moment like this. Peter felt the mood change, and he sighed, then shooed them out of the room and got to work—on his knees.

He prayed. What did he pray for? Who knows? He prayed for the threads to be binding. He prayed for the sake of the community who loved her so much. He prayed for her lying there washed and cold and ready for what might be next. He prayed for the will of his Lord to be done. Then he stood up and remembered another room with a body laid out. He was there with Jesus that day, saw him reach out his hand to the dead girl and whisper, "*talitha coum* – little girl rise." So,

Peter reached out his hand and said, "Tabitha rise." And her eyes opened and looked with his, and the smile on his ruddy fisherman's face caused her to sit up at once.

He opened the door to their joy and disbelief and thought to himself with a wry smile, "Now where have I felt that before?" Nobody seemed to notice when he left. He just passed by them, hugging and crying and laughing; and he smiled when he heard Tabitha say, "That seam is coming undone; where is my needle?" And he walked down to the seaside and knocked on the door of a man he hadn't seen since they were boys. He never would have made this re-connection before, against the law, you know, because of the business that took place in this house. But he shrugged and thought, "Things are changing everywhere," and he made himself at home with Simon the Tanner. And somewhere a face familiar to Peter lit up with a massive smile and then thought, "He has no idea. No earthly idea. Yet."

Sometimes miracles happen, and those we thought gone are returned to us. More often, the miracle is that the threads remain, but they grow and change and become something new, something holy. And we find we can continue on after all. I am who I am because of my mother a disease can't take that away, can't undo the threads of my being. And whatever the future holds, I will honor her for what she has stitched for me, stitched into me. We are the lives we touch and that touch us. We are the threads we wear. Thanks be to God.

Fifth Sunday of Easter – What God Called Clean

May 15, 2022 – [Acts 11:1-18](#)

PLANNING NOTES

Change is all around us, even in the church. And change is never easy. Our text this week is about a whole new direction for the beginnings of the church. It has to do with who was considered worthy to include and who should be avoided. Peter pushed the church to go further than they were comfortable going. Wait, no, it wasn't Peter. The Holy Spirit pushed the church to go further than they were comfortable. And that has been the church's story from then on.

Perhaps the way to approach this theme would be to focus on hospitality. How do we welcome and whom do we include? How do we make space for those who might be different from most of us? What do we do to show that we are open to any and to all?

This might be time to say “thank you” to the ushers and greeters, the folks who show up week after week and make sure that worship happens and that people find their way easily. A recruitment invitation could be included in that thank you. Let some of them share their stories of encounters and relationships made in a moment. Many congregations believe that they are friendly, and many are friendly to one another. But how do we show our friendliness to the new person, the stranger in our midst? We sometimes take hospitality for granted, but it grows out of a conviction that we are the church for all people. What might we do to enhance our hospitality, even in the act of worship? Who is excluded because of our facility? How do we accommodate those who didn't grow up in the church and have no idea what “proper church behavior” looks like?

Our worship could invite the Spirit to direct our attention to those being neglected in our community, those pushed to the side, those left behind. We can pray for our neighbors we don't know how to reach but are determined to include somehow. We can learn about worship in other contexts and cultures that might inform our own expressions. We can learn the songs of faith that come in other languages and cultures. It is a way of expressing our openness to folks who may have different ways of worshipping.

You might be saying, “That'll never happen here, in this church or this community.” And you may be right. But this is kin-dom work. This is preparing

ourselves for living in the world that God intended at creation. It is a Pentecost moment where we embrace a vision that is larger than our local context. Yes, we are called to be who we are and where we are and to prepare ourselves to minister in our community. But our vision is always larger, always inclusive. So, we make space for those who may never come in our lifetimes; but who in God's time are a part of the same kin-dom of which we are a part. And we celebrate that future, even as we live in the now.

PREACHING NOTES

A familiar story, Peter's vision on the rooftop. It is the explanation about why we can eat shrimp scampi now. Whew, thanks Peter. Rise, kill, and eat, gives us all kinds of permission to change our diet and include all kinds of delectable things. Otherwise, no bacon. So, an important story to say the least. So, a great sermon to precede a church potluck. Dig in, everybody!

Except that isn't what it is all about. This doesn't really have anything to do with food. Despite the imagery in the vision, this is about people. Which makes it infinitely more . . . messy. Wouldn't you rather preach about bacon?

Our text this week isn't the vision; that happened in chapter ten. Nor is this an analysis of the vision, Peter had done that immediately after it happened in the last chapter. No, what's happening here is Peter is explaining himself to those of the fellowship who don't like what he's done. Peter has crossed a line in the eyes of some of those who are now accusing him.

