



Fifth Sunday in Easter
2 May 2021

Ascension Lutheran Church
Pastor Chris

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Risen Lord and Savior Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

My wife has trouble closing the door to our master bathroom. If her husband were more of a carpenter – I am sure there would be an easy way to fix the door. But alas, my skill set never included a hammer and chisel, just ask Pastor Tony who often gets called upon to fix the fix at my house after I tried to fix it. So my wife closes the door but the door does not stay closed. Now there is a secret to the door. If you close the door and lift-up just a little bit, the latch on the door will engage and voila – the door is closed – but somehow my wife has not figured it out. And so last week, after she complained for the, I-have-no-idea-how-many-times-she-has-complained time, I walked over to the door and showed her the secret. With both of us standing on the outside of the master bathroom, I pulled the door closed with just a little lift and what do you think happened? The door closed. And my wife was like, “Ahhhh, got it.” And then I went to open the door. Yeah, it was locked. She thought if she locked the door the last time, she tried to close it, it would stay closed. Well, it stayed closed this time...with no one inside to unlock the door. Until I saved the day – with a little baby-size screwdriver – which according to Pastor Tony is all I have at home – Pastor Tony calls all the tools in on my work bench “baby tools.” I am okay with that. When I need big strong manly-man tools, I call my dad or maybe Pastor Tony.

On this fifth Sunday of Easter, I would ask this question of you this day. Who has been on the other side of the door to unlock your understanding of God’s love and promise in your life? And before we get any farther –grab a pencil in front of you – and write that name on your bulletin. Maybe it is not a name – maybe it is a title like mom, grandpa – that’s okay too. Just write the name down. And then hold on to that for a moment.

Today, we hear the story of Phillip and Ethiopian Eunuch. The story begins with “the angel of the Lord” directing Philip to a certain “wilderness road” that leads away from Jerusalem. There, at the edge of civilization, Philip finds the Ethiopian eunuch. He is a man interested enough in Israel’s God to make a pilgrimage from Ethiopia to Jerusalem, but according to Hebrew law, he is not free to practice his faith in the Temple. Side note – if you are a Eunuch – you are not allowed to worship in the temple. (I will leave the explanation of all things ‘eunuch’ to the privilege of all parents.) Don’t get mad at me – it’s in the Bible, after all. It’s possible that the Ethiopian is a Jew, but in Philip’s eyes, he is a foreigner. He is a man of rank and privilege, a royal official in charge of his queen’s treasury, but he is also a powerless outsider — a person who doesn’t fit into the social constructs of his time and place. He is wealthy enough to possess a scroll of Isaiah-which means he is really wealthy and literate enough to read it, but he lacks the knowledge, context, and experience to understand what he’s reading.

In other words, as one author explains, the unnamed eunuch occupies an in-between space, a space of reversal and surprise that stubbornly resists our tidy categories of belonging and non-belonging. What kind of person, after all, earnestly seeks after a God whose laws prohibit his bodily presence in the Temple? What kind of wealthy, high-ranking official humbly asks a stranger on the road for help with his spiritual life? What kind of long-rejected religious outcast sees a body of water – be it puddle, pond, river, or lake - and stops in his tracks because he recognizes *first* — before Philip, the supposed to know the faith stuff “expert” — that God is offering an unconditional, and irresistible invitation drenched in love and soaked in promise?

Yes, the Ethiopian eunuch hears the good news of Jesus’s life, death, and resurrection, and decides to become a follower of Christ. That is true and it is wonderful. But consider for a moment the amazing question he asks Philip in return: “Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?” Sit with this for a moment as the real question-the only question that matters. God knows there have been enough reasons given through history and perhaps in your own histories why someone was told they were not welcome – why someone told you that you were not welcome.



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“What is to prevent me?” What is to prevent me from belonging to the family of God? What is to prevent me from being welcomed as Christ’s own? What is to prevent me from full participation in the risen life and community of Jesus? What is to prevent me from breaking down the barriers, fences, walls, and obstacles that have kept me at a painful arm’s length from the God I hunger to know more deeply? What is to prevent me from becoming, not someone who simply hears the Good News, but *someone who becomes a part of* the Good News of resurrection? And may be the more personal question is this: what have I done in my own life to prevent me from being in the intensely intimate relationship with God I believe I want? I believe we own those times in our lives when it has been easier to run than stay? Ask Edwin or Pastor Tony how many years they ran away from God’s call before finally saying yes. Easier to ignore or deny the truth in our own lives instead of facing up to honest reflection offered to us in the mirror? And honestly, easier to walk away from someone – family/friend – who spoke the truth to us...easier to walk away from the church for a time then staying in the mess and working through the difficult valley we might find ourselves in.

What is to prevent me? And the answer from Phillip – silence. Enough silence that the Eunuch tells his chariot to stop, and Phillip and the Eunuch enter the water and the Ethiopian official is baptized. And that my friends is the end of the story. At least the end for us. We have no idea where this moment of God’s grace revealed will take this newly baptized child of God. And I kinda love that we don’t know what happens next. It leaves us the reminder that we are not always offered the opportunity to see what happens when we open the locked door for someone else.

Martin Luther, in his introduction to the 95 theses, his list of challenges against non-scripture-based practices in the catholic church, wrote these words: “Out of love for the faith and the desire to bring it to light.” Out of love for the faith and the desire to bring it to light, I offer these words for Lily and Jackson baptized today and for all of us reminded of our baptism this day.

This is what we are about. We plant the seeds that one day will grow. We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise. We lay foundations that will need further development. We provide yeast that produces effects far beyond our capabilities. We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do something, and to do it very well. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest. We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker. We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs. We are prophets of a future that is not our own. We are simply invited to unlock the door for someone else to find a deeper relationship with God.

At the beginning of this sermon, I asked you to write down the name of someone who unlocked the door for you to a deeper relationship with God. Now I wonder, whose name would you write down, to ask God to help you unlock a door for them to find a deeper relationship with God. And after writing down that name? One more question. What is to prevent you from opening that door today? Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen.