

2 May 2021  
The Fifth Sunday of Easter

Saint Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“An Unexpected Easter”

Text: John 15:1-8; Acts 8:26-40; 1 John 4:1-21

**Alleluia! Christ is risen!** [*He is risen indeed! Alleluia!*] **Alleluia.**

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

The Ethiopian man was lost. He didn't know how to read the map. He didn't know how to get home.

He wasn't dumb. He was anything but. You don't get to be in charge of all the treasure of the Candace, the queen of the Ethiopians, if you're dumb.

He knew what road he was on. He had probably traveled that way before. He knew how to get to his house. That wasn't the kind of lost he was. Besides, he probably wasn't alone. An official of his standing would certainly have had others with him. We know he had at least a chariot driver with him, whom he commanded to stop by some water. Probably others, too, for protection from bandits and thieves, if for nothing else.

For he was traveling with wealth. He was no ordinary pilgrim. Given his position, it seems likely he had been sent to Jerusalem, going on behalf of his queen. To worship, that is, to take gifts from her to the God of Israel. And while there, perhaps to purchase the scroll he now read. The scroll of the prophet Isaiah. For it was quite extraordinary that he would have such a thing in his possession. It probably wasn't his. Such scrolls were very expensive and rare. They were usually limited to synagogues, temples, and libraries. People didn't own their own personal copies like we do today. So it seems likely that this, too, was at the queen's behest.

So being an educated man, an official of some calibre, why not read this scroll on the journey home?

And so it was that Isaiah confused him. He was lost. He had read almost 53 chapters (where he quoted from today) because with a scroll, you didn't start in the middle. You start from the beginning and unscroll it. But even after so much reading, he couldn't understand. What was the prophet talking about? *Who* was the prophet talking about? A man of his position probably wasn't used to being confused . . .

And then he heard a voice - but not the voice of one of his companions. A strange voice. ***Do you understand what you are reading?*** It was almost as if this prophet's God had arranged for someone to explain to him . . . someone to lead him home.

Which, of course, is exactly what was happening. Isaiah's God had sent an angel to send Philip on this mission. ***Rise and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza***, he told Philip. And then later, when Philip was on the road, the Spirit told him, ***Go over and join this chariot***. And Philip didn't wander over, he ***ran!*** And then he heard *familiar* words. The words of Isaiah that spoke of Jesus and that Jesus had fulfilled as the Lamb of God. ***The Lamb led to the slaughter***. Words that Jesus had explained to His disciples after Easter. Words that the Apostles were now teaching the people. And words that Philip now was given the privilege of unpacking to this Ethiopian man. The chariot his pulpit. The desert his church.

There was so much to say! Philip began with what Isaiah said here, but said so much more! He told him the whole story as Isaiah laid it out. Isaiah chapter 7 about the virgin birth. Isaiah chapter 11 about the new kingdom that was ushered in by the one who is both David's human son and David's divine Lord - God and man in one person. Isaiah chapter 35 about how this promised one would open the eyes of the blind and the ears of the deaf, and how the lame shall leap like a deer and the tongue of the mute sing for joy. And how Jesus of Nazareth had done all those things. And then in chapter 53, that Jesus was this lamb led to the slaughter, and how this was God's will. That God sent His Son to be born as a man and be the sin offering for the sin of the whole world - no one excluded. And that He was not dead, but risen from the dead! To now give life and an eternal home to all people. It is hard to imagine a better book for Philip to have to preach Jesus than Isaiah!

And like Peter and the other Apostles, Philip must have also told this man that in baptism, by water and the Word, a person receives this new life and new home. That in baptism, one is born again, born from above. For when he sees some water, immediately the Ethiopian wants this gift. That is for all people, right? Even him! He had likely gone to Jerusalem with gifts from his queen. Now he is the one receiving a gift for him! And one even greater. And he is no longer lost. He goes home ***rejoicing***. But which home? Ethiopia? Surely. But his new home, too. With Christ.

**That day was Easter Day for this Ethiopian man.** That was the day he was raised from being dead in sin to a new life in Christ. Or as John put it today, the day he was grafted into the vine of Christ. *Just like you.*

Now I wanted to give you this new way to think about the story of this Ethiopian man because I want to give you a new way to think about the Holy Gospel that you heard today as well. Because when we hear these verses about the vine and the branches and bearing fruit, I think many people, maybe most people, hear them as a command. That

you have to bear fruit! This is something you have to do! And if you don't, or if you don't have enough, you're going to be cut off. So get to work! . . . *But that's not what it says.* There is an imperative, a command, in those verses, but it's not to bear fruit. The command is this: **to abide in Jesus.** That's the emphasis. It's said *seven times* in those verses. To remain in Jesus. Connected to Jesus. Getting your life from Jesus. And when you do, you will bear fruit. That's *the reality.*

For notice: **this is all God's work.** As it was with the Ethiopian man. The Father is the vinedresser, Jesus says, which means He is the one who grafts branches onto the vine and He is the one who prunes and takes care of the branches so that they bear fruit. All the branches do **is be branches** and drink from the vine, and from that nourishment - and the Father's care - fruit is produced. Good vine, good nourishment, good branches, good fruit. Pretty simple.

