

Alleluia. Christ is Risen! Christ is Risen indeed. Alleluia!

My mom is a BIG Winter Olympics fan.
 As a child, every four years in January or February,
 I'd be allowed to stay up past bedtime to watch it all:
 downhill skiing, slalom racing, figure and speed skating,
 and, of course, ICE DANCING.
 Mom and I were BIG ice dancing fans.
 We'd even watch ice dancing competitions and shows on TV
 outside of Olympic years,
 which means, because it was the early 1990s,
 we loved "Torvill & Dean."

Jayne Torvill and Christopher Dean were an ice-dancing pair from Britain
 who wowed the world at the 1984 Olympics
 with their routine to Maurice Ravel's *Boléro*.
 They won Gold with twelve perfect 6.0 and six 5.9 scores.
 That routine—you can still watch it on YouTube—
 shows flawless skating, expert artistry, passion and craft.
 Their bodies smoothly mirror one another like twin ballerinas
 as they glide across the ice.
 Dean lifts Torvill, and then Torvill pulls Dean.
 It is, for much of their riveting performance,
 impossible to tell
 who is leading
 and who is following.

That is how I feel about our story about Paul and Lydia from Acts today.
 That it is impossible to tell who is leading and who is following.
 Is this a story about someone who *steps out in front*
 or about someone *who trails behind*?
 The driving question that emerges for me is,
 is this a story about *leaders* or *followers*?

Because it seems to me that Paul has always been the leader-type. Leading the
 persecution against Jesus' earliest followers,
 until he, in a moment of complete change-of-heart,
 became a Christian himself.

In short order this new believer became a leader once more,
 a missionary who took the good news of God's love and inclusion
 to the Gentiles,
 to the non-believers,
 and to the farthest reaches of the Roman Empire.
 Paul led the charge,
 giving soaring orations before educated audiences in the public square,
 preaching inspiring sermons to people worshiping in the temples,
 rubbing shoulders with the powerful men of his day.
 By these accounts, Paul is a *leader*.

And yet, by other accounts, Paul seems . . . a follower.
 Seems that when he's in the presence of God, like at his conversion,
 Paul is more likely following directions than giving them.
 Especially in this account from Acts 16.
 Paul follows the Holy Spirit to the city of Troas, or Troy,
 where he has a vision of a man of Macedonia, from the other side of a sea,
 pleading with him to come over and help.
 So, Paul goes. He follows.
 He follows this strange vision,
 just like he has followed the Holy Spirit and its call upon his heart
 since his conversion on the road to Damascus.
 He follows all the way to the foreign city of Philippi,
 and once there, on the Sabbath day,
 he follows some believers outside the city to the riverside.

That's where Paul meets Lydia.
 And she also has me wondering about *leading* and *following*.

From everything we know about Lydia, she was a leader herself.
 Lydia shows all the qualities we look for in a leader:
 independence, social influence, and the power to break down barriers.
 She owned and operated her own business in a prosperous city,
 selling an expensive good—cloth dyed the exquisite color purple.
 She dealt with a wealthy, elite clientele, and she probably had employees.
 And unlike so many other women in scripture,
 Lydia's identity is not at all determined in reference to men.
 It doesn't say if she was married or widowed,

but when she eventually invites Paul and his companions over, she says,
 “Come and stay at *my* home.”

A female business owner, an influence in the community,
 a mover and a shaker in the commodities market.
 Yes, Lydia is a leader.

And Lydia is also a religious God-follower, a “worshiper of God,”
 someone who believes in the God of Israel
 but whom is not a Jewish Israelite.
 She follows this God weekly to the bank of the river,
 where this Sabbath, she meets a guest preacher named Paul.

It’s a chance meeting of one leader—Paul—meeting another—Lydia.
 Here’s a take-charge guy who recognizes a take-charge lady,
 and a woman-in-charge who encounters a man-on-a-mission.
 We can imagine they exchange respect.
 Lydia’s presence makes Paul rise to the guest-preaching occasion;
 and as a leader himself, Paul can more easily talk on her level.
 Down by the riverside, their story becomes one
 in which a strong leader shows another strong leader
 what it means to follow.

