

Easter 6 C  
Acts 16:9-15  
May 25, 2025

“No Longer Unseen”  
Rev. Dr. Brandon S. Perrine

*<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. <sup>11</sup> We therefore 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 worshiper 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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You’ve heard the one about the invisible man and the invisible woman who got married? I’m not sure what they saw in each other and their kids weren’t much to look at either!<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Joker. “Invisible Man and Invisible Woman,” Fart.com: <https://fart.com/joke/14274/an-invisible-man-married-an-invisible-woman-im-not-sure-what-they-saw-in-each-other-their-kids>

After services last Sunday, one of our members approached me and pointed out that despite everything that happened in our text from Acts, women were completely invisible. It's true, isn't it? There were the circumcised believers in Jerusalem, and Peter with his unusual dream of the heavenly tablecloth and his subsequent visit to Caesarea, and Cornelius with his vision of a man with a message, and the three men that collected Peter and his six "brothers." But there were no women in the story. Now, of course that doesn't mean there were no women *involved* in the story, but none that were written into its retelling by Luke's author. Of course, the Jerusalem believers included women. Of course, Cornelius' household included women. Likely, Peter's little traveling group included women. And it's worth acknowledging, even when the text doesn't, that women played and continue to play leading roles in the unfolding story of the Jesus movement and human history. Let's face it, none of us would be here without them! In today's text, though, we get a little more. Today, we hear about Lydia.

The story begins with Paul's vision of a man from Macedonia pleading with him to come. Immediately, Paul and his traveling companions set sail from Troas in modern-day Turkey, to Macedonia in present-day Greece, via the island of Samothrace in the Aegean Sea. This was, effectively, a voyage from Asia to Europe, Paul's first. They passed through the coastal town of Neapolis and headed straight for Philippi, an important colony city of the Romans. After a few days, they found a group of women who had gathered to pray by the river on the sabbath, led by Lydia.

While it may not seem like a lot, the text gives us four important details about Lydia. First, we hear that she is a "worshiper of God." She was a non-Jewish person that worshipped the deity of the Hebrews. Second, we then learn that she is originally from the city of Thyatira in modern Turkey. Third, we read that she is a dealer in purple cloth. And finally, we ascertain that she is the head of her own household. Taken together, these details paint an impressive picture.

God-worshippers or God-fearers, like Lydia, were common in the Greco-Roman world. These non-Jewish individuals participated in some of the rites and customs of Jewish communities without fully converting. The city of Thyatira where Lydia originally came from was an important economic and religious hub “known for its production and trade in dyed cloth.”<sup>2</sup> Purple dye was derived from marine mollusks and only wealthy people wore clothes or used fabrics of purple. Lydia had a thriving business in luxury textiles.<sup>3</sup> And following her baptism, Lydia spoke (a rarity in and of itself for a woman in Christian Scripture) and insisted the group stay in her apparently large home. It was *her* household that was baptized and it was *her* home to which they all went. And it would be *her* home to which Paul returned after a run-in with local authorities. The text makes no illusions to a husband, father, or son, or of an attachment to any male whatsoever. Lydia was successful in her own right and independent. Later in the chapter, we learn that it was at Lydia’s home that the church of Phillipi first gathered (Acts 16:40). And we have every reason to believe that it was Lydia herself that first led it.

In a world of invisible women, Lydia stood out, and not because all the other women weren’t exceptional in their own rights. But because the Greco-Roman world did not value women on the same level as it valued men. Nonetheless, Lydia still stood out. Lydia was independent and successful in a world where women simply were not allowed to be either. Lydia was courageous, seeing truth in a belief system she did not grow up in, following a teacher she had never met, welcoming strangers into her home, and receiving them back again after they wound up in jail. Lydia was hospitable, housing not just Paul and company, but providing the space for Phillipi’s first church—and likely leading it. There was nothing a man could do that Lydia couldn’t. What better person to shepherd the fledgling church, the first in Europe, than the first European to adopt the teachings of Jesus—Lydia. Perhaps that’s why the Eastern Church designates her, St. Lydia, Equal to the Apostles.

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<sup>2</sup> Commentary by Gary Gilbert. “The Jewish Annotated New Testament,” Oxford: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2011. Page 233.

<sup>3</sup> “Lydia,” GodWhoSpeaks.uk, February 15, 2022: <https://www.godwhospeaks.uk/women-in-scripture/lydia/>.

Lydia's story illustrates the importance of asking ourselves: "Who are the invisible people in the stories we tell?" Lydia's story illustrates the importance of considering: "Who are the invisible people that make my life and lifestyle possible?" "Who are the invisible people affected by my choices, by my actions, by my inaction, and by that of my community and nation?" Admit it or not, our lives and the lives of our communities, our nation, and our world are indelibly linked to the lives of countless invisible ones.

Jesus made it his ministry to call the invisible and unseen ones out of the shadows and into the light of day. He called out the women and the children. He called out those sick or in need. He called out those unsavory and unclean and unwelcome. He called them out so that the ones responsible for their invisibility might have to look at them and be held to account. He called them out because seeing is believing and denial is no longer possible when proof stares back at you with eyes of its own. He called them out of the shadows and into community, into relationship, into mutual care because that's what people are built for and it's something we all need.

Now I'm purely speculating, but I bet that's what Lydia did next. I bet she empowered women in her community. I bet she fed hungry people and nursed sick people in her community. I bet she listened to elders and affirmed children in her community. I bet she saw people, really *saw* people that had been in the shadows, and welcomed them into the bright light of day, and into the welcoming arms of community, and into the hope that together things could be better. I feel pretty confident that's exactly what Lydia did. Because when you've finally seen the light and been seen for who you are, you naturally want that for others. And so do we. May we do likewise. Amen.