



St. Andrew's By-the-Sea
The Episcopal Church
in Destin, Florida

“Can Lydia’s story be ours?”
May 24, 2025 – Easter C6
Acts 16:9-15

A Homily by The Rev’d Jo Popham

Memorial Day is a day of remembrance and thanksgiving for those who have served and died in service to our nation – a day when we recognize the sacrifices our military personnel have made. It is a time to reflect on the price of freedom. And it is a time to look hard at the legacy of those who represented this county and served with honor.

It makes me think of the enduring legacy of St. Andrew’s By-the Sea. Often on Memorial Day we share stories of the loved ones that we remember this day. It would be fitting to do that today, to recall our heritage as we seem to be adrift in uncharted waters.

The steeple at St. Andrew’s By-the-Sea was for many years a navigational aide to fishermen on the waters of the Gulf of Mexico. And the church has guided many home when we were lost or uncertain of direction. Without a home now, do we still have the same focus? Are we still guiding those who are lost to a safe place?

The world has changed so much from when this church began, and yet we are reading the same lessons from Holy Scripture and singing the same hymns we did decades ago. Actually, meeting at the Destin Community Center and in one another’s homes gives us a more intimate worship experience. We can hear and see one another in a smaller space. But will our legacy survive? Survive being without a home and after we move into a new space? I think that what is key is how we do ministry in a new space, and by ministry I mean not just how we worship but how we do outreach to those less fortunate than we.

I have been asking myself, if we want to be free of the incumbrance of a building? Do we want to behave like 1st century church people who met in their homes? One of our members who moved away (Nancy Skinner) helped to plant a new Episcopal Church. They began in her home. They moved to a store front. And now they are building a church. This is consistent with the church of the future, a church that is reinventing itself.

This happens about every 500 years. The last time was the great Reformation of the 16th century when Protestants broke off from Roman Catholic traditions. We owe much to the pioneers of the Reformation where our manner of worship was forged. It was not an easy or comfortable transition. Leaders were killed over the manner of worship that was being tried during those times.

Thankfully, clergy and leaders of the church today are not killed for their actions on behalf of the church, but they surely are responsible for the direction the church, either forward into a new era or back to old ways. But that flexion point between the old ways and the new is where we find ourselves today. And for us at SABTS the pivotal moment is now. How we make decisions about our future is paramount. Do we seek just the right place to worship and let that drive our mission? Or do we discern what our outreach is and let those efforts be the engine to lead us to our new home? Jim's sermon last week outlined who we are and what has driven our church. We glorified (that is revealed) God's love in the world in words, yes, but also in action. How? By providing meals and showers and shelter and clothing and housing and medical and social service referrals to the homeless in Destin. We provided food and household goods to the food insecure, the underemployed and the unemployed in Okaloosa County. Our bike ministry provided transportation to the homeless and the seasonal workers. We have been the poster church for an Episcopal presence at a time of schism and since. From the outset nearly 100 years ago when we were the first church to be planted in Destin, our steeple has led fishermen and parishioners and visitors home. And we have raised up from among us the ministry of a postulant who will leave us shortly to pursue a seminary education to become a priest in God's one holy catholic and Apostolic Church.

But is that in the past now? Should we be proud of who we were and let our legacy be our contribution to the Christian Movement? I wonder....

We are at a crucial and decisive moment when our next steps will define who we are to be. And how we make decisions must be in light of what God wants us to do and be in

the future. What will we have to offer Destin if all we do is sustain our presence with little regard for our call as Christians to respect the dignity of all people and to spread the Gospel beyond the walls of our church wherever that may be? And should where we worship define who we can and cannot reach out to with the lifesaving Word of God and life sustaining sustenance to feed people?

The Jesus Movement began in the homes of our Lord's followers. Worship at the room in the community center has given us the opportunity to appreciate being with our fellow parishioners in an intimate way. Today we are in a home. How does it feel? Do we feel the difference in being in a public space, in a church, or in a home church? Isn't it more intimate than a large empty space? Is that what fed the people in Philippi, that feeling of belonging and learning to understand the Gospel? Is that what we hope for?

Lydia was a pivotal person in the formation of the Christian Movement in the first century. When Paul and his traveling companions arrived in Philippi there was no synagogue where they could worship, so they decided to go to the river on the Sabbath where there was a place of prayer. Lydia was at the river. She was "a worshiper of God," and listened to Paul's teachings. It was there that "the Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul." She was known for her hospitality and welcomed Paul and Silas into her home, and then others came to hear what the Lord had done for her, and it became a place of worship. And the first Christian church in Europe was established. In Philippi, Macedonia the first church was planted. Lydia had been the first convert – the first to accept Christianity from the teachings of Paul and Silas. And all of Lydia's household also converted and followed Christ. Lydia's home became the first church meeting place, and the church in Philippi grew and became a strong community. Not only did Lydia offer hospitality, but she financially supported Paul's mission work in Philippi, and through their efforts to spread the Gospel, even throughout Europe and even during their imprisonment.

Would that we had a Lydia among us. We don't, but we do have some possibilities for a place to worship and discern next steps for St. Andrew's By-the-Sea. We may feel this is getting the cart before the horse, but perhaps not. It could be that we need to feed ourselves with the Word of God so that we can take the next bold steps needed to further God's kingdom here in Destin.

What can we learn from Lydia's story? Why did Luke (the author of the Acts of the Apostles as well as the Gospel according to Luke) why did he include this account of a wealthy career woman's hospitality leading to the establishment of the Church in Philippi? Is it because Lydia's story is one of the few stories of the conversion of a woman? Or because it is the conversion of a wealthy person? I don't know, but I am certain these verses in Acts are pertinent to our lives. Lydia is given status along with other planters of the church, along with men, yes, but also along with fishermen, who were men of some means because they owned their own boats. Is that why we hear Lydia's story – because she was not only a woman but a wealthy woman? No, I think not. Could it be that scripture includes this mention of Lydia to include all of us, whether we are people of means or people who live on fixed incomes and whether we employed or not, whether we are retired or not. We too are all called to support the church, yes, but also to bring others to know God through Jesus with the support of the Holy Spirit and those who spread the good news to us. We are called to offer hospitality as Lydia did to others within the church and those outside our doors, to new believers and seekers alike, even to traveling missionaries and wandering refugees from a storm. We all are to spread the good news as Paul did to Lydia. My sisters and brothers, we too can bring others to believe and to grow their faith. We are all called to spread the Gospel. And as we promised in our Baptismal vows, we are called to respect the dignity of all people, and that, my friends, is what St. Andrew's By-the-Sea has done so well in the past and will do again. People are hungry, y'all. They are hungry for the lifesaving Word of God and the lifegiving substance we can provide. And we, the Episcopal Church of Destin, can and will provide both.

Lord, may it be so. Amen.