

We continue with our series on the uprising of the Christian faith following the resurrection. Today we are talking about the uprising of partnership. Let us pray. After Jesus had spent some time with his disciples, after the Sermon on the Mount, and long before the triumphant entry into Jerusalem, Jesus sent his disciples out in pairs to share the gospel. First Jesus sent them to nearby towns, just to the children of Israel. Even there he warned them that they would face resistance. Even among their own people, they could expect resistance. I think that's why Jesus sent them out in pairs—so they always had support.

And after the resurrection, before the ascension, Jesus told his followers that they were to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, and in Judea—places he had sent them before. But he didn't stop there. "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you;" Jesus said, "and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the **ends of the earth.**" And that's what they were doing, the apostles and the other followers, they were being witnesses to the ends of the earth. Twenty years after the resurrection, Paul and Silas, along with others, were indeed sharing the gospel all over. Just as Jesus told them to do.

Paul and Silas are in Philippi. Philippi is a very important city in the Roman world. So they are now far beyond being witnesses in Judea and Samaria. They are, indeed, moving into that "ends of the earth" phase. While they are there, they hear about a group who gather for worship on the Sabbath. This is a place where the Jews in that city would gather to worship—possibly akin to a synagogue, although possibly an outdoor space.

When they find the group, it is a group of women, including Lydia, described as a woman of God, indicating that she was, possibly a very pious woman or a Jewish sympathizer.

She is also a woman of some standing and wealth, described as a dealer in purple cloth, so even in this time when women are marginalized, she was a business woman.

This group of women who gather for worship outside the city and Paul and Silas joined them. The spirit was moving and Paul shared with them the gospel, the good news of Jesus. And they all became believers—Lydia's entire household was baptized. And then she invited Paul and Silas to stay in her home, joining the many woman who supported the early ministry financially, providing food and shelter to the apostles. Another partner in ministry.

Although the scripture makes it seem as though everything happened in one day, it is possible it was over a period of time. Indeed the next sentence says, "one day we were going to the place of prayer," the same place where Paul met Lydia and where he taught the gospel, and on the way there was a slave girl who had a "spirit of divination," that is, she could tell the future. Indeed it appeared she could not help but tell the future, calling out after Paul and Silas, "these men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of

salvation,” a way of liberation—in another translation. Imagine what that sounded like to Romans, liberation, did she mean freedom to slaves? After all, the Roman economy was in part based on slavery. It was the exploitation of the workers that allowed the wealthy to prosper. If they were given liberation, if they were given salvation and saved from their slavery, how would the wealthy maintain their wealth? How would they maintain their influence? And not just this girl’s owners, but all such slave owners, all the elite who ran society. And the most high god? What could she mean by that? Ceasar, after all, was the most high. Greeks and Romans would argue over who was the most high, Hera or Zeus or Apollo. She wasn’t speaking of any of them.

Moreover, Roman peace, Roman dominance was based on their worship of the most powerful pantheon of Gods, failure to worship them could be the downfall of the empire. And here this slave girl was proclaiming these men, Paul and Silas, were slaves of the Most High God, and that they brought a message of freedom, of liberation, and of salvation. She brought attention to them when she did this. Attention that could be dangerous. Attention that Paul was not seeking. And it annoyed Paul and he ordered the spirit out of her.

Notice, this wasn’t a gift she had, it wasn’t a blessing to her and to others. Instead it was the basis of her slavery—the way her owners made money off of her. She had a spirit, some would say a demon, some unnatural and unhealthy way that we cannot begin to explain that allowed her to know the future, indeed to know the truth. And her owners exploited that and her, and made money off of it. And when Paul ordered the spirit out of her—no more money for her owners, no way to make an income off of her predictions when she no longer made predictions. And so this group of powerful men went to the Roman officials and claimed that Paul and Silas were dangerous, they were Jewish revolutionaries, they had a lifestyle not fit for Roman society. And this alarmed the officials.

After all, what is the most important story in Jewish faith and history? The liberation of Israel from slavery in Egypt. If these men are now preaching freedom from slavery, preaching liberation? That would mean the breakdown of Roman society and the foundation of their economy. It is no wonder that the Roman officials were worried, no wonder they had Paul and Silas arrested. But just was it that Paul and Silas were teaching that was so extraordinary? What was so threatening?

They were teaching of the resurrection, but more than that, they were teaching all that Jesus taught. That people, everyone, was loved by God. That everyone was equal.

The significance of Lydia is in part that she is a woman, and like others before her, she has a key and powerful role in this new faith. Much like Mary Magdalene and Mary and Martha and Priscilla, woman play an important role in this new faith because to God there is no distinction. “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one

in Christ Jesus.” This is what Jesus taught. Mary is welcomed to sit at the feet of Jesus. Children are welcomed to come to him. Sinners, and tax collectors, and Samaritans, and even Pharisees, are given equal attention and equal care from Jesus.

This is a gospel that tears down the divisions that society works so hard to build, divisions that give order and structure to society, that bring calm and economic prosperity

to some, at the expense of others.

This is a gospel about and for the others, the ones society excludes, the ones society exploits for gain, like the girls with the spirit of prophecy.

The gospel of Jesus is about the resurrection, yes, but it is about so much more.

And that is what Paul and Silas are teaching. And in this teaching, they partner with each other, but they also partner with those they meet in their journey, those who are also seeking to know God and God’s ways, those like Lydia.

And this is threatening. It is threatening to the elite who benefit from the divisions in society. It is threatening to those who exploit the slaves and women and the poor. And so those who are threatened respond, from a very real and understandable place—their way of life is being threatened and so they have Paul and Silas arrested, beaten, and dragged off to prison.

This is the point when we usually focus on the amazing faith of Paul and Silas, who continued to praise God and sing hymns even while in prison. And indeed it is remarkable. In more recent times, psychologists have said that what Paul and Silas do, sing songs, is one way to handle the pressure and stress of prison and confinement.

Indeed, prisoners of war did better, withstood the pressures of imprisonment and recovered faster if they remembered and sang hymns and songs or poems and scripture. Their faith kept Paul and Silas strong despite their imprisonment, a testament to the comfort and peace Jesus gave them.

Around midnight the prison shook in a great earthquake, and the doors opened. The guard, terrified that he would be punished for their escape, prepared to kill himself. But Paul called out, “don’t do it. We’re all still here.” Their concern for HIM, changed him. “What is this freedom, this liberation you have? I want it.”

And there, the guard’s heart having been opened by the Spirit, Paul shared the amazing gospel story.

“You will be liberated. You and your entire household” The jailer took them to his own home to care for them. And he was transformed, from jailer to host, from terrified, to empowered to care. And when Paul and Silas shared the gospel, when they share how Jesus had come to preach good news to the poor, release of the captives (which must have seemed ironic), recovery of sight to the blind, to set the oppressed free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor, and how Jesus healed regardless of someone’s status or gender or ethnicity and how Jesus loved children and taught that God was a father who loved us all like a good father loves his children.

When this man, this Roman jailer heard this good news, and heard how Jesus gave himself up, was crucified and yet arose, was resurrected defeating even death. Then the jailor and his entire household was baptized. Another partner in ministry.

Of course, we know that Paul's story was not over. The officials who had arrested Paul learned that Paul was a Roman citizen and entitled to certain rights, that he had not been afforded. They wanted Paul to go away quietly. Paul instead insisted on an apology. He insisted on being treated as he was entitled to be treated. Just as Jesus taught, demand the dignity to which you are entitled.

And after he received his apology, rather than leave as requested, Paul stayed in ministry, building up the partnerships that had started with Lydia and the ecclesia, the religious community of faith, that was forming their in Philippi. As Brian McLaren imagines it, the community claimed their joy and their partnership in faith: "We are partners in an earthquake of liberation! As we move forward together in this partnership in mission for peace and freedom, injustice at every level of society will be confronted, and people at every level of society will be set free!"

That work continues.

It continues here at Journey where we state our mission as a community where families of all cultures connect to worship, grow and serve on our journey with Jesus. It continues even as I prepare to move to a new ecclesia, a new faith community. Just as Paul would eventually move on from Philippi to bring the gospel to other towns and other ecclesia. The partnership, the community, lived on in those who remained and who continued to share Jesus' message of love and liberation, opening the doors that trap people in their station, in their prisons of grief, their prisons of poverty, their prisons of sin, their prisons of other's expectations and limitations.

An earthquake of liberation that opens the doors, just as we open our hearts and our minds to the love of God and fellowship in Jesus Christ. Amen.