

Certain Uncertainty

Acts 16: 9-15



©Rev. Sarah Cooper Searight
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These days, with two little ones in the house, there are rare opportunities for quiet and stillness. In fact, quiet and stillness have pretty much left the building. This is not breaking news, I know, to many of you who have kids...or know of them.

You understand then, why earlier this week, co-mingled with sadness at being away from home for a few days while away at a meeting, there was just a little bit of giddiness that I would have 2 hours on a plane with nothing but quiet and stillness and my podcasts. One of my favorites is “Radiolab”.

For those of you who don’t already know it, “Radiolab” is short for Radio Laboratory. The hosts of the show identify a theme and then explore it using theories of science, philosophy and experience as guides.

The episode I listened to on the plane is called, “Are You Sure?”¹, and features the story of a geologist, his fiancé, a cross- country bike ride, and God. Almost immediately I thought about our text for today. A reading that comes from the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 16, verses 9-15. Let’s take a minute now and listen for God’s word to us this morning.

*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.”*

*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.*

*We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace,
the following day to Neopolis,
and from there to Philippi,
which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony.
We remained in the city for some days.*

*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.*

¹ Miller, Lulu. “Are You Sure?” Radiolab, season 11, episode 5, WNYC, 2010, www.radiolab.org/story/278075-are-you-sure/.

*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.

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.

This is the word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

On this fourth Sunday of Easter, we make our way from the closed upper rooms and miraculous moments where Jesus stood resurrected, to the impassioned activity of the apostles traveling far and wide with their proclamation of good news.

Trading a seaside in Galilee for a riverside in Macedonia—
we move from those who were unsure, frightened, and hesitant in their new call;
to those who were bold, unafraid, and certain in their words of new life.

What strikes me right off the bat when we listen to stories like this one of Paul and Lydia, is how vastly different their world seems to be from our own.

Theirs seems to be a world where visions and dreams happened. Just prior to this passage, Paul and Timothy rerouted away from Asia because, as the story explains, they were blocked by the Holy Spirit. Instead, Paul has a dream of a man pleading with him to come to Macedonia. And straight away they are off- traveling for the first time into Greece.

Theirs seems to be a world where anything and everything could be a connection to the holy. A dream. A river. A daily gathering of women outside the gate. Lydia was brought that day to the shore of the river just as were the apostles, and her heart was opened to hear them, and she was baptized.

Theirs seems to be a world where barriers were constantly challenged and broken down— no more Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male and female— barriers it had taken thousands of years to build up. Just like that, Lydia— a woman, a business woman, an owner of her own household— offers her hospitality and becomes their home away from home in Philippi.

Maybe it's not so much that their world was all that different. Maybe they understood it differently; wrote about it differently; engaged it differently. Maybe it wasn't all that different, but it sure feels a world away.

As children of the Enlightenment, as advocates for reason, as post-modern Presbyterians where shades of grey are the new normal; we have a few clarifying questions to ask. First and foremost being— but how do you *know*? It's the Thomas question—you know, the one who wasn't quite sure until he saw Jesus in the flesh— and it's not a bad one. As certain as we are that God is love, we are more often than not certainly uncertain that we have any solid proof. Are you *sure*?

So then back to Radiolab, the geologist, his cross-country bicycle trip, and the episode, with that very same question as its theme. *Are you sure?*

After setting a little context, we find out that this bicycle trip is preceded by a crisis of faith that led then almost immediately to a crisis in his relationship with his fiancé. Their sure and certain faith was central to their relationship until the moment he describes when he wasn't so certain anymore. In fact, he was pretty certain in that moment of clarity that God didn't exist. He recalls precisely how it felt: a tightening in his chest, just behind the sternum. The funny thing is that nothing really preceded this. It just happened.

He knew he had to confess this to her, and she reacted just as he feared. They didn't call off the wedding, but doubt had surfaced. And so, weeks before the big day, he set out on this bicycle trip with the express purpose of finding a sure and certain sign of God's existence. A sign that would make certain again both his own faith and their mutual conviction that they were meant to share life together. He looked, but nothing ever seemed quite enough. Nothing gave him 100% certainty.

This seems more along our line of experience, maybe not the complete and utter about-face in believing in God, or maybe so, though more often it is the questioning, the looking, the uncertainty.

You know, that gnawing feeling you have when faced with a loved one in the emergency room who doesn't seem to be getting any better. You start to wonder, will one more prayer really change anything?