What we don't have, and it would be helpful to us if we did, is a sense of the tone of those who have approached Peter. We can imagine, and we might even have experienced something similar, but we don't know. It is possible that they came calmly and rationally and asked Peter to help them understand how the rules are changing. And if not the rules, then certainly the practices that they have been following, consciously and unconsciously since they began this new venture. This step has caused them to reconsider who they are and what their calling is as what is about to be called the church. So, they needed to sit and think together about who they will be from here on out.

That's certainly possible, and I would like to think it happened that way. But experience tells me, it wasn't quite so calm. When long-held beliefs and practices are threatened, people tend to lash out. Voices are raised and fists are shaken. Words like "how dare you" and "who do you think you are" were hurled and long-standing relationships were broken. The accusers felt challenged, felt wronged, felt unheard. It was a tense moment in the early church.

Peter stood his ground and passed the blame. "It wasn't me," he declared; "it was God. This wasn't just an idea that I had or a strategy I decided to employ; it was a direct revelation from God." That's a hard line to argue, also hard to support. Perhaps the folks of that time were more in tune with hearing the voice of God and accepting such things as visions, but perhaps not. Not surprisingly, not a lot is said about what happened after this conversation. Was it convincing? Was there a general shrug of the shoulders and a general acceptance in this radical change in practice and understanding? The story we have seems to imply that it was so; the church is spread into the Gentile world, and the mission takes off by leaps and bounds. There are a few hints that there were still some battles to be fought. Just like Peter in this text, Paul is called on the carpet for extending the circles too wide and including those who should not be included, or in the way that Paul wanted to include them. He too argues that it wasn't him, but the Holy Spirit that fell and there was nothing he could do but go along.

Maybe it was all accepted, and the new direction of the church went without a hitch, but that seems doubtful. More likely, there was anger and digging in of heels and possibly even a schism in the newly forged community of faith. Maybe we had the formation of the "First Reformed *True* Followers of the Way" Church in Jerusalem made up of those who chose not to accept this new teaching. Who knows?

What is clear from our text is that something changed. Some understanding, some position, some rule – written or unwritten. What's not so clear is what exactly that change entailed. That this vision, this redirection was not about food is clear to Peter, at least. This is not a new way of looking at bacon. It is a new way of looking at people. What God has made clean, you must not call profane, that's the word that came to Peter in the vision. The one put into practice at that very

moment when some men appeared at his door. This statement is about people. The people God has made clean, Peter must not call unclean or profane. People.

But which people? Well, that also seems clear in the context of our text. It is the Gentile race, non-Jews, who had been considered unclean and therefore unapproachable, especially in intimate settings like eating together, abiding together, acknowledging the existence of, and things like that. You know, life stuff. That seems a safe assumption.

It is, however, an assumption. The vision isn't specific, really. There is no word that says these people named here are now made clean and those people over there are still in the unclean category. Peter's interpretation of the vision was larger than that. In the previous chapter, the living out of the vision, Peter says, "but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean." (Acts 10:28) A little later, he says again, "I truly understand that God shows no partiality" (Acts 10:34). Anyone, no partiality. All-encompassing statements. He doesn't say, "You are now not unclean" or "These people should be included." He says, "All."

Think about that for a moment. Is it any wonder he was challenged in this behavior and in this interpretation? He was confronted by those who wanted to say, "But what about . . . ?" What about this group or that type or this nationality or that ethnicity? What about the ones who wear their hair this way, or who speak like this, the ones who live differently and love differently? I truly have seen that God shows no partiality. What a radical hospitality that represents, don't you think? What an awesome rethinking of our role as witnesses to the Christ we follow that would be. Rather than judgement and exclusion, we proclaim acceptance and inclusion.

Dr. Darryl Stephens says it this way:

"Growth in Christ-likeness allows us to love each other, to encourage development of each person's full human potential. Flourishing is for everyone, not just for the select few or the demonstrably pious. As children of God bearing God's full image, all of humanity is redeemed through Christ. Each person is invited to flourish." - [*Bearing Witness in the Kin-dom: Living into the Church's Moral Witness through Radical Discipleship*](#) (United Methodist Women, 2021, 84.)

Preaching about bacon might be easier, let's be honest. But it would not be nearly as transformative, not nearly as powerful, and, frankly, not the gospel. We are witnesses to the power of the Spirit at work in the world, and we are invited to stand with any and all and declare them clean.

