

The Joy of Being Truly Connected to Jesus

5ht Sun. of Easter – 05/02/21 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: Acts 8:26-40 Pastor Keith Besel

v. 35, “Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus.”

v. 38b, “...and he baptized him.”

Introduction

✘ Christ is risen. *He is risen indeed. Alleluia!*

✘ Many small towns hold some type of celebration that harkens back to the founding days of their community. Here in Ft. Lupton we call it *Trapper Days*; a time when local merchants sell their wares on the sidewalks, we have a special parade, contests, reenactments, art displays and more. It’s a time when we’re all encouraged to gather and celebrate the town’s history.

➔ There are some people however, who just aren’t able to get very excited about remembering or celebrating events from the past.

✘ But a lot of our celebrations are just that: things we do at prescribed times, whether people feel like a party or not – celebrating birthdays, anniversaries, and legal holidays like July 4th and Thanksgiving Day.

➔ One of the challenges we face with these celebrations is keeping our sights upon the true significance of the original event; staying connected to the joy of that original occasion and thereby making it something that is really worth celebrating, even after we’ve celebrated it so often that the bloom is off the rose.

➔ Think for example how excited Methuselah and his family might have been celebrating his birthdays as he approached his final age of 969 years (Gen. 5:27).

✘ Sadly, Easter can be like that. We know that our Lord’s resurrection is wonderful. We shout it out, “Christ is risen. *He is risen indeed. Alleluia!*”, and we know it is worthy of our celebration.

➔ But we celebrate Easter every year using many of the same traditions. We repeat the story and the truth of Christ’s resurrection each time. Yet even as we do, other things in life continue on. Yes, Christ is risen. *He is risen indeed. Alleluia!*, but the stresses of keeping our marriages together still exist, the boss still wants that extra effort at work, the children are still not performing as well as they could be at school, and our health concerns don’t take a break just because this is the season of Easter.

➔ For many Christians, even more serious questions have now come to the surface as their years of celebrating Christ’s resurrection add up, “Does any of this talk of forgiveness and new birth really make sense to me anymore? Maybe Jesus has risen from the dead, but life is so exhausting; so demanding; so boring; to be honest it seems so meaningless”.

I. Caught between “what ought to be” and “what is”.

✘ What so many people struggle with you see, is the same thing that the Ethiopian in our Reading today was struggling with. He was caught in between the struggle of “what ought to be” and “what is”.

➔ The way things “ought to be” for this man who lived at the beginning of what we call the New Testament Era is that he should have been living a life full of joy. God’s Word that we call the Old Testament was filled with promises of the coming Savior.

- That promised Messiah was due to arrive at any time. Maybe He was already there, but this man just hadn't heard the news yet. It was a time that should have been filled with great anticipation and excitement.
- ✘ But the reality of "what is" was working overtime to put a damper on all of that joy. As a eunuch from Africa he was considered to be a second-class citizen in the kingdom of God by the Jewish leaders in the church.
 - This was that age's struggle over racism, and ethnic privilege. He had multiple "strikes" against him. First his bloodline did not place him in with the people of Israel. Second he was a eunuch, that is a castrated servant, under the rule of the Ethiopian Queen.
 - Every day meant a difficult and often dangerous balance for this man, trying to serve those in the world who had charge of him while also trying to be faithful in His worship of the God whom he clearly confessed, yet whose leaders among the Jews would not acknowledge him as a person acceptable in their eyes.
- ✘ As the Apostle Philip is sent to interact with him, the eunuch's problem is not just that he doesn't fully understand the prophecy he is reading in Scripture, but also that his own life seems to be disconnected from the prophecy itself.
 - How could this Servant that he is reading about in the book of Isaiah actually affect his life in Ethiopia? It's the question that believers have struggled with throughout all the ages, "How is the Spirit of God going to take hold of our hearts and minds and convince us of the truth so that we are able to actually live and believe with courage and confidence and joy when the message seems so distant and irrelevant to our daily existence?"

