

**Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa**  
**Sunday, May 26, 2019 – Elizabeth Bryce**

**Readings: Psalm 67**  
**Acts 16:9-15**

**Sermon: To the ends of the earth (Easter 6)**

When I was a kid, summer vacations were all about travel. We were a camping family. We bought our first trailer about the time that I started school and learned to read. So every spring we would sit around the kitchen table and my father would pull the big atlas out of the book case and he would challenge us to find the road that would take us from Montreal to Nova Scotia or Niagara Falls or New Jersey or even all the way to Gramma and Grandad's house in Vancouver.

We tended to take the routes that took us by sites of historic interest (we saw a lot of old forts) or pulp and paper mills (that's another story.) Even when we were going to end up in a destination where we had visited before, we would always try to find a different route.

And every few years we packed up the station wagon and the tent trailer and we drove and we camped all the way to and from British Columbia (where my grandparents lived). But we rarely took the same road – one time we would wind our way through southern Ontario, another time through Northern Ontario, this time through the northern states, the next time along the Yellowhead highway. Even though we never quite made it to Newfoundland as a family, I was proud to say that I had been to almost every province in Canada by the time I could spell Saskatchewan.

I think just being exposed to many of those different landscapes shaped my worldview and my understanding of how life's journeys help us grow in faith.

The faith of someone in a fishing boat who sets out into the deep wide waters of the Atlantic Ocean, for example, would naturally be different from the wheat farmer on the prairies whose life and livelihood were always dependent on the whims of the weather. Or the mountain climbers we saw dangling from cliffs while we were safe in the gondola ride in the Rockies. Not to mention the distinct faith of any pedestrian crossing busy intersections in the traffic found in downtown Toronto.

I don't think I am alone in being exposed to many places, many influences. At Rideau Park you don't have to look very far to find someone who has travelled to, travelled from or lived in many other places around the world. Personally, I think I have learned more about World Geography by attending Harmony Club slide shows and World Day of Prayer services than I ever did going to school.

The other day I was leading worship at the Maplewood residence, and I read the story of Jesus' ascension, which is coming up (liturgically speaking) this week. The ascension is the turning point in the Christian story. At first we hear that Jesus told his followers to stay in Jerusalem, but then Jesus tells them that he is sending them "to the ends of the earth".

And so the apostles spread out far and wide and changed the audience for Jesus' good news forever.

Last week, Steve told us about Jaffa, and how Peter was sent to Jaffa to give his witness to Jesus' good news. While Peter was there it was not just the people of Jaffa that were changed forever by his journey. Peter's own boundaries and limits were also stretched far beyond their former limitations.

Only a week or so before that we heard the story of Saul of Tarsus who set out to Damascus, intent on persecuting the disciples of Jesus.

Saul was stopped in his tracks by a blinding vision, which opened his heart to a different kind of relationship with God – a vision that took him far beyond the limits of his previous experience, and which transformed him from Saul the persecuter to Paul the apostle.

Throughout the gospels we witness this call to journey forward in our faith again and again. To move beyond our former understanding – perhaps to a new place, or maybe to a deeper faith, or even a stronger belief in a greater God. Geographically, culturally and spiritually speaking, we are all travelers, we are all explorers and seekers, on a journey of faith, whether we leave home or not.

In today's reading we meet Paul the missionary, once again in a story from the book of Acts. By this time Paul has spent more than a dozen years learning how to live as one of Jesus' followers in Antioch and then setting out on his first missionary journey, alongside another apostle named Barnabas. That journey took him places he had probably been to before: to the island of Cyprus, into what is present day Turkey, all around his old neighbourhood, the towns close to Tarsus. Paul and Barnabas started little Christian communities everywhere they went, and after some time back in Antioch, they planned to return to those areas for a little check-in.

But then Paul had this vision. He had a vision of someone saying to him – don't go back there, go forward. Come to us in Macedonia, in Greece, to the European peninsula.

If you remember Peter's vision last week, and how it changed the tribal boundaries of the Christian movement, in the same way Paul also had a vision. that vision caused him to change not just the tribal boundaries of those who followed Jesus, but the geographic boundaries as well.