Sixth Sunday of Easter – Opened the Heart

May 22, 2022 – [Acts 16:9-15](#)

PLANNING NOTES

If the Third Sunday of Easter was about hearing God's call for the first time, then this week is about carrying on that conversation. God doesn't tap us on the shoulder and then leave us alone to figure it out from there. God is a constant presence, guiding, advising, hinting, strengthening us for the journey into discipleship. But how do we hear that voice? How do we know what God wants to say to us? How do we discern God's voice in the midst of all the other voices in our talkative world? That's what this week addresses.

We need to cultivate our ability to listen to God speak. But it may be beyond the scope of one worship experience. Instead, we can point to it; we can taste it; we can suggest it; and the worship team can even work with discipleship growth to set up an ongoing hearing God experience.

Worship can both move inward and outward to allow for a variety of experiences of hearing the voice of God. For those of a more contemplative bent, we listen to the stirrings of our soul. We need quiet and reflection time; we need to sort out the strands of experience that are working on us constantly, to examine our thoughts and see which ones reflect our own anxieties and which are leading us to deeper faith and hope. Build in meditation time in worship, perhaps guided with some questions for examination, perhaps in silence or simple music. There are those who need space to listen well.

But know that some will find that space difficult and distracting. So, we move outward. God uses the voices of others, at times, to direct us. The sermon is one such time, but not the only one. Look at the songs that are sung for guidance statements, for encouragement. Look to the prayers that speak of working toward a kin-dom expression of life daily. What quotes from spiritual leaders might be posted or projected? What fillers in the bulletin or worship folder might cause someone to think and to hear God's urging voice?

Hearing God's voice begins with the faith that God is speaking and then a needed determination to listen. So we sing about the voice of God; we pray for that blessing; we commit ourselves to the task of hearing and obeying the word that we hear, both the written word gathered in the scriptures and the ongoing

prompting of the Spirit that speaks to us in this moment, for this moment. How do we hear?

PREACHING NOTES

Do a quick search with your Bible software for occurrences of the word “vision.” This isn’t a scientific research project, but just a quick scan. In my software, for the NRSV, the word vision appears eighty-two times. Thirteen of those are in the apocryphal writings. That leaves sixty-nine times that the English word “vision” appears. Then look and see where the word is used. In the Hebrew scriptures, the book with the most usage of “vision” is Daniel. No surprise there. We might have guessed that one given the chance. But then look at the New Testament. The book with the most usage of the word “vision” is not Revelation (though it could be argued that it is the whole book!) but Acts. The Acts of the Apostles uses the word “vision” eleven times. So, what does that mean? Well, maybe nothing. That’s not really something you should build a sermon on, right? This isn’t a scientific study, and there are many ways that the word “vision” could be used; and we didn’t even go back and explore whether it is the same word in Greek and/or Hebrew. So, just a filler, perhaps.

Yet, it is interesting that in this story of the beginnings of the church there are frequent references to the idea of “vision”—specifically of hearing and seeing God’s vision as it is relayed to the church through individuals. What does that say about how well we listen to God when we make our plans and plot our strategies for mission and ministry? Do we not only bathe all our work in prayer, but do we also take the time to listen to the voice of God however it might be discerned in our specific context? What might we learn if we listened first and planned afterward?

For the second week in a row, our text deals with a vision that came from God and the impact on the direction of the church. “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” We could argue that the first-century church was closer to the idea of vision, especially dreams as visions and communication from God than we are in this more scientific age. But maybe that’s not necessarily progress. Maybe we’ve lost something by not being more in tune with the voice of God.

Maybe this is something to pursue. It might be helpful to talk about how we hear the voice of God. What does it take? How do we open ourselves to that voice? Is it simply an urging in the pit of our stomachs, or is it something more? And how do we tune our hearing to hear that voice? And then once we think we hear a voice from God, how do we test it? How do we discern God's voice from the myriad other voices in our talkative world?

"But wait," you're thinking, "aren't we supposed to be dealing with the text? Does all of this have anything to do with Acts 16:9-15?" Well, no, but actually yes. I mean, no, it isn't dealing with the events that take place in this part of the narrative. But yes, it provides some insight into the larger context.

So, what is going on here? After the vision, Paul gathers up his entourage and heads to Macedonia. We don't see a lot of waffling, a lot of questioning—should I go, was it real, it's a risk. No, it says, "We immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia." *Immediately*. How often have you heard a word from the Lord and immediately changed your plans and your direction and headed off to a new destination? Surely some deliberation took place, Luke just doesn't record it. It isn't interesting to the story. Perhaps.