II. Our tension between "what out to be" and "what is".

- ✘ Yes, that struggle is what takes a hold of so many people right now today, isn't it? Even among many of our own family members and friends here in this church; in this community as we reflect upon the meaning and application of Easter into our lives.
 - We shout out and we believe that Christ is risen. *He is risen indeed. Alleluia!* But we still have trouble communicating with our spouses, our bank accounts hover at or below zero, we still face crying babies, tedious routines, and unfair treatment everywhere where we're the ones on the wrong side of those who are considered privileged.
 - And so, it's easy for us to conclude and ask whether Easter really matters after all; whether Jesus' resurrection and victory actually does anything to positively change "real life."
- ✘ Oh, we still know all that Scripture connects to Jesus with Easter. There is the risen Savior, His incorruptible body, the angels at the tomb, and disciples like Philip here who are full of change – these are the Bible's evidences of victory. But...but is there any "here and now" physical experience or evidence that you and I can point to directly?
 - It's like the local law-enforcement officers in the 1983 British-American musical comedy film, *The Pirates of Penzance*. Those officers pledged to fight and conquer the marauding pirates that caused them all such grief. But their pledge didn't change or remove their fear which caused them to repeatedly delay their departure for battle. In a rousing song we then hear their brave words of "Away, Away! Forward on the foe!" even while the major general more than once calls them to task saying, "Yes, but you don't go!"
- ✘ Many of us folks, have our own "yes, but" when it comes to the Easter message. The brave proclamation of "Christ is risen. *He is risen indeed. Alleluia!*" on Sunday morning far too often meets the reality of Monday morning, and you see that you need something much more than just a reassuring and rousing shout of victory.

→ That victory that we celebrate in Christ's triumph over death and grave just doesn't seem to translate to real life in the world. No, for too many of us, things don't seem very victorious right now, but instead they feel like the exact opposite. Something real...something very real needs to change for it bring meaning to life!

III. Truly Connected to Jesus

✘ But that's exactly what you and I see in the interaction between Philip and the Ethiopian today. The very truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ brings about a very real change in the Ethiopian that day. And the same not only "ought to be" true for us, it actually is!

✘ Philip is taken by the Holy Spirit, to this Ethiopian, a second-class citizen in the eyes of all who see him in the world. And after Philip helps him understand that the promises in Isaiah have a direct connection to the reality of Jesus and His work on the cross for all mankind without any regard for class or bloodline or status, this man sees for real, in the eyes of God Himself that he is a second-class citizen no more!

→ That's what the true Gospel of Jesus does you see. It breaks through the false evaluations of the world, it outshines the troubles and stresses and pains that we face each day to reveal that their actual importance in the big picture of eternity is nowhere near the way that the devil and those around us and even our own fears and feelings have made them out to be.

✘ Through Philip, God reveals the truth about Jesus in Isaiah's words and He breaks into that Ethiopian's life and completely sweeps away sin and physical mutilation and racism and every other barrier, to leave him in the peace and assurance of His place with God.

→ Then in the Eunuch's Baptism he is truly connected to Jesus as no other connection can do. Paul assures us in Romans, chapter six that in baptism Christ's death on the cross means the actual death of sin's guilt and consequence for us, and His resurrection and victory over death on Easter means that death no longer holds any power over us as well.

→ If that's not real change, I don't know what is. Christ's death and resurrection may not mean that our troubles all go away, but it means that His power over sin and death and devil is now the power that we have to apply in all of those troubles so that even in the middle of life's realities, we know that we are still Christ's redeemed children and He is forever our Savior.

✘ You see, the Eunuch's situation may not have changed, but he is changed by the blessing and presence of God. Yes, the tension in his life may still be present, but now the tension within his heart is resolved by the powerful promises of God's Word and the personal working of grace in God's Holy Sacrament.

→ That change is yours in your Baptism too. It is Easter in real life for you – your own personal resurrection! Today we proclaim, "Christ is risen. *He is risen indeed. Alleluia!*" And tomorrow, even though it is a Monday, and then again the day after, and the day after that, God's resurrection commitment to you is still there. It remains the same forever!

Conclusion

✘ Yes, like the Ethiopian you are truly connected to Jesus now. Notice how that man's joy was not deterred after Philip left him. That's because His joy was not about Philip but about His new-life connection to Jesus.

→ Verse 39 says that he "went on his way rejoicing". The stresses and commitments and realities of his life were still there ahead of him, on his way. But now he faced them "rejoicing" in His resurrected Lord Jesus!

→ This is why you also can find joy in your heart; not because we sing the songs of victory; not because it is that time of year again; not because you are supposed to be joyful; but because you are different now. You too have been touched by the risen Lord so that, in your connection with Him, you have the guarantee that your life has purpose, in service and worship and in the joy and the reality of Jesus.

✠ Christ is risen. *He is risen indeed. Alleluia! Amen.*