

The woman in purple (or Acts as a movie)

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They met down by the river, some Jews, a handful of Gentiles, and the usual suspects from other places beyond the city of Philippi.

Paul, with Timothy and Silas, ventured to the riverbank. It was Friday, the Sabbath. According to the 16th chapter in Acts, they'd been in Philippi only a few days. Their visit to this strange-to-them speck on the map of Rome's empire was inspired by a vision Paul had one night.

In the vision a man of Macedonia urged Paul to come and help.

To bring the good news of Jesus?

To bring the good news of Jesus!

And so a dream with a mysterious man from a faraway locale compelled these spirit-fed, God-led disciples of Jesus to venture into the unfamiliar. They chose to trust a midnight hint, a divine nudge, a vision that lingered after waking.

Sometimes that's enough.

This is our story up to now. Let's continue with the script . . .

EXT. - AT THE CITY'S EDGE, WITH A VIEW OF A GROUP NEAR A RIVER BELOW -  
DAY

The sky is the color of a robin's egg. Clouds, delicate smears of white, surf the currents of the warm breeze. Birds dip and dive into the river. Indistinct voices, from children playing games to women chatting, compete with the rollicking flow of the water.

Paul, hand hovering over his eyes for protection from the bright sun, scans the crowd. He plunges down a trail toward the river. Ever dutiful, Timothy and Silas troop behind the apostle.

EXT. – AT THE RIVER’S BANK. PAUL IS STANDING, SPEAKING – DAY

Most by the river have gathered in front of Paul, listening to him. Some stand, others sit on the ground. Several children play a noisy game of tag, but are shushed by their mothers.

The crowd seems alert, fascinated by Paul’s sermon.

EXT. – AT THE RIVER’S BANK. PAUL IS STANDING, SPEAKING – DAY

A woman—Lydia—nods with every word Paul says. A purple scarf encircles her head. Framing her face, the scarf’s material is like a living creature as a gentle breeze tugs its edges. Her dark eyes focus only on Paul.

What happens next?

In the Acts of the Apostles, the scene plays out with confidence and simplicity, as if a movie with a screenplay. Paul speaks. Lydia listens. She is baptized. Paul is invited to her house. A community of faith, daring followers of Jesus, of the living Christ, will begin—for the first time—on European soil.

Everything works out.

But what about the moment that mattered the most? The writer of Acts proclaimed:

*As she [Lydia] listened, the Lord enabled her to embrace Paul’s message.*

Ah!

And yet I wonder what happened between Paul preaching and Lydia listening that transformed both of them?

A man in a vision led Paul to the region of Macedonia. And yet it was a woman Paul would first meet.

Paul spoke to a group of women by a river. And yet it was a singular woman who stepped into the scene.

Did Lydia, by the riverbank, boldly approach Paul?

Did Timothy or Silas spot Lydia and ask her if she wanted to meet Paul? Did she initially refuse? (I'm usually nervous when meeting the person who seems so important, so special, and is also a stranger!) And yet, with persuasion, with gumption from a newly forming faith, did Lydia step forward?

Or did they bump into each other as Paul was leaving after his sermon? Such a coincidence?

Or did Lydia shadow the preacher back up the trail to the city, gathering courage to speak to this unknown man with his heady words about God's love? Was she desperate to tell Paul how he'd warmed her heart? Seek and ye will find? Soon after, did they return to the river for the baptism?

What *did* happen between Lydia embracing Paul's message and being cleansed with the flowing water of the river and the forgiving message of the risen Christ? (Or did her baptism even occur in the river, for Acts again was spare in the details of where and how . . .)

Acts shared so much and so little. Is it enough to read it was "the Lord" enabling her that led to the encounter with Paul? I suppose.

And yet . . .

What of the blessed and messy encounters, without scripts, without warning, that changes everything for us?

What if my future wife hadn't been in worship on that life-changing Sunday?

What if the pastor who mentored me had turned a cold shoulder to my questions about God?

What if I hadn't overheard a seminary professor say encouraging words about my preaching?

What if my friend Michael only prattled on about backpacking, but never took me on a first sojourn into wilderness?

What if the director of the hospice had told me there weren't any jobs and don't call again. Why did she encourage me to keep calling?

What are these precious moments we have, the nudges and hints and possibilities and encounters and opportunities and second chances and whispers and visions that happen and then, unbidden, transform us?

Where will God's sacred luring and my scared-to-take-risks listening overlap and become the cornerstone of a new or newly renewed faith?

The encounter between Paul and Lydia, in an unexpected place between two strangers, would change . . . *everything*.

Who has been your Paul? When have you been Lydia?

Holy happenstance happens, but human hands will never script it.

*Originally posted at [Patten's blog](#)*