But they went. We went. It's great how Luke enters the story here, in the famous "we" passage. He wasn't an ivory tower scribe, recording the events of long dead historical figures. No, he was along for the ride. He rolled up his sleeves and jumped aboard ship. There's a sense of "y'all come" in this story. There is a passion that is catching, a hope that is inviting. That's how it is written. Sure, it could have been a later editor, a compilation of stories told and hopes shared. But still, the effect is one of joining up, sharing in. You read these lines, and it feels like you're on the team. We went to Macedonia.

And then an amazing thing happens. Someone listened. Well, that wasn't all that amazing, to be honest, people were listening all the time. Someone decided to give their life and the lives of their whole household to the cause of Christ. Again, that's wonderful news and a sign of the passion and power of the Spirit in the Church. But not what was amazing.

Here's the amazing part: "a certain woman, named Lydia . . ." Ponder that for a moment. Dwell on that verse and let the amazing proclamation wash over you. What's the big deal, you ask? How many women in the Bible get named? How

many women seem to be in control of their own stories and not the victims or objects of the men who surround them? And get this: hold on to your hats, she appears to be the head of her household. Lydia and *her* whole household were baptized into the faith that day.

Where does all this begin? We could say it begins with a vision, a word from God that came in a dream. And that would be true. But it isn't the whole truth. God is always proclaiming. God is always inviting, announcing, encouraging, God is always reaching out with a hope to share in an act of creation. That is the nature of the God we worship, the God we proclaim. That is the before the story, the foundation on which every story is built. On that hope, on that certainty.

The story begins then with an open heart—a heart that was open enough to have a dream and then act on it, a dream, for heaven's sake. A heart that was open enough to jump aboard a ship heading who knows where and who knows why. To join up and be a part of a mission that takes a risk and heads off into the unknown. An open heart that hears a word of hope and affirmation and decides to lean into that word with their whole life and livelihood.

The story begins with an open heart. We often want to skip a step, to move to commitment, to sign folks up when our efforts ought to be focused on opening hearts—calling on the Spirit to come and open the hearts of those we meet, even as we continually pray that our own hearts might be open enough to catch a glimpse of the Spirit, even when we are sleeping.

Seventh Sunday of Easter – Disturbing the City

May 29, 2022 – [Acts 16:16-34](#)

PLANNING NOTES

“Good trouble” is a phrase that has grown in the consciousness of the nation. Representative John Lewis, a towering figure for civil rights, coined the phrase; and more than that, he lived it. Our text for this week says there are wrongs that need righted. But maybe it isn’t quite that clear. It says there are systems, there are presumptions and prejudices, there are oppressive patterns and economic cycles that are impossible to break out of without help. How will we disturb the city today?

But wait, some are thinking, we can’t get political. It would tear us apart. A different approach is needed. We are making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. What would that transformation look like? What would be different in the kin-dom of God? Today is a day for casting a vision of what it means to be working toward, leaning toward, co-creating with God the kin-dom we long for.

Shall we sing about peace, about making peace and studying war no more? Shall we pray about an end to hunger and about living into God’s abundance even here and now in this fruitful world? Shall we stand for an end to violence between nations and on our streets and in our homes? Shall we take small steps toward a carbon neutral existence, clean up our waterways and streets, call for recycling and a plastic-free lifestyle? What does the kin-dom look like in your neighborhood? What would end and what would be enhanced? Who is working with us on this vision? Who can we partner with as we seek to be more kin-dom focused in our living and working and planning and worship?

Can we fix everything? No, but we can hold up a vision that inspires us and those who come alongside us. We can invite the next generation to join us because we are heading somewhere, no longer content with things as they are, and ready to be a part of the solution. Our worship has a thread of holy discontent, wanting the kin-dom to come on earth as it is in heaven. That’s our prayer every time we gather; let’s mean it.

And as always, we start with ourselves, not simply pointing fingers at all the problems out there. We pay attention to our language for worship, expanding the

images of God, providing balance in gender and watching how we depict different races and nations when we gather. Our songs can sing of a multicultural expression that may be bigger than our local context. But we sing with hope of a wider, more colorful world; we sing our desire to be a part of that richer world. We may stumble over the strange languages and unfamiliar rhythms, but we can grow into them, even as we are growing into a kin-dom life. It is worth the effort.

What good trouble can you stir up today as you worship? Or at least suggest? What vision of God's kin-dom can you cast as you gather, as you sing, as you pray today? When was the last time your church was accused of "disturbing the city"?

PREACHING NOTES

"Making Disciples of Jesus Christ for the Transformation of the World." You've seen it before. At least if you are a part of The United Methodist Church. That is our mission statement. It defines us, directs us, empowers us. At least that is the plan, the agenda behind such a statement. But where does it come from and what does it really mean?