So instead of going backwards, and building a church that is mostly traditional, rooted and monocultural, Paul left Barnabas behind, he got on a boat and he headed farther than he had ever been before. To Troas, to Samothrace, to Neapolis, then on to Philippi in Macedonia. And if you've never heard of those places before – don't worry – neither had Paul! He didn't know the people, the culture, the language. As a Roman citizen he could travel safely. But as a Christian – he was breaking all the rules.

When Paul arrived in Philippi, he looked for somewhere to start a discussion about faith. He found a group of women down by the riverside leading some kind of prayer meeting.

And somehow they began a conversation together, which led to his telling them about Jesus.

The leader was a woman called Lydia and, according to scripture, she was already a believer in God, But as she got to know Paul and his storytelling about Jesus, she wanted to know more. Lydia is traditionally known as the first European convert to Christianity, but perhaps it was just as much Paul being the convert to a new perspective on Jesus from a European perspective.

In those early Christian missions, as we read in the New Testament, teaching and proclamation was rarely a one-way street. Paul and his faith were as changed and influenced by the people he met, as they were affected and changed by the good news of Jesus.

However, traditional mission trips took a wrong turn somewhere, I think. Because somewhere along the line, the missionaries stopped listening, they stopped learning, they stopped growing their own faith in relation to the new peoples and cultures they encountered. The word “missionary” meaning sent out became aligned with the colonial adventures of Western empires and monarchies.

The vision stopped being the kind that opened minds and expanded hearts. It veered away from broadened boundaries towards a less inclusive vision of God. Instead the vision became a dream of mono-cultural communities, ruled and regulated under one seat of power, under one creed.

That tight-fisted grasp over God’s children, their questions, their faith, their lifestyles, led ultimately to such atrocities as war, and residential schools, and concentration camps and slavery, all in God’s name.

And yet the earliest stories of Jesus’ followers tell us that when God calls people of faith out into the world, it is not just to change the world, but also to be changed.

The stories of Christian apostles and epistles emphasize learning along the way: be true to God’s word, yes, and have courage in Christ, absolutely – but listen, always listen. You just might find that God is already dwelling in that stranger by the river. The newcomer who asks those pesky questions, the one who forces you to think and re-think until together the two of you add up to a God who bursts the confines of all our previous definitions and limitations.

When Paul was ready to go back to the places of his past success, he was awakened by a different vision, a decidedly less comfortable vision, a decidedly more difficult vision. God called out to Paul, saying Come and help me - wherever you find me – for I am everywhere and you might find yourself along the way.

Lydia opened the doors of her own household to host Paul and his companions whenever they were in Philippi, and in hosting them, her household became the first house church. Paul did not take over the household. He did not move the furniture, change the menu, tell them what to think.

The courage of Lydia, and the openness of Paul, represent the kind of attitude that blessed that early church with great success. No community of faith can succeed if they continually demand that everyone think like them, look like them and act like them. Lydia and Paul, working together, show how the faith grows, starting with conversation, invitation, and partnership.

Often we imagine that Paul and the other apostles entered into a community and found people empty, like the proverbial tabula rasa. Then they took over like an invasive species, wiping out everything that was there before.

According to the gospels even Jesus was changed by the people he met: was made more tolerant by a Syro-Phoenician woman, he was made more just by a persistent widow, he was helped to be more forgiving by a Samaritan leper, and more joyful by the children he blessed.

When we go out into the world, as Christians, we should go out with Jesus' attitude, with Peter's curiosity, with Paul's flexibility and with Lydia's hospitality. Whether we greet people from the other side of the world, or the other side of the street – may we be inspired by God's Spirit, to live and move without borders, in love and in hope. Amen

*Today we sing one of my favourite hymns – the one called the hymn of the l'Arche community. A community founded by Jean Vanier, as he travelled to a new dimension, not just geographically, but socially and spiritually, not as the leader, but the learner alongside those whom society had discarded. In that way Jesus walks with us, wherever we go.*