

# OPEN WIDE

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**ACTS 16:9-15**  
**LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH**  
**BY: RYAN DUECK**  
**MAY 1, 2016/6<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY OF EASTER**

Christ is risen!

A very happy Easter Sunday to our Syrian friends.

(al-Masīḥ qām! Ḥaqqan qām!)

More than 250 million Orthodox Christians around the world are celebrating Easter today.

The difference in dates between the Western and the Eastern church's Easter dates is because in the east, they still use the Julian calendar, while in the west we use the Gregorian calendar. Also, I learned this week, that for the Orthodox church it is a priority to always has Easter *after* Jewish Passover to maintain the biblical sequence of events.

At any rate, we rejoice with our Orthodox sisters and brothers today in the good news that the tomb is empty.

Each week in our tour through the book of Acts, I have tried to distill things down to one word. One word to describe what "resurrection on the move" meant for the first Christians and what it could mean for us all these years later.

In week one, the word was **obedience**.

In week two, the word was **conversion**.

In week three, the word was **life**. More particularly, a freedom from the fear of death.

Last week, the word was **welcome**.

I didn't always adhere as closely to these one-word themes as I might have planned, but they gave me a good starting point or anchor from which to proceed from as I prepared each week.

When I looked at the word I had for today was "**hospitality**." It seemed natural enough, given the story of Lydia in today's text.

We have the apostle Paul changing course on his missionary journey and ending up in Philippi in the district of Macedonia. We have a conversation with Lydia and a group of women down by the river. We have the embrace of the gospel and a baptism.

And then we have Lydia welcoming Paul into her home. The theme of hospitality virtually leaps of the page.

But as I reflected on this passage throughout the week, a different word stood out to me. The word was "open."

**We have the openness of Paul to being rerouted on his travels, following where the leading of Christ via his night vision.** It is remarkable how open Paul was to having his plans change.

**We have the openness of Paul and the women of Philippi in breaking through common gender norms to create space for a meaningful encounter.** We can probably never draw enough attention to details like this in a context where, even two thousand years later, women still struggle for equality with men, whether in the workplace or in the church or wherever else. The rise of the early church is fueled by women at every turn, from the first witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus to women like Rhoda, Tabitha, Eunice, and Priscilla. From the beginning, women were at the forefront of the Jesus movement.

**We have the openness of Lydia to the gospel and to baptism.** She was a "worshiper of God," the text says, but she knew nothing of what God had done and was doing in and through Jesus. Yet she was open to conversation, to learning, to growing, to walking

through new doors. She was open to God and to God's guiding in her life. She was open to responding in obedience through the step of baptism.

**And then, of course, we have the openness of Lydia in welcoming Paul into her home.**

There is something profound about welcoming people into our homes. We open our space, open our lives, our tables. We say, "what's mine is yours." We invite others into our story and seek to be invited into theirs, even if in small ways.

I was in conversation Wednesday night with the bible study group and we were lamenting the decline in hospitality. I asked what they thought accounted for this decline. The answer came swiftly. "Technology." We have our computers, our phones, our iPads, our home entertainment systems. All of these devices become convenient ways to isolate ourselves from each other, each locked in our own private experiences.

(Kathy even pointed out the dangers of *dishwashers!* She said that there was a time when people would make conversation and connect with one another while doing the simple task of washing dishes!)

Making space for each other matters.

The early church certainly grew through the preaching and teaching of the apostles. But it also grew through simple acts of hospitality. The way of Christ moved forward through simple acts of receptivity to God and neighbour.

So, at each stage of the story, a posture of openness is required for things to move forward.

It could have been openness to:

- New ideas...
- New people
- Chance encounters—situations that weren't expected or even comfortable
- God!

I am convinced that this is still the way that the good news of Jesus makes its way in the world—through ordinary people like you and me opening ourselves to unexpected encounters with others, and through them, the God who created us all.

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So how we can do this in our own lives.

I want to just share a few stories in the remainder of the sermon. For those who read my blog or connect with me on social media, some of these stories might sound familiar.

**As I reflected upon openness leading to amazing things, my thoughts first turned to the past year in my own life and the life of our church**

Fifteen months or so ago, our church made a decision to be open to welcoming families fleeing war in Syria—to opening our arms and our lives to the stranger.

I've told the story many times before and I won't tell it in much detail here. Suffice to say that when we made the decision in our church basement in February of 2015, I could not have imagined what the next year and a half would hold.

I could not have imagined the delight of welcoming new friends from Syria, or the relationships that formed with other churches, or developing friendships with the Muslim community in Lethbridge, or the media attention (CNN story!) and the speaking and writing opportunities around the Syrian crisis that would come to take over my life.

Or figuring out how to say "Christ is Risen" in Arabic. 😊

I could not have imagined the many ways in which *my* life and the life of our church would change as a result of one decision to be open to welcoming the stranger.

Another story.

Some time in late January, I was facing a long evening of bible study followed by a refugee meeting in the midst of a pretty frantic few weeks. It had already been a busy day, our church AGM was the following day, Naomi was leaving for a conference for the remainder of the week, and my sermon, as always, was in its, shall we say, "formative stages."

All in all, I was not particularly looking forward to the evening ahead.

