

And Now For Something Completely Different  
Acts 16:6-15  
The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights  
April 6, 2008  
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What do you do when you've done everything you know how to do, and still nothing is happening? How do you quiet the restless energy in your heart, the longing to do or to be more, and live with the fact that you are not where you are supposed to be...but you don't know how to get there, either?

Many of you know that at 1 am on Thursday, I returned from a study tour of many of the places where the Apostle Paul tried to serve the Lord. It was a great trip in a number of ways, and it gave me a deeper appreciation for Paul as a human being. Our reading from Acts describes a small portion of his travel, but points to a huge shift in the history of the Christian Church. It also reflects the ways that Paul dealt with the questions that I asked earlier: what do you do when you know you're supposed to do something, but you're not sure what it is?

Let's look at what happened here in the hopes that it might lead us to a deeper consideration of who God is calling us to be.

Paul is in a tight spot. He has just parted company with Barnabas, his mentor and traveling companion of many years. For at least 17 years, they had been in relationship, and now they are at odds. It was such a sharp disagreement, in fact, that the book of Acts never records them getting together again.

Right after the split, Barnabas does what he's always done. He takes a new apprentice, John Mark, and sets off for various places in the Middle East and Asia Minor. The two of them visit churches, preach, encourage new believers, and so on.

Paul tries to do the same thing. He picks up a few new companions, but it seems that every door he tries is closed to him. No matter where he goes, he just can't seem to find his groove. The group tries to enter various cities where Jesus has been preached, and they are somehow prevented from doing so. Frustrated, the Apostle finds himself in Troas. I know that name doesn't mean much to you, but let me tell you that Troas was built on a site that had achieved some fame in prior years: it is the successor city to Troy. Do you remember Troy? The Trojan Horse? The Iliad and the Odyssey? Brad Pitt? That's where our frustrated band of preachers ends up – in a city that has three thousand years of history already, a symbol of ancient history and mythology. It is, of course, an Asian city. And here, they are stumped.

Until Paul falls asleep and has a very vivid dream: there is a man of a different ethnic group and a different culture calling out to him: "Come and help us!" And scripture tells us that "immediately" the group set out to go to Macedonia. In Greece. In Europe.

Nobody had ever done what they were trying to do. Oh, it's not that huge of a deal to sail from Troas/Troy to Macedonia – it's a distance of 125 miles, pretty much due west across the Aegean Sea. A small boat with a good wind could make it in a couple of days.

But it was more than a hundred miles, you know. It was a new continent. It was a different people. It involved leaving the safety of what he knew and venturing into a risky place. But they left. And they traveled from Troas/Troy with 3000 years of history behind them and ended up in Neopolis. In Greek, that means “new city”. And it was, then – a boom town that served as the port for another, more important city about 5 miles inland: the city of Philippi.

Let me tell you a little bit about Philippi. It was a “leading center”. It was a Roman Colony, which meant that there were a number of official offices for the Empire in town. More than that, it was full of retired veterans – Roman soldiers who had fought in various corners of the Empire and now were granted the right to settle down, to vote, to live tax-free, and to govern themselves. It was a solid community full of people who were loyal to Rome and wary of disruption.

What is Paul to do here? Up till now, every time he entered a town with the intention of preaching the gospel, he went straight to the synagogue, the site for Jewish worship and instruction, and met with the leading Jews first. But the problem was that Philippi did not have a synagogue. In order for a synagogue to be built, you needed to have ten adult males willing to serve and worship there. There were not that many faithful men in Philippi, so Paul was once more frustrated. He had heard a call to this new place: where was he supposed to start?

It was time for something completely different: he went outside the town to the river. I have photos of this “river”, and it's smaller than Chartiers Creek. But Paul knew that when there was no synagogue, Jews sometimes met for worship near the rivers where they would have enough running water for their rites of purification. And there, he found a wealthy woman named Lydia, and God used Paul to bring Lydia the good news about Jesus. Her heart was opened, and she was the first person in Europe to become a believer in Jesus. Time for something complete different.

And that was just the start of the ways that this news, this Good News, changed Europe. The next few verses of Philippians, which we did not read, talk about how Paul's ministry challenged the status quo: he met a slave girl who had some sort of illness that allowed her to become a sort of a “freak show” for her owners. They carted her around and she would go into some sort of a frenzy that her owners said was a fortune-telling. She was a gold-mine for them...until Paul cured her of her illness and made her whole. But as a whole, healed person, she was worthless to the men.

