

**Grace Episcopal Church, Galena Illinois  
May 3, 2015—Easter 5B**

**Sermon by Rev. Gloria Hopewell, D.Min.**

**Text: Acts 8: 26-40**

Most of the time, it is easiest for us to relate to readings that have elements that are familiar to us—events or examples from the kind of life we see around us—comparisons with what we know that can move us toward understanding something new or unfamiliar. Though life in first century Palestine was vastly different, there were images that remain accessible now. The vine and branches story today certainly connects with the many here who are gardeners, farmers, people who work with the soil and growth of flowers and vegetables.

Today, though, we go to the other story—one that has little that we might recognize in our day-to-day lives. Its setting, its characters, what is happening, and what moves the action makes us work a bit, as it probably doesn't match very well with our experiences.

This is the story from Acts that takes place far off on a desolate road in the desert—in the middle of nowhere, and two unlikely people come together for a life-changing encounter.

We can set this story aside as a quaint and obscure tale. Or, like one of today's characters, we can ask, "How can I [understand] unless someone guides me?" And we can invite that guidance. That is the route we will take this morning, for this is far more than a quaint tale from an ancient and unknown world. It is a lesson that has volumes to speak to us in our own time and place.

Philip, one of our characters, is a newly commissioned deacon in the developing community that is following Jesus' command to teach, heal, baptize, and carry the Gospel to the ends of the earth. We know that he was not one of the original twelve. And that when their workload became too great and they squabbled about who got help and who didn't, they brought in seven others who were initially in charge of caring for the widows and orphans in their midst.

Philip was a Hellenist—one of the Greek-speaking Jews, and he quickly had great success in his preaching and healing. In fact, he is right in the midst of great works with Samaritans when this story begins—when the angel, the Holy Spirit, interrupts and sends him on this detour to the desert road.

Here he soon meets the other character—not your average someone Philip has been meeting like the lame or the blind or those possessed by demons. This one is an exotic

man, a person of means, a high ranking official in the Ethiopian court in a lavish chariot. He is reading a scroll from the Hebrew Bible—thus, he is educated, literate, and rich enough to own a scroll—not a common sight on the road between Jerusalem and Gaza.

We learnt that this man is on his way back home in Ethiopia after having gone to the Temple in Jerusalem—just as all faithful Jews did. But here is where it gets interesting: he is not a Jew. He cannot be a Jew or go into the Temple not because he has dark skin or is a It was foreigner, but because he is a eunuch—a male who has been castrated, possibly because he is a male working in a Queen’s court.

Jewish law forbids those whose bodies have been mutilated from entering the Temple. Furthermore, a man who cannot reproduce, has a limited future in the faith. And yet, he had made this long difficult and possibly dangerous journey, wanting to learn, seeking some nourishment for his desire to know God.

And Philip appears. Is it happenstance? Synchronicity? Or, might he be led by the Spirit?

The scroll the Ethiopian is trying to comprehend is from Isaiah 53—a prophecy that deals with being a social outcast and about God’s plan for redemption. Christians read this a pertaining to Jesus as the sheep led to the slaughter. So it is an opening for Philip to tell the good news of Christ.

And, as those scrolls did not have numbered chapters at that time, perhaps he had read far enough to reach this:

Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say,  
‘The Lord will surely separate me from his people’;

and do not let the eunuch say,

‘I am just a dry tree.’

<sup>4</sup> For thus says the Lord:

To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths,  
who choose the things that please me  
and hold fast my covenant,

<sup>5</sup> I will give, in my house and within my walls,  
a monument and a name  
better than sons and daughters;

I will give them an everlasting name  
that shall not be cut off.

And just then, the chariot happens upon water in the desert—perhaps it was the right season when the dried up, shallow wadis filled, when flowers bloomed in the desert. Or, perhaps it was another act of the Spirit.

But here—the Ethiopian found what he was seeking. He was home, no longer outcast, and he did not hesitate to reach out, to say, “What is to prevent me—*me*—from being baptized?”

The answer is “nothing.” Philip and the Ethiopian go down into the water together and then go their separate ways, led by the Spirit. And that is the end of the story.

But it is not the end, is it?

It was not just Philip and the disciples in the Apostolic Age who were commanded to spread the Good News, to baptize, and to teach. It was Jesus’ followers in all generations. Even our own. There are those who firmly believe that the church is now in a second Apostolic Age now—a time when the church has fallen from its central place in society and where we have to work again in the mission field which is right outside our doors. Yesterday, we participated in another Thrive meeting in the Diocese. Part of what was shared with us were some of the newest statistics gathered over the past four years on growth and decline in the Episcopal Church. The data has been sliced and diced in many ways showing the percent of churches growing in various categories—from demographics like geography, size of town or city, age and diversity to liturgical practices, leadership, evangelism and presence in the community, and clarity of mission and purpose.

We also heard each church’s team report on their work toward congregational vitality. Our churches are primarily small town or suburban—with average Sunday attendance ranging from 40 or 50 to several hundred.

The work is varied. One suburban congregation is striving to be an interfaith center for understanding in a community with a large Jewish population. Another is addressing hunger, the needs of veterans and new mothers. Still another is connecting with the schools and businesses in the community to get a bigger picture of how the church can best relate and is collaborating with other churches in making statements on social and justice issues—immigration, the current Supreme Court deliberations on Marriage Equality, and racism.

What they have in common, they also share with Philip. They are leaving their four comfortable walls and going out into the world. They are not waiting for newcomers to show up on Sunday mornings. They are making their presence known—who they are, what they stand for.

And, yes, they all shrink away from that “e” word (Evangelism) for fear that we might offend. But this does not need to be about “conversion”—our CAT Survey results show that we are highly in agreement that conversion is not what we are about. There are other ways of spreading the good news—through conversations and sharing of stories and through our actions.

Did you catch the fact that more than 75% of us agree with the phrase that being part of this church has changed our lives? And, if you add the “somewhat agrees” that number rises to 94%? That is rather amazing! Why would we not want to share that with others? Why wouldn’t we want the same things for them? Isn’t it strange how reluctant we are to talk about some of life’s most important and deepest questions?

You can bet that the Ethiopian did not quietly go back home to life as usual after his experience! And I’m guessing Philip might have talked about it, too...“you’ll never believe what happened on the way to Gaza...”

Amen.