Sermon on Acts 8:26-40
(References to John 15:1-8 and 1 John 4)

In Acts 1:8 the resurrected Christ says, “You will receive a power from the Holy Spirit coming upon you. And you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all of Judaea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.”

He was serious! We sit here today, part of a world-wide family borne of that power, the heirs of an extraordinary chorus of witnesses down through the centuries and in our own day; and, we find ourselves, to echo John McCrae’s famous poem *Flanders Fields*, called to hold the torch high even as we do it with failing hands.

By chapter 8 of Acts we are already in the Judea and Samaria portion of the mission. We get this entertaining story about Philip running up to and beside the chariot, and while *running*, (one pictures John Cleese here, long neck craning trying not to trip over the goats at the side of the road), politely asking and answering questions (quite, yes, Hmm I see your point…).

The story serves to show us how the resurrected Christ reaches into our world and into our lives in sometimes improbable ways.

Who is this Ethiopian? A man from the edge of the world. Ethiopia was the exotic land that defined the southern border of the world from the Roman empire’s perspective.

In Hebrew thinking Ethiopia was equivalent to ancient Cush an almost mythical land that defined the southern borders of human habitation.

In our multi-cultural world, not a big deal but to Luke’s readers he’s an exotic man from the edge of the world who lives in the middle of a paradox; he’s powerful, the treasurer of a fabled kingdom and yet he’s sexually mutilated, a eunuch.

It was not uncommon in the ancient orient for intelligent men to submit to, or be forcibly made to submit to, the travesty of castration; this allowed them, even if they were from lower classes to serve in the corridors of power without the hint of scandal.

For many this was a price worth paying; for others it was no doubt as brutal as it sounds.

It makes us think of travesties large and small, endured by so many, willingly or unwillingly, just to “fit in” or to “get ahead;” whether it’s forced female circumcision, or the shameful “rites of passage” endured by many college undergrads or junior members of so many companies, not to mention bullying which is so common that it just seems like part of the human liturgy.

In our day, with new stories emerging everyday, #metoo fits almost everybody, with the danger that it trivializes the unique circumstances of each new type of abuse uncovered.

Back to our story; in the case of this Ethiopian man; the ritual he had embraced or endured on his journey may have helped him survive and thrive economically but it had also tragically stymied his spiritual quest.

Somewhere in his travels he had encountered the writings of Jewish religion or Jews themselves and become deeply attracted to the one God of Jewish monotheism as many did who sought more of a universal perspective, free from the tribal gods and the often sordid rituals associated with them.

The tragedy was that the Mosaic Law was often interpreted as excluding the sexually different, we would say queer folks.

As a non-Jew and eunuch this man would have been prohibited from becoming a non-Jewish convert who would then at least be allowed into the Gentile court in the temple.

But despite these prohibitions, this fundamental exclusion written into the prevailing interpretations of the scriptures of the God he’d come to believe in, this man willing foregoes what he might have considered his right as a powerful man.

Instead He buys a scroll of the scriptures; an expense that only a few could afford; he goes on pilgrimage to Jerusalem, a dangerous and very lengthy journey, all in his quest for truth.

In a day and age when people are turned off organized religion by the smallest slight of the church or by people in it; the Ethiopian eunuch stands for the primacy of the quest itself, a figure who calls us to a spiritual journey regardless of the obstacles in the way.

Unlike some today who show up at temple or church looking for some form of amusement or even entertainment—shall we call it “spirutainment?”—most pre-modern people understood that religious truth was apprehended through effort, effort founded on God’s grace and mercy, yes, but genuine effort.

Recently I talked to a man who decided to stop coming to church, when I asked him why he said simply “it’s not the same as when I first came;” I said, “well, here’s what I know, spiritual growth usually only gets started when things require effort.” We left it there, the modern predicament: if I don’t see an immediate benefit I’ll amuse myself another way.

Clearly this Ethiopian stands as a challenge to us in our culture. Are we, in all our activities—I mean, surely this man had a lot to do, a lot on his plate!—giving space, the primary space even, to the greatest quest and journey?

He was not prepared to allow even the most prejudicial barriers to keep him from God. What barriers, what attitudes or beliefs are stopping you on your spiritual quest?

Into this scene, into these questions, strides a messenger, Philip. Like the Ethiopian who stands in for the realities faced in all serious quests, Philip, too, stands as a symbol for all those people and forces that intersect with us if we’re willing to journey towards God and what they will come to mean for our lives.

He’s commissioned by an angel, prompted by the Spirit and makes judicious use of questions and comments in his interactions with the man.

He represents some of the different ways God seeks to get the message to spiritual seekers, how the resurrected Christ gets inside the pressing questions and quests of our world, the questions of the exotic and the ordinary, the majority and the minority, the rich and the poor.

And what Philip brings most of all is understanding. The good news is always, first of all, a promise of meaning, meaning in our lives and it is that meaning that allows us to continue our own journeys and commitments.

One of the reasons people leave the church or get turned off God at even small slights is that the message has been slapped down on the table as a set of demands without an adequate explanation as to why.

When we see what God really desires for the world, for us, is the Good, the Beautiful and the True we are far more open to hear the demands for justice, holiness and sacrifice.

Notice that Philip doesn’t presume but interacts with the man’s questions; the scroll is opened to a puzzling text in the prophet Isaiah and Philip skillfully shows how Jesus of Nazareth is both the key to unlock this man’s understanding and unlock the doors that now prevent him from being a full member of God’s people.

The good news of God makes sense of *our* lives by opening doors that we thought were locked for good!

Christ continues to unlock doors, sometimes on a very large scale! Presently there is in India a widespread movement among the Dalit caste, close to 300 million people who are considered “untouchable;” consigned to demeaning and difficult work with no hope of advancement.

And hundreds of thousands of them are beginning to realize that Christ has an answer for them: a vision of dignity and of justice that they have never dared dream.

On a large scale, and coming from the other side of the social equation, they are experiencing what this Ethiopian has experienced.

The Ethiopian notes the almost miraculous presence of water in the middle of the desert and asks the question that is at the heart of his yearning, our yearning, at the heart of the world’s cry; “it’s too good to be true, surely there’s something stopping me from walking through that door; I’ve been told I can’t be grafted into vine! And now you’re saying I can? What then is to prevent me from being baptized?”

And you can almost picture him cringing waiting for that one piece of small print that will nix the deal. But it doesn’t come! It really is true!

All the painful, degrading rituals of ancient and modern religions and societies are literally washed away in the clean water of baptism; the poring over us of the liquid that brings life demonstrates in the most powerful way that life is our destiny!

During the Easter season we keep sanctified water visible giving ourselves the opportunity to feel the cool splash of refreshing life; when we look at or sprinkle or cross ourselves with the baptismal water we remind ourselves of our fundamental freedom to live our spiritual purpose, to know the Ethiopian’s joy.

It is only fear that stops up; and as our second reading perfect love is here to cast out all fear.

Tradition tells us that this man made it back to the edge of the world and became the founder of the Church in that fabled Kingdom, the beginning of the “to the ends of the world” promise of Christ.

I don’t imagine that his life was easy; how would he have lived his faith back in Ethiopia? I don’t imagine that living in the joy of Christ’s victory and in our baptism is any easier; we have our own challenges.

All around us people are seeking for life; here in this room, on our street, in our families; sometimes we don’t know how to help; but God simply asks us to be available, to love, speak simple words, to share the burden of being a witness with a faith community.

We do this with failing hands, but Christ will never fail to read the true intentions of each heart. We are the improbable recipients of and witnesses to Christ’s barrier-breaking love. Let’s celebrate our joy at this table!