I don't know where you stand on mission statements. Some consider them essential; others find them distracting from the day-to-day work. Or maybe it is the creation of them that is so distracting. When the conference I served in got infatuated with mission statements, I admit I struggled through the process. I felt like we didn't need a mission statement, as we already had one. At least we did if we took the time to read the gospels. "Go into all the world," said Jesus. "That's pretty mission oriented," I thought. "Love God, love neighbor"—can't get a better mission than that. "Do justice, love mercy, walk humbly with God"—okay, not the gospels, but still sounds like something Jesus would affirm. Why do we need a mission statement? We just need to claim the one already given to us.

I did come to understand that to claim that statement, that fundamental belief of who we are as a church, as a community of faith in a particular place and time, we need to make it ours. How were we going to make that mission from our Lord into that which gets our feet and hands and hearts moving? That was the real process of shaping a mission statement.

Enough of that, we've got a text to explore. But let me share that I see a connection between our denominational statement and this text from the Acts of the Apostles. Maybe only in a tangential way, but it seems compelling to me.

Our text continues the story from last week. We're still in Macedonia, it appears. We're traveling around as the "we" group. We were teaching and praying and engaging with the community in the usual Paul kind of way. But then there is this person. An irritant, really. A buzzing fly that just won't leave them alone. A slave girl, with a gift, a spirit of divination. And she runs after them, like an annoying kid sister who keeps tagging along, wanting to be one of the cool kids. And she announces, no, she divines good stuff, stuff that Paul would have said himself. "These men are the slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation."

Who could be upset by that? They're getting free advertising. They've got a P.R. manager running in front of them. What a deal! Except it didn't feel like a deal. Her enthusiasm short-circuited any conversation that they might want to have. The big reveal was revealed too soon. Day after day, she was there, with the same tagline, like a bad commercial that keeps running in every break, all day long. Finally, Paul just snapped. And he turned and healed her. Just like that. He cast out that spirit of divination, effectively shutting her up for good.

Then it hits the fan; the owners of the slave girl just lost their meal ticket, and they aren't happy. They have Paul and team arrested and invent some charges that may be based on truth, but probably not. They are stripped as a way of publicly humiliating them; they are beaten as a way of extracting a pound of flesh for the loss of income; and they are thrown into the inner jail (the jailiest part of the jail).

Naturally, they start singing hymns, perhaps "The Old Rugged Cross," "How Great Thou Art," "Amazing Grace"—Luke has a solo on that one. All the hits. They sing them through their facial contusions and over the creaking of their broken bones; they sing rather than moan; they sing rather than complain; they sing. And the other prisoners locked away there in that rat-infested darkness listen to them sing and decide they are either crazy or saints, maybe something of both.

Then the earthquake happened. A natural occurrence? Well, sure. Earthquakes happen. But it's funny how Luke describes the effect. He says the chains were

unfastened. Not the chains were shattered, or pulled from the wall, or any other accidental freeing effect. He says unfastened. Interesting, don't you think?

And no one seizes the moment and runs for freedom. The gospel singers and their appreciative audience sit there in the rubble patiently waiting for whatever might be next. When they hear the scream from the jailer and metallic unsheathing of the sword and the ragged breathing of a man on the brink of despair, Paul shouts out. "We're all here," put away your sword. Then the jailer brings light into their darkness and kneels before the men he treated like dirt earlier in the day and says, "I want what you have that causes you to act like you did here."

It was strange, out of the ordinary, unsettling. Their behavior was not normal. It was offensive to the status quo; they were upsetting the city. It was a part of transforming the world.

Change is hard; that's the point; and it will be resisted. But if we embrace the mission statement, then we are change makers, change bringers. And we will be resisted, and ignored, and maybe even persecuted. Yet we will persist; we will bring change, bring a new kin-dom, a new way of living as the human community. We will struggle with it, and sometimes will get it wrong. Paul's response to the girl who annoyed him is hardly worthy of the Christ he proclaims, even if the result was a positive one. Last week, we celebrated the status of a woman named Lydia in the life of the new movement. This week, we seem to have fallen back on social patterns of sidelining unnamed women. One step forward, two steps back. We are not perfect vessels of this perfect grace. We will continue, however, to be worthy of the gospel we proclaim.

But we are in the business of disturbing the inadequate peace, challenging the status quo. In the next chapter, the charge gets even better: These people are turning the world upside down. What better legacy could we leave? We who are making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world? Let's be about disturbing.