Or, at least, it *should* be. But the very fact that Jesus must teach this shows it is not. That there is a constant temptation for us to receive our nourishment, our food and drink, from other sources. Sources that do not produce good fruit. From when **Adam and Eve drank** in the serpent's lies, to when **Joseph's brothers ate** the food of bitterness and revenge and sold their brother into slavery, to **King David** who *thirsted* for his neighbor's wife and drank from that well, to **the people of Israel** who *hungered* for worldly success and honor and so became like the faithless nations around them, to **Judas** whose eyes *feasted* on the glitter of 30 pieces of silver so that when Jesus spoke these words we heard today, there were sadly only eleven disciples listening, not twelve.

So **abide in Me**, Jesus says to them. Because He knows the past, He knows the present, and He knows the trials, temptations, struggles, and threats those eleven are about to face. And they will not be small, easy, or few. So **abide in My word**, He says to them. My Word will not mislead you. My Word will give you the strength and nourishment you need. *And joy.* The Ethiopian went home rejoicing, remember? And you know what Adam and Eve, Joseph's brothers, King David, Israel, and Judas all had in common? No joy. Oh, maybe for a moment they did. But it didn't last. In the end, there was just regret, fear, resentment, anger, bitterness, sadness, and loss.

So **test the spirits**, John wrote in his Epistle that we also heard from this morning. That is, think about what you are listening to; *who* you are listening to and learning from; *from where* you are receiving your spiritual food and drink and nourishment. Is it leading you farther and deeper into God's Word or away and apart from it? It is causing confusion or clarity? Is it giving joy or regret? Fear or confidence? Doubt or certainty? So **abide in Me**, Jesus says to us, too. That we be not like Adam and Eve, Joseph's brothers, King David, Israel, and Judas. **Abide in Me**, Jesus says, to us who - like the apostles - live lives in this world where trials, temptations, struggles, and threats are not small, easy, or few. This world where those who are anti-Christ are constantly trying to get us to listen to them - if not by worldly logic and wisdom, then by sheer repetition and wearing you

down. So *abide in Me*, Jesus says. For your life.

Or maybe put it this way: do you remember when Jesus taught *that you cannot serve two masters* (Matthew 6:24)? To put that same teaching into the words of Jesus that we heard today: **you cannot be grafted into two different vines**. You can only get your life and nourishment from one. Drinking from the world's vine, you will bear the world's fruit. Drinking from Christ, you will bear His fruit, which is good fruit.

So back to the Ethiopian man . . . do you think the next day, the next week, the next year, to the end of his life, that man remembered that moment when he and Philip stepped down from his chariot and not just baptized, but baptized *into Christ*, the true vine? Think that was a defining moment in his life? **Then maybe for you, too**. To remember that you are not just baptized, but baptized *into Christ*. That that day was your own Easter day! And abide in those words. That you are not just a person, like any other person, *but a forgiven child of God*. Abide in those words. Find your life in those words. Christ's words.

And while we do not know anything else about this Ethiopian man, what he did after this story . . . do you think that maybe after Philip left him, he went back to reading the scroll of Isaiah, pouring over it, reading with new eyes, finding Christ in those words? **Then maybe you, too**. Finding in the Scriptures not just rules or laws, but Christ and His life. The wonderful and glorious truths that led up to Easter and now flow forth from Easter, of forgiveness, creation and re-creation, resurrection, goodness, mercy, a loving, caring, giving, and gracious God. Abiding in those words, living in those words, in Christ, and finding a joy that lasts.

And while we do not know anything else about this Ethiopian man, we do know that Christianity flourished in Africa; that it was a center of the early Christian Church; a Church that produced a lot of good fruit as it spawned many of the great, early Christian theologians, like Athanasius (whose commemoration is today, by the way!), and Augustine, and Cyprian, and more. A church that perhaps started with the baptism of an Ethiopian man . . . that started that day in the back of a chariot . . . a vine growing from the back of a chariot . . . *Wouldn't that be just like Jesus?*

**Abide in Me**, Jesus says. **To you**. Who live in a world that is often confusing, filled with contradiction, rife with division, quick to accuse and persecute, ready to knock you down and run you over, eager to insist on its way or the highway, constantly changing, not always right but never wrong, ever conning, phishing, scamming, and always ready to dive headfirst into the latest sinful fad, and tempting and luring you to go with them. How do you stand in such a world? How *can* you? What can you rely on? What foundation? What truth?

**Abide in Me**, Jesus says. To get you through such a world. To get you through death to

life. To forgive your sin. To raise you up. To strengthen you. A vine growing not out of your chariot, but in your house, in your life, bearing good fruit, His fruit. He'll do it. He said so. Just ***abide in Me***, He said. That's the command. Remember your Easter Day, your baptism. Drink deeply of His Word. Rejoice in His forgiveness. Come eat and drink His Body and Blood. *Often*. He'll grow in you. As He abides in you.

For the simple fact is this: **the life of the vine is the life of the branch**. It was for those apostles, it was for that Ethiopian man, it was for the early church, and it is for you. So abide in the true vine. ***Abide in Christ***.

For only **Christ is risen!** [*He is risen indeed! Alleluia!*]

Just be who you are. He'll take care of the rest.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.