As I was in the final stages of steeling my resolve for the next three hours, a little old man gently poked his head around the corner of my office door. "Am I too early for the refugee meeting?" he asked.

I recognized him right away. He was the local Buddhist minister. I had seen him a number of times over the years at various funerals and events involving Naomi's extended family. I did not know him well, but he struck me as a kind, decent man whenever I had met him in the past.

"Well, you're a little early," I said. "It doesn't start until 8:00." I had no idea how he had even heard about the meeting, but I assumed he would leave and come back later. Or just leave.

He smiled and said nothing. I waited for him to indicate what his plans were (bible study was to start downstairs in five minutes) but he seemed content to just smile.

"Well, I need to go downstairs to lead a bible study..." I said, hoping he would take the hint.

"Oh, ok." He was still smiling. "May I join you?"

This would be one of those moments where a more natural pastor might say something like, "Yes, of course, you are most welcome." Instead, I stared blankly at him for a minute and then said, "You mean, for bible study?"

"Yes," he said. Still smiling.

Needless to say, it was an unlikely scene—one I had not anticipated when I woke up that morning!

But of course, I (eventually!) welcomed him to come downstairs and for the next hour we sat together—a group of Christians and a Buddhist minister, discussing the mystery and delight of love in 1 Corinthians 13.

We found him a bible and he followed dutifully along. He smiled a lot and nodded. He bowed his head when we prayed for each other.

He's been back again a number of times throughout this winter and spring. He was at Bible Study on Wednesday. He brings along his bible, he reads out loud, he asks questions, we ask questions, he learns, we learn.

Each time he comes, I am struck by the wonderful things that are possible when we decide to be open to God and to one another.

How about one more example?

On Thursday night I was driving with Claire to swimming today and we saw an old couple crossing the street, holding hands.

Claire made some comment to the effect that she thought it was really cute and that she loved seeing old couples like that.

I rather unimaginatively responded, “me too.” And the conversation could have ended right there. A pleasant observance on a spring day on the way to somewhere else.

But something within me sensed an opportunity. And not *just* for a sermon illustration! ☺ Pressing boldly forward, I asked her why she liked seeing couples like that?

Her response was quite insightful. She said, “I don't know. I think because it means that they've learned how to love for a long time.”

The statement struck me as a deep and insightful one, particularly in our cultural context where marriages and relationships so often break down, where we place impossible expectations on one another—expectations that are often fueled by Hollywood movies and syrupy pop songs.

*They've learned how to love... (i.e., it's a skill... not something that just happens to you, or that you passively fall in and out of)*

*They've been learning how to love for a long time...*

*They've discovered that loving for a long time takes constant learning...*

A lot is packed into that one little statement—probably even more than Claire knew.

Well, at any rate, this openness to a conversation with Claire led to another conversation the next morning.

Many of you know that Ray Schultz was hospitalized with pneumonia. My conversation with Claire about “learning how to love a long time” was still whirring around in my head as I sat with Ray. Many of you know Ray and Nettie’s story, of how for the past seventeen years Ray has been caring for Nettie after her stroke. Ray and Nettie’s story has been about learning how to love for a long time.

Ray and I talked about this. We talked about what love was and what it wasn’t. We talked about loving each other and about loving God.

Do we only love each other when things are going well? When things are easy? Ray and Nettie have had to learn this in a very difficult situation. And they are still learning.

The same is true with God, Ray said. Do we only love and thank and praise God when our lives are going relatively smoothly?

Or, is love revealed to be most real when it perseveres through dark valleys and hard roads?

Would I have been open to this conversation with Ray if I had not been open to asking that question of Claire? Or was God using these ordinary, everyday events to teach me about life and love and faith and hope and trust?

In each of the above stories, I’ve discovered a very basic but very important truth.

**God teaches us, inspires and instructs us, *saves us when we live lives that are open wide.***

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I don’t tell these stories to make myself look good or super spiritual (at least this isn’t the *only* reason ☺).

These are, in many ways, the kinds of stories that I could hardly avoid. God just dropped them into my lap.

But very often, I fear, I miss out on things like this because I’m not open.

What about you?

I'm sure looking back on your own story you can think of times where you acted upon a hunch or a nudge (or possibly even a more clear directive!) and before you knew it you found yourself launched into a story that you could never have imagined.

Or maybe you just refused to close a door. Sometimes that's all it takes. And a relationship forms, an opportunity arises, a conversation begins.

Space is created for God to work in and among us, bringing goodness, healing, shared suffering, hope.

I don't know what God is asking you to be open to.

Maybe you need to be open to that person you've been avoiding because you know they will need you in ways that you're not sure you are willing to be needed.

Maybe you need to be open to a conversation, a question, an invitation.

Maybe you need to be open to welcoming people into your home, sharing your table.

Maybe you need to be open to taking a risk at work.

Maybe you need to be open to walking with someone in their pain.

Maybe you need to be open to God, to faith, to baptism.

Whatever God might be calling you to open yourself to, I am convinced that as Christians, we follow a God who is always speaking, always guiding, always leading and directing our paths, always inviting us to encounter him in the lives of our neighbours, in the joy and the sorrow of our world.

This is how the good news of Jesus Christ spread through the early church like wildfire in the Roman Empire. This is how it spreads today.

May God help us to live our lives that are open wide—to God and to one another.

Amen.