Or the pictures that come to us from Syria or Somalia, from Parkland or Chester. We ask, and we legitimately want to know, where is resurrection in these stories?

Or that troublesome question that keeps popping into your head when everything is so busy and life seems to be fine and you're not going to church or being as faithful to devotion as you once were, and you really just don't feel connected anymore.

There are the times when we need to hear or see, when we search desperately for a sign, and we're *never* 100% sure. Is this the right school for me? the right job? the right relationship?

As a community of faith we want to know that the direction we're headed in ministry will produce measurable growth. We want to know that the risks we take will pay off: in numbers on the rolls, in tithes to the budget, in successful spreading of the Gospel, in growth of our relationships.

So we look at a text like this one from Acts with Paul and the apostles and the women and Lydia, and we wonder at how nice that would have been **back then**.

To be certain.

Or at least to be bold enough to risk it.

How nice it would have been to be Lydia; newly baptized, she offers her home as a place of hospitality for these men who were not so long ago strangers, but who have become brothers. Baptism—that's the easy part. Where baptism leads: a changed life, a part in this community, a chance to sit at the Lord's table again and again with people who might be as uncertain as you.

That's the part where our fears and doubts creep in.

Two years after the bicycle trip, after calling off the wedding, and splitting up for a time; the geologist and his fiancé reunite and do marry. At some point, he started back to church. He chose church for a sense of community rather than the conviction of faith, but just the same, he went. And he describes during that time another palpable moment.

This time, while taking communion. He felt it again. A presence. A pressure, in fact, just behind the sternum. And he paid attention to that. That one thing, above anything else. No voice. No vision. No visible sign. It's probably not the first time he'd taken communion since his crisis of faith began, it may have just been indigestion, but there was something that set this instance apart.

He still does not know he can claim God's existence with 100% certainty, but he and she are more comfortable in his uncertain hope.

Truth is that Jesus showed up for disciples locked away by their fear, and for an early church trying to spread the Good News. Truth is that the nature of discipleship and ministry is just this most of the time— it's uncertain. Like Thomas, we want to put our finger in the mark of the nails and our hands on Jesus' side; but like Lydia, we don't get that chance, but perhaps we get another one. A holy moment in conversation. A swelling of heart to invite hope in for tea. A pressure, just behind the sternum.

Our task as disciples is dependent upon this hope. And trust. And paying attention. And yes, taking risks.

This week while I was away I visited Farm Church. Started two years ago by three pastors who went to seminary together and had long since been serving established churches in various places across the country. The story goes that one of these three woke up one night from a very specific dream. He dreamed that he was called to a new church, site unseen. When he showed up on the first day, there was no building there but rather, a farm. It was a short dream, but he couldn't shake it, and he spent the entire rest of the night wondering just what came next. So he called his two friends, 5:30 in the morning, and said "I think we should do this". And they said yes. As much trust as they had in him, as much trust as they have in the Holy Spirit, they all said yes. And their families with children said yes.

Two years later, Farm Church exists and gathers 40-60 people weekly in Durham, North Carolina. As though the Holy Spirit weren't done with them yet, they have land, they have a worshiping space for those few cold months the southland calls winter, and they have support.

The first hour each Sunday morning is spent with their hands in the dirt. It's planting time now as you know, and when I saw it the first sprigs of lettuce and turnips and carrots and greens were on their way up out of the ground. Once these crops are grown the entirety of what they harvest will be distributed for free to local food pantries and serving kitchens. The second hour is worship, though there's less of a delineation there for as one pastor put it, "Seeing that these particular leaves can all grow together and the wonder of what is being created in front of our eyes is proclamation of the Gospel just the same".

Those who gather are students and faculty from Duke University, residents at the crossroads of a gentrifying neighborhood, kids and old folks, most of whom are pretty wary of institution but who have found church in this unlikely place.

Turns out that visions are still a thing of this world. They are not merely reserved for the pre-Enlightenment days.

The first disciples, the early apostles, Paul, Lydia, the geologist, the three pastors of Farm Church, they are not much different than those of us gathered here this morning. In our certain uncertainties we all follow a God that defies expectation and calls us to believe that life can come from death, that visions and strange feelings are a piece of the puzzle, and that the Holy Spirit can

open our hearts in just about any place—down by the riverside, at the communion table, outside with the dirt in our fingernails, and right here in this place. Thanks be to God. Amen.