

The Lord opened her heart Acts 16, 9-15



<sup>9</sup> During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." <sup>10</sup> After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them. From Troas we put out to sea and sailed straight for Samothrace, and the next day we went on to Neapolis. <sup>12</sup> From there we traveled to Philippi, a Roman colony and the

leading city of that district<sup>[a]</sup> of Macedonia. And we stayed there several days.

<sup>13</sup> On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there. <sup>14</sup> One of those listening was a woman from the city of Thyatira named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth. She was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. <sup>15</sup> When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. "If you consider me a believer in the Lord," she said, "come and stay at my house." And she persuaded us.

When Paul travelled from one country to another, there was not a single church tower to be seen. There were no beautiful church services, no social work or projects to support the poor. At the time of the Apostle Paul's missionary journey, he knew nothing about any of this. Moreover, his mission had reached a dead end. He and his friends had set out full of hope. But all their efforts led to nothing. They wanted to go to the province of Asia. But the Holy Spirit did not allow it. Then they wanted to set off for Bithynia, towards the Black Sea. But the Holy Spirit also blocked their way. How should the path continue now? The missionary Paul without a future and without a mission? The name „Jesus“ was Paul's mission. And the name Jesus means "God saves!" And that was what Paul was concerned about when he travelled up and down the country. Saving people. Do we still understand what it means today, with our beautiful church towers, Christian culture and beautiful church services? "Jesus saves!" When Paul's path led to a dead end and they no longer knew how to proceed, an SOS call came in a dream. Someone needed help. And Paul immediately set out. Initially, it was not his goal to travel to the dark continent, Europe. But he listened to the call, which he understood as God's call. These were the beginnings of the Christian church in Europe.

And how did the church begin in Europe? With a few women. The name Lydia is mentioned in particular there. Lydia was a woman with a migrant background. She found no comfort in the pagan religions and therefore turned to Judaism. She learned the 10 Commandments and the one God who is above all. And yet Lydia could only hold a kind of prayer service with a few women. Because there was no synagogue in her town. Probably because there were not 10 Jewish men, such a synagogue could not be founded. That is why the women met in the countryside by the river on the Sabbath to pray. It was at this time that Paul and Silas came to Philippi. At first nothing happened for days. As I said, in Philippi there was not even a synagogue where he could have met people. And then it

says: "We sat down..." Where they sat down was exactly the place where Lydia and a few believing women gathered to pray. I can imagine it so clearly: Lydia was sitting in the sun with a few women. They were knitting, they were sewing, they were talking to each other and praying. And it was in this context that the first church in Europe was founded. If only the church in Europe had retained this hint from God and this way of God to choose inconspicuous things as his tools later on? We know how things continued in the church: with splendour and wealth came political entanglements. It began completely differently in Philippi! They sat in the sun and talked to each other. This is exactly what Jesus meant with the parable of the sower. In the middle of everyday life, someone goes carefree into the field and scatters his seed. He does this generously and without considering where the seed falls. But one thing is certain. He does this with great confidence that something will grow from the carefree scattering. This is exactly what Paul and Silas show us.

And then the miracle happened: The Lord opened Lydia's heart. An interesting note about this. The verb used here for "open" is exactly the same as that used for the birth of a child. And thus shows us unambiguously what happens when people come to faith. "The Lord opens the heart!" We cannot open our hearts ourselves. We cannot do it for others either. Just as little as anyone can make a birth. God does that! Faith is not possible without God. Neither through missionary strategy nor through clever words! And what happened there in Philippi is still happening today. When it is said that the Lord opened the heart, He means that the whole person is touched in his innermost being. God does not want our works and achievements; God does not want our long pious prayers; God does not want our high churches that reach up to the sky. No, He only wants you! Exactly as you are right now. That is what the Acts of the Apostles means when it says that the Lord opened Lydia's heart. But what actually happened to Lydia's heart? The story doesn't even begin with her, but with a Macedonian who, out of deep distress, calls on Paul to come to him. What distress was Lydia in? Honestly when I see her sitting carefree in the sun with the other women, she doesn't seem particularly worried. And yet she is in distress. It is the same distress of the Macedonian who calls out to Paul at the beginning, and it is the same distress that we all have. The distress is that our human hearts are closed to God. Through sorrow and worry, and sometimes through bitter experience. Sometimes hearts are frozen by ice-cold human reasoning. Because our hearts are closed to God, they can only react to God in two ways. Either it says that God doesn't exist, or it rebels against God and sees God as an annoying destroyer of fun who doesn't allow us to do what we want. Either way, we want to shake off God, but we can't. That is the plight of the Macedonian and that is the plight of Lydia. Ultimately, that is our plight too! God wants to win us over from within, but our hearts do not want to! Luke expresses what happened to Lydia quite simply. The Lord opened her heart. You have to imagine it that vividly. Martin Luther would say: "I believe that I cannot believe in Jesus Christ or come to him by my own reason or strength." That is a work that we cannot do. God has to make it happen. When Luke vividly describes how the Lord opened her heart, a few questions naturally arise. How should I imagine it? Did a light come from above, a wonderful experience, or a glimpse of heaven? All of that has happened before, of course. But normally the Holy Spirit prefers the simple method. Just as God made the world out of nothing, so too does he open

a person's heart. The women are sitting in the sun and then Paul simply says God's word. The Holy Spirit rarely takes a detour around the Word of God, but comes to people through the Word of God. This is how it was in the first church in Europe. Even more strange to our understanding was the progression of Lydia's story. The Lord opened her heart and as a result her entire household was baptized. Back then that meant slaves, children, relatives, the disabled patient in the next room... simply everyone! How can that work? Yes, that's how it has always been with God's Spirit. Many of us were baptized when we were still an unsuspecting bundle of joy in our parents' arms. Others were baptized because they hoped that this would give them the right to stay in Germany. And yet they are part of God's plan. God works with his Spirit and does not allow himself to be boxed into categories by our thinking! What we get to know later is the first Christian hostel on European soil. Lydia becomes almost pushy in her demand that the apostles should now live with her because she has been baptized. Yes, that's how it can happen if you take the risk of the Holy Spirit. A Sunday walk and a conversation in the sun leads to a longer stay and a close community. Later, this spontaneous invitation and lodging became a real Christian community. When Paul was on his third missionary journey, the community met in Lydia's house. The community included such close friends of the apostle as the prison guard and his family, Epaphroditus, Euodia and Syntyche, whom Paul became so fond of. Paul later wrote to this community: "My beloved and longed-for brothers, my joy and crown" (Philippians 4:1).

In the meantime, this house church in Philippi has become a large church. Cathedrals and Papal States have come and gone. Alongside the dark ages of the Middle Ages and the violence that emanated from the church, there were and still are the bright times of the discovery of the Gospel! These are the times when God opened hearts. Just as it was with Lydia, God did it with Martin Luther. And with many others too. With all of this, we must never forget the early days. The time of the mustard seed is the time when everything was already in the core: The Lord opened the heart! He did it through his word... through baptism, ... through communion, ... from this an authentic Christian community developed. These things that were there in the beginning are still there today. Can still be there today. Could it be that the Macedonian's call will come again? "Lord, help!" May this call begin with us. And God grant that our hearts may open. Amen.