



making God's love visible in downtown Memphis

Connecting Sunday with Monday
The Sixth Sunday of Easter
May 22, 2022
The Rev. Paul McLain

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

In the fall of 1923, an Ole Miss freshman named George had a series of conversations with Malcolm Guess, the student YMCA director. Prior to talking with Malcolm, George had thought of religion as something you do and think about on Sunday, with no real connection to the rest of the week.

Malcolm told George about the Social Gospel movement, in which we are called to an active, collaborative, socially aware Christianity, not concerned with securing a spot in the afterlife, but with improving the world in this life. This new Christianity demanded something more than passive church attendance. It required thought and action and real commitment. Those conversations with Malcolm not only stayed with George, they gave him the trajectory for what he would do with the rest of his life.

In our first lesson from the Acts of the Apostles Lydia has a conversation with Paul that changes her life. It changes Paul's life too. In fact, it changes the whole trajectory of Christianity. Lydia is a smart, savvy business woman, making her way independently in a world run by men. She is a master in making purple cloth, the color of royalty worn by the leading citizens of Philippi. Lydia is also a seeker. She is a Gentile who has sought out the God of Judaism. In these conversations with Paul, her heart is opened to God in a whole new way.

As Lydia hears the story of Jesus, she discovers how God is fully immersed in the world. Lydia's response to all that she hears is that she wants to become fully immersed in this God, and asks Paul to baptize her and all members of her household. This may have meant her family, it may also have meant her employees in her dye business, or it may have meant both. Then, Lydia does not just ask Paul and his companions to stay at her house, she prevails upon them to do so. She is decisive. She will not take no for an answer. It is believed that her household, perhaps her business, served as the first home church in Philippi. It became the base for the Christian conversion of Europe. And Lydia is the first European convert. She opens her household, her business, her whole life to serve the mission enterprise of Jesus.

The George I mentioned earlier was George McLean, no relation of which I am aware, but this is a Mississippi story, so who knows? After George's conversations with Malcolm Guess, he sought a way to live out the Social Gospel of Jesus. He tried teaching here in Memphis at Southwestern College, the predecessor of Rhodes College, but his contract was not renewed when he was perceived as too radical.

After that, in the midst of the Great Depression, George bought a bankrupt newspaper from a bankrupt bank. It was *The Tupelo Journal*. He did what all small-town newspaper publishers had to do. He sold advertising, printing, and office supplies. He wrote articles and editorials, helped run the printing presses, and paid his children and their friends to deliver the papers. He struggled to make a weekly payroll.

But George never lost sight of his real vision for the paper. He wanted it to be a leader in transforming not just the city of Tupelo, but the entire region of Northeast Mississippi, from the bottom up.

The Daily Journal linked each civic club in Tupelo with a rural community in Northeast Mississippi. They funded innovations for farmers, bringing in experts from Mississippi State to experiment with artificial insemination of cattle. George and the Tupelo civic groups even bought the bulls. They all worked together to bring new industries to the region, many of them home-grown. Tupelo and Northeast Mississippi became a center for the furniture industry. *The Daily Journal* and its sister non-profit called CREATE led the way and funded the effort to provide teacher's aides to improve reading levels in both the city and rural public schools, a program that was later replicated by Governor William Winter throughout Mississippi. For George, this was his way of connecting Sunday to Monday. He believed that what he professed in church on Sunday must be put into tangible action Monday through Saturday.

He traveled to a community development conference in Minnesota where he shared a hotel room with his associate publisher, Billy Crews. That night, Billy tried not to stare as George, who was 76 at the time, got down on his knees to pray. Billy said, "I'm confident, even though I only saw it once, that this was a nightly ritual."

It is probably no coincidence that Paul met Lydia at a place of prayer. In many ways, their conversation was a continuation of the prayers they offered that day. It was a holy conversation of teaching and learning. It led to more holy conversations about tangible ways Lydia and her business could help Paul begin this missionary enterprise in Europe. Paul had come to Philippi because he had seen a vision of a Greek man saying, 'Come and help us.' Instead of finding that man, he was led to this enterprising business woman who wound up helping him!

Our readings from the Acts of the Apostles this season remind us that resurrection is not simply a passive concept to be believed. Instead, it is an active hope to be lived out in the world.

When George died, he left all the stock in *The Daily Journal* to the non-profit organization CREATE. The newspaper's profits would perpetually fund community development projects throughout the region of Northeast Mississippi. For George, that's what resurrection is all about – bringing new life into the here and now.

The lives of Lydia and George teach us that true resurrection is bringing the heaven of Sunday down to the earth of Monday.

Amen.