I find it fascinating to consider what happened next: the men dragged Paul and Silas before the magistrate, but they didn't mention the slave girl or the fortune telling. Instead, they questioned Paul's patriotism. They said, “These men are Jews who are advocating customs that it is not lawful for us as Romans to observe.”

Do you see that: it starts as a matter of economics, or maybe theology, but it doesn't stay there. The slave-owners know their crowd, and so they attack Paul's loyalty to the government, and the crowd swallows the bait and begins to beat Paul and Silas until they are finally jailed. But once in jail, they continue to raise the name of Jesus, and in a miraculous turn of events, there is an earthquake that breaks the bars of the prison and makes it possible for the men to flee. Instead of doing that, however, they stay with the jailer. Why? Because it was his job to keep them there. If they had left, the jailer would have been executed. So Paul and Silas stay with the man until the authorities show up in the morning. These guys are not totally on top of things, but they are aware enough to know that something amazingly scary has happened, and they tell Paul and Silas to be on their way.

But once again, it's time for something completely different: instead of taking the pardon and getting out of town, Paul says, "I'm not leaving this jail until you come and walk me out yourselves...and we want an apology."

Now why would they do that? Isn't it better just to get while the getting is good? Well, it turns out that Paul and Silas were men whose credentials in the citizenship department were outstanding: they were full citizens of the Roman Empire, which means that they could not be legally beaten or imprisoned without a fair trial. When the magistrate hears this, it's his turn to panic, because if Paul were to write a report and submit it to the provincial authorities, there's a good chance that our man the magistrate would lose his position. So now Paul has something to hold over the magistrate's head – the magistrate "owes" Paul in some way if he's interested in keeping his job. Paul agrees to keep quiet about the beating. Why? It doesn't say so in the Bible, but I'm betting it's because the magistrate has agreed to allow the church to continue meeting without interference from the local government.

And because things happened in that fashion, the church of Jesus Christ in Philippi was able to grow and thrive. In the weeks to come, I hope that we will grow by looking at Paul's letter to his friends in Philippi, a church for which he had deep affection, great hopes, and profound ties of friendship.

For today, though, I thought it would be helpful to look at Paul and his companions, who went to the edge of what they knew and then went beyond their limits and jumped into murky waters. They refused to be limited by what they knew, or by what people had always done. Instead, they pushed to be open to new ways of being faithful.

I have said to more than one person in the last couple of days that I was surprised by my reaction to my recent visit to places like Philippi. I like history, and thought it would be at least mildly interesting to stand among the ruins of the ancient world. The overriding reaction that I had on virtually every site, however, was one of astonishment and awe at how Paul stood in the midst of ungodliness and apathy and pointed to truth and hope in Jesus Christ. I have a new and profound admiration for the boldness that he showed in confessing Christ to a world that seemed to be doing just fine without him.

So this morning, when I read about Paul's calling to, in the words of the great theologian Captain James T. Kirk. "boldly go where no man had gone before", I hear a challenge to my own life and practice.

Where am I complacent? Where am I "settling" for something that is not God's best because it's convenient or it's accessible? Think about it...what would have happened if that morning in Troas, Paul woke up and over a cup of coffee with Timothy and Silas, were to say, "Man, I didn't sleep well at all last night. I had some crazy dreams... Oh well, I wonder what's going on today..."

But he shared the vision, and he acted on it. Would I? Do I?

A few weeks later, Paul found himself in a strange place, surrounded by strange customs, and in the midst of strange men who were intent on beating the life out of him. Instead of standing up for his rights or protesting his innocence, he used that situation to create a means by which the local church grew stronger in its ability to proclaim the grace of Jesus. Do you see? Paul used every asset he had – his time, his energy, his education, his citizenship – to point to God.

Do I? Is my story, my citizenship, my language, my car, my home, my computer, my life – is any of that pointing to Jesus? Like the people in Philippi two thousand years ago, we live in a world that treats religion as a nice distraction or a basically harmless hobby, as long as we don't take it too seriously. As long as it does not challenge our racial prejudices or our national pride or our ethnic identity or our ability to earn the most money possible. In other words, our world says that faith is fine, as long as it doesn't really affect you.

Paul challenged people in Philippi – and in Jerusalem and other cities in the "old school" of the Christian faith – to see that it was time for a new understanding of the ways to practice faith. As we look at Philippians in the weeks to come, I hope that we'll get some of the flavor of that challenge. More importantly, I hope that we will be able to respond in a way that demonstrates the transformational and life-changing grace of Jesus so that in the years to come, people will think of us and say, "Thank God! That is a church that was not afraid to follow God's leading, even in uncomfortable places." Thank God for Paul. Thank God for you. Amen.