

Kate Huey says that even though we call this book "The Acts of the Apostles" we really should name it "The Adventures of the Apostles." Of all the books in the Bible, it has more close calls, prison escapes, shipwrecks, executions, and stonings than any action-adventure movie, and then it throws in a few circumcisions, a lot of healings, and a church fight or two, just for good measure...stuff you don't usually find in action-adventure movies, actually.

Yes, the Acts of the Apostles is a book by men, about men, a kind of "guy's guy book of the Bible." But even though it was written by men and written to men, there are some very important stories of women that come inching to the service. And if we only read Acts focused on the men, we would miss the pivotal role of women in the early church.

Just before our text, Paul and Silas keep getting turned away from the places they want to go. And who is turning them away? It is none other than God's Holy Spirit. The two guys want to go to Asia but the Holy Spirit says, "No." They want to go to Bithynia, the Holy Spirit says "no."

So here are these two missionaries sitting at this crossroad between Europe and Asia. They want to go east. But God's Spirit blocks them from going east. What are they supposed to do? They have been blocked from going in the direction that they want to go to spread the good news of God's love.

But then we are told that a man from Macedonia arrives. Modern Day Greece. The seat of the Greek Empire that colonized much of the known world. The same area of the world that is drawing lots of interest today. This man says, "Come to Greece. Help us." And for some reason that we are not told, Paul and Silas head out and begin the long and difficult journey west. They wanted to go east. The Holy Spirit blocked them from going east. And then a vision came to them and told them to head west.

Ever been blocked from going in a direction that you wanted to go? Ever felt sure that God wanted you to go in a certain direction but it seemed like your road just keep being blocked over and over and over again. And then you became frustrated because you were sure that it would be smart for you to go in one direction but you just kept coming up against road block after road block after road block. That is what happens to Paul and Silas.

On this Mother's Day, I think about all of those women who have been blocked from going in the direction that they felt they wanted to go or that they felt God wanted them to go. I think about those women who have wanted to be mothers but biological reasons or life circumstances have prevented them from becoming mothers. I think about those women who wanted to become professional women but the society said, "No, you must not pursue a career."

I think about those women who wanted to stay home with their children and nurture them but financial reasons led them to the work place even though that is not where they wanted to be. We think about our own mothers or we ourselves who wanted to follow some dream but some family circumstance prevented them from following their dream. On this Mothers Day we think about all of those women who have been prevented from living out their dream.

And then we also think about those women who have been forced into slavery or deplorable circumstances. The young women who are trapped into being property of a pimp or an abusive boyfriend or who have been abandoned by any real love by their parents. Young women like we meet in the second part of our text this morning.

A slave girl who is trapped by a demonic spirit and forced into fortunetelling in order to make money for some guy who is using her for his financial gain. So many women who have had their freedom removed and forced into choices that they did not want to make.

I want to tell you a story about some women who were faced with a barrier and how they dealt with that barrier.

"Five college students heard a collective call to mission in 1806 and agreed to find a way to convince their church to send them overseas as missionaries. They worked persistently for four years and at last the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) was established in 1810 in Massachusetts and Connecticut. Two years later those same young men were sent across the sea.

But before the establishment of the ABCFM and even well before the five students received their call, the women were hard at work on mission. The Female Society for Spreading Christian Education (later changed to the Women's Board of Mission) was organized in 1801, a full five years before the call of these young men. The women started the "Penny Society" and asked women in the churches to give 1 cent a week for mission.

By 1812 when four of the young men and their wives were duly commissioned and ready to sail across the sea, the ABCFM knew the funds were not sufficient to book passage. Ironically, or in divine order, the ship's sailing was delayed for several weeks. In the meantime, churches were inspired by the prospect of mission and money began to flow.

But it was the women that saved the day. The women's Penny Society over twelve years had raised \$6000 – that is 600,000 pennies!! Their \$6000 was what enabled the eight to book passage on two clipper ships, fully outfitted with supplies and food and salary for one full year! We can safely say that without the women this would not have happened.

For fifty years the women faithfully collected their mission pennies and, working closely with the ABCFM (men), funded many, many missionaries. Throughout that time the ABCFM (men) would not allow any woman to be sent as a missionary herself. Yet, the women didn't dwell on the fact that they were not allowed to go.

The women understood that bringing the Good News across the ocean was as important as teaching and practicing mission here at home. Since the women were mostly responsible for the faith education of the children, they firmly based their emphasis in teaching on local and global mission, and so they changed the church's view. They knew if they taught their children well, their children's generation could allow girls as well as boys to become missionaries.”

In our story, Paul and Silas end up in Philippi. They are in the city for a few days when they decide to head outside of town to places where they think people might be praying. And lo and behold, who do they find but a group of women praying.

Among these women is Lydia, a woman who was a saleswoman of purple cloth. Since only the wealthy wore purple, it is assumed that Lydia was wealthy herself. Lydia listens to Paul and Silas, is transformed by their words, asks to be baptized, brings her whole family for baptism, and offers her home as hospitality to Paul and Silas. Even though Lydia was prevented from doing very much as a woman in that culture, she becomes the first European Christian and shares her home for the benefit for others.

The stories we have heard this morning reinforce for us that we cannot use excuses to prevent us from sharing the good news. If for some reason we are prevented from doing something that we believe we are supposed to do, then maybe we channel our energy in other avenues.

If we cannot be a biological mother, then maybe we devote our time to helping kids who are forgotten.

If circumstances prevent us from achieving a dream, then maybe we redirect our energies into another area that can help someone else.

We cannot become so narrow minded that we forget that if certain doors are blocked, then we keep looking for new doors and new directions.

God is in the business of directing and redirecting us to the places that God is calling us out to go. Do not allow barriers be an excuse. AMEN

-illustration and opening to sermon from ucc's lectionary site and found at <http://www.ucc.org/worship/samuel/may-9-2010.html>

-Text: Acts 16:1-24

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