

The Easter Signs

St. Mark Lutheran
Three services

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And a vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing there, urging him and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." And when Paul had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

So, setting sail from Troas, we made a direct voyage to Samothrace, and the following day to Neapolis, and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city some days. And on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to the riverside, where we supposed there was a place of prayer, and we sat down and spoke to the women who had come together. One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshipper of God. The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul. And after she was baptized, and her household as well, she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay." And she prevailed upon us." Acts 16:9-15

Signs, signs, signs. Everywhere we see signs, signs like "No shirt, no shoes, no service." I would guess practically everyone has seen the sign "Don't walk on the grass." Which sign do you think that we see the most often? I would guess it is probably the "STOP" sign.

We dislike many signs and choose to ignore them. "Speed Limit" signs are probably our least favorites. Shoppers often do not like the sign "Limit One Per Customer". Those visiting the Chester Twp. Recycling Center often show their disdain of the signs telling us NOT to throw plastic bags in the large cans for recyclable materials. Too many people want life to be without bounds and free, and they dislike signs that limit them.

But there are also signs that we long to see. If a loved one is sick, we anxiously look for a sign of improvement, hoping that things are going to get better. If we care about our relationship with someone, we look for signs that the person cares for us or maybe even loves us. If you need to find a job, and you are called back for a second interview, that's a hopeful sign that they are considering you.

God is looking for signs also. He is looking for signs that we take our relationship with him seriously. He is looking for signs that we are sorry for our sins. Jesus has at least two specific signs for which he is looking: one that we "love one another" and two that we "witness" in regard to what he has done for us.

This is the Sixth Sunday of Easter. There have been all sorts of signs pointing to Easter, haven't there? Next Sunday, June 2 is the Seventh Sunday of Easter, and we return to our two service summer schedule. Then we move into Pentecost. Is that it for Easter then? Will you be thinking that Easter has come and gone? That is certainly not the way God intends for things to be. He expects our lives to be filled with his Word and resurrection power. He expects every day to be a "little Easter" for us.

It's time to meet Lydia. Acts 16 tells us, "And on the Sabbath Day we went outside the gate to the riverside, where we supposed there was a place of prayer, and we sat down and spoke to the women who had come together. One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods."

So Lydia was from Thyatira. This small city in Asia Minor was a commercial center which was especially known for its rich crops and its production of purple dye. Lydia was a dealer in purple cloth and as a result may have been a businesswoman of some wealth. Purple cloth was costly and purchased primarily by the nobility.

Our text also says that Lydia was a "worshiper of God" (vs. 14). "Worshiper of God" is a term that is often used for Gentiles who believed in the Jewish God. But though they believed in God, many of them did not yet know Christ.

The text also says, "The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul." (verse 14) We don't know what Paul said, but we can be confident that it included the Good News about Jesus Christ, both that he died on the cross to pay for our sins and that he rose from the dead on the third day. She heard and her heart was opened. This fits right in with what Deacon Chris said about conversion last Sunday, that conversion is the work of God the Holy Spirit.

But that wasn't all! After that, she and her household were baptized. These were surely "signs of Easter". Paul in Romans, Chapter 6, tells us that in baptism we are united with Christ both in his death and in his resurrection. We have been set free from the eternal penalty for our sin. Lydia received faith in Christ through hearing the Word of God. Salvation was hers.

You may be surprised to hear that the Rev. Kurt Ziemann, Senior Pastor at Zion Lutheran Church in Painesville, is probably speaking on this same topic this morning. Now how would I know that? He wrote a similar message months ago and submitted it to Concordia Pulpit Resources for possible use by ministers on this day. I used part of what he had to say and part of what I wanted to say in my message today. But let me directly quote him on this part: "God calls. God opens hearts. God creates faith, and God empowers for service." These are the signs of Easter, and the marks are the work of the Holy Spirit..." All we are asked to do in conversion is share the Word.

Lydia was a miracle of God's power and love and proof that the effects of Easter linger on. But let's not stop with her. You, too, are meant to be a "Sign of Easter". You are to be a sign that Easter goes on living and that God's Word opens hearts and causes them to change. Yes, Easter goes on, living in believers' hearts and living in believers' voices.

Maybe some of you right now don't feel like much of a sign. Maybe the effects of Easter have been missing for some time. This may, directly or indirectly, be the influence of the Devil himself. He wants to rob us of our victory and lead us to despair over things wrong in our lives and in the world. His goal is to turn our eyes away from the empty tomb and its meaning and turn them inward toward ourselves and our worldly desires.

But thanks be to God we have God on our side! He is patient and merciful. He has called us to be his people.

He brings our life back in focus and in alignment with his will through Confession and Absolution. He gives us spiritual strength and guidance through his powerful Word. The Holy Spirit works through this Word to bring faith. Hearts are made whole again and we go forth renewed.

Faith produces fruit. Our hands find things to do to serve the Lord. We throw our arms around others to provide comfort and support, and our legs take us where we need to be. We share the transforming news of Christ crucified and Christ risen. The victory of the empty grave lives on and on and on. Amen.