For Lydia listens eagerly to what Paul proclaims,
 and the Holy Spirit opens her heart.
 Lydia follows this heart-opening Holy Spirit to the waters of baptism,
 for her and her whole household,
 after which she goes back into leader-mode,
 opening her home to be a base-of-operations for Paul and the other
 missionaries.

Paul and Lydia: is theirs a story about *leaders* or *followers*?
 The answer is Yes.

Because in the realm of God’s Holy Spirit,
 following may mean leading others,
 and that leading looks more like serving.
 As a follower of Christ,
 leading is less about commanding and controlling people

and more about changing hearts;
 less about wielding independent power
 and more about being in community together;
 less about being with known friends
 and more about encountering unexpected people.

For the Holy Spirit brings about a different kind of leadership,
 seen in how God worked through someone like Mary:
 an unwed teen who followed God's will and bore God's child
 and became the leader we know as The Mother of God.
 We see this Holy Spirit leadership in what her son, God's son,
 taught about caring for the poor and seeking the stray sheep
 and forgiving the lost sons.
 Jesus led like a servant,
 empowering people who society spurned,
 changing folks with deeply entrenched prejudices,
 plunging into death to work life.

That's what we can imagine Paul and Lydia talked about on that riverside:
 Jesus.
 And in Jesus, these leaders, these powerful people,
 found a model for servant leadership,
 for their own follower-ship,
 that really spoke to their hearts.

Leaders or followers? That's the question for us Easter People this week.
 As Easter People, we inherit the Good News of Easter.
 We believe that Christ, who died, is risen,
 and we have died and risen with Christ.
 So, we seek to conform our lives to this death and resurrection.
 But do we do that by leading, or by following?

The answer is Yes.
 Yes, we are followers of Christ,
 which means that yes, we are leaders by the Holy Spirit.
 But a Holy Spirit leader doesn't look like the world's version of a leader. While
 our culture praises independence and dominance,
 Holy Spirit leaders foster relationships of interdependence and mutual care,

like Lydia opening her home to a wide community.
 While a typical leader expects people to come to him,
 a Holy Spirit leader listens to marginalized voices where they actually are,
 like Paul going to meet Lydia and her companions outside the city.
 Where a normal leader would amass influence and resources for herself,
 a Holy Spirit leader gives them away and shares,
 just as Lydia feeds and provides for foreigners.

We know when the Holy Spirit upends this typical, worldly leader-follower
 dynamic in our own relationships;
 we discern the shift in our daily lives.
 Like when we think we're *leading* our kids spiritually,
 but then we discover they share much more wisdom about God.
 When the boss has all the authority and maintains an iron grip on the team,
 but what a change it makes when he solicits feedback from every person *and*
actually follows through with it.
 Even in church,
 we feel like the pastor is the one with all the spiritual knowledge,
 but then we discover that WE have individual gifts
 that are every bit as valuable and necessary
 for the promotion of the gospel.

To put it in terms of our opening image:
 A Holy Spirit leader looks less like a speed skater winning the race
 and more like ice dancers moving in beautiful synchronicity.
 A Holy Spirit leader looks less like Apolo Ohno
 and more like Torvill & Dean:
 leading by following to the music's rhythm playing from above;
 staying close to one another;
 watching each other attentively;
 being aware of where our bodies go;
 learning the steps so we can move together;
 dancing tentatively at first,
 and then gliding with confidence and vigor.

That is how Easter People follow and lead:
 with the example of Christ flowing into our bodies,
 directing our steps and changing our course,

with God helping us cross over into places and spaces,
real and metaphorical,
where we've never been before;
and with the Holy Spirit pouring courage into our hearts
so we can dance and glide and follow and lead with
the confidence and vigor of Christ.

AMEN.