

May 2nd, 2021

Acts 8:26-40 “We Are All Strangers”

Last month when I was looking through the lectionary, I noticed that the first Sunday of the month had the Story of Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch as one of the choices. I had to stop and ask, “When was the last time I preached on that text?” For the life of me, I couldn’t remember, but there’s been a lot of things I haven’t remembered lately. So I did a word search on my computer. Of course, I searched for the word Eunuch first, because there aren’t many times in the Bible that this word is used, nor is it a word that I typically use *ever*. Nothing. So I thought, “Well, maybe I used a different word,” but what other word is there, right? So I looked up “Ethiopian.” Bingo! I got two hits on this one. I opened the first document, and it was a skit that Katy and I wrote a few years ago where Peggy Davidson read the part of the “Ethiopian woman.” The other was from 2018 when we had our Bible Study on Luke and Acts. I thought, “Why would I skip this story? There’s so many themes to choose from! It covers God’s concern for people outside the Jewish tradition. In fact, it’s the first record of a gentile being baptized. Even better, he was an interesting and multi-faceted gentile. He was a black African from a country that was frequently described in those days as the “ends of the earth.” He’s a person of “complicated gender and sexual identity” so a lot of folks see his conversion and baptism as a sign of hope for those who have been excluded from the church because of their sexual identity. He was a high-ranking representative of a monarch famed for wealth, wisdom and military might that rivalled even Rome itself, so his submission to a power that is the antithesis of earthly power is remarkable too. But I’m on a roll with this, “let’s talk about what it means to lay claim to and follow the risen Christ.” One of my goals is to “comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable,” and I’m having fun making my fellow, “I have a hard time with the label ‘Christian’” folks squirm a little.

One of the challenges we face in today’s church is one that the early church struggled with too. What does it mean to have a living

relationship with the risen Christ? The difficulty, both then and now, is pretty obvious. Even if we confess that the crucified Jesus was risen from the dead and walked among us again, there are some problems we have to address. Even the gospel writers admit that the first-hand witnesses to the resurrection were a mixture of belief and doubt. But even if we had no doubts about the resurrected Christ whatsoever, the physical experience of the risen Christ turning up and hanging out with people is only lasted for forty days. So what then? In what sense do we claim that the risen Christ continues to make contact with *us*? How can Christians then and now say that the risen Christ continues to speak to us and guide us? Or is it all just wishful thinking? Good thing we've got this story here in Acts to help us out! [][[MARKER]]]

Acts is a great book because it's all about the birth of Christ's church. The official title of the book is "The Acts of the Apostles," but we just shorten it to "Acts." I like to call it "The Acts of the Holy Spirit" though because that's what drives and motivates the apostles. It's written by the same author as the Gospel of Luke. It's frustrating that our bibles plop the gospel of John right in between Luke and Acts. I believe that Luke and Acts were meant to be read back to back. This is me setting you up for why I chose the passage from Luke at the beginning of the service instead of the Psalm. The story I read from Luke is the story of Jesus' post-resurrection encounter with two of Jesus' followers who were on their way to Emmaus. There's a lot these two stories have in common, [][[MARKER]]]

In the Emmaus Road story, the disciples are travelling away from Jerusalem, when they meet a stranger who guides them into an understanding of how the Hebrew scriptures speak of the suffering and death of Jesus, and how their hearts burned within them. Then there's this sacramental moment where the stranger breaks bread with them, and all of a sudden their eyes are opened and they recognize him as the risen Christ, then poof ... he vanishes from their sight. What we have here in Acts is a story about an Ethiopian official who is travelling away from Jerusalem, when a stranger appears and guides him into an

understanding of how the Hebrew scriptures speak of the suffering and death of Jesus, and his eyes are opened to recognize Christ in scripture. Then there's a sacramental moment where the Ethiopian official asks Philip to baptize him, which he does. And then immediately Philip vanishes from his sight, snatched away by the Spirit to another place.

See the similarities? Anyone have any doubt that Luke and Acts belong together? This is the same writer constructing his stories in a way that draws attention to their similarities. And when we put that alongside other points that Luke stresses it's even more apparent. It is in Luke's gospel that when Jesus sends out the 72 disciples to proclaim the Kingdom, he says to them, "Those who welcome and hear you are welcoming and hearing me, but those who reject you, are rejecting me." And so here in these two later stories, in one case we know that the stranger is Jesus, though the people in the story don't see it at first, and in the other we know that it's *not* Jesus, but one of his followers, and yet we see that in welcoming and hearing Philip, the Ethiopian official finds himself welcoming and recognizing the risen Christ and giving his life to him in baptism.

One gospel writer. Two stories. Similar circumstances. Same outcome. The first story may have taken place during the forty days of the physical presence of the risen Christ, and the second story after his ascension into heaven, but, Luke is saying, the risen Christ is present, speaking, guiding, illuminating and transforming, in both of them. You may not immediately recognise the moments when the risen Christ is present ministering to you, but neither did the disciples during that forty days. Christ is risen, and as we affirm in our prayer at the table, his ascension is so that he can be everywhere present; it does not make him less present.

There are two practical insights I want to highlight from this. The first is that it calls us to maintain a stance of openness towards the stranger. In our liturgy we acknowledge that we are all strangers to one another to some extent. No matter how well we know each other, we remain also

significantly unknown and unknowable. We can always still surprise and delight or shock one another. And so even within our congregation, this openness to the stranger is essential. That's why in our governing of our congregational life we say that discernment and decisions must always happen in open meetings, because we can never know who will be the stranger who bears the word of God to us on any given occasion. Samara has insightfully prompted us this week to think again about the importance of identifying and acknowledging those who comprise the core of our congregation, but this would never be for the purpose of excluding anybody else's voice from the conversations. The gospel makes it quite clear that the voice of Christ is just as likely to be heard from one we might not recognise as from those already well known to us. So we maintain an expectation that the risen Christ will make his voice heard even knowing that the one who gives voice to his word will often surprise us.

And the second thing I want to highlight is that sometimes we are in Philip's position in this story. Sometimes we are the strangers through whom Christ would speak to another. So often we are reluctant because we feel under-qualified and under-prepared. We don't know enough. We are too unsure. We don't have the words. But the message is, it's not about you. The risen Christ is just as capable of using you as he is of using anybody else. And many a time, the unqualified and unprepared are able to speak more directly into another person's situation than those with their heads stuffed full of knowledge. Interestingly, when Philip asks the Ethiopian whether he understands the scriptures he is reading, he doesn't reply that he needs an educator or an authoritative interpreter. He says he needs a guide. A guide is one who has been down a track before and can show another what they know. That's all we are called to do in most cases: bear witness to what we have seen and experienced ourselves. The rest is the Holy Spirit's job, not yours. As we say in our covenant, we are called to be ambassadors for Christ, sent into the world he loves in mission and ministry.

The risen Christ is indeed among us, living and active. Sometimes he is reaching out to us in the stranger; sometimes he is reaching out to the stranger through us. But always he is everywhere present, made known in scriptures, in the waters of baptism, and in the broken bread and outpoured wine. Christ is risen!