

Fifth Sunday of Easter (B)

May 2, 2021

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown MD

Readings: Acts 8:26-40; Psalm 22:25-31; John 15: 1-8

Grace and peace to you from God – Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Amen

Jesus said, “I am the vine, you are the branches.” The disciples would have gotten the picture. Not vineyards as we know, with vines growing on trellises in fields, but vineyards planted on terraces on the side of hills. The vines grew on the ground and when they began to produce fruit, stones would be put underneath them to keep the fruit off the soil. “I am the vine; you are the branches.” It seems like such a lovely, peaceful picture, even if it isn’t an Italian Tuscany scene. And how comforting to think of being joined with Christ. But we must not be fooled --- there’s resurrection power coursing through that vine.

Maybe it’s a bit like this. At Amherst College, scientists planted squash seeds. When one had produced a squash about the size of a person’s head, they put a tight fitting band around it, which was attached to instruments that could tell how much pressure the squash exerted as it tried to grow against the restraints of the band. The anticipated it would exert about 500 pounds of pressure. In a month’s time, it did just that. But the squash wasn’t finished growing. In two months it was producing 1500 pounds of pressure. At 2,000 pounds the band was reinforced. The scientists stopped the experiment when the squash exerted 5,000 pounds of pressure and broke the band. Still the squash grew. It had sent out over 80,000 feet of roots, stretching and searching for the strength to grow against the force holding it back. ¹

That’s like the power of Easter. Risen with Christ and set loose in the Holy Spirit, the power of Easter is unable to be restrained or confined. Easter is not done yet! The power of the resurrection and the life it secures will not be stopped. Easter is not over.² It’s still happening, growing in human lives that abide in Christ the vine. It’s a love that will not be stopped, that will not give up.

The disciple Philip got caught up in that resurrection power. Jerusalem had become dangerous -- Stephen had been stoned for proclaiming Jesus as Lord and Saul was on a crusade against Jesus’ followers. Philip took the gospel to Samaria in the north and had great success. Then an angel told him to take a hike --- south into Gaza, to the wilderness road. He may have been scratching his head wondering why the Lord would send him away from a hotbed of converts to a desert. Still, Philip went. And it only got stranger.

There was an Ethiopian eunuch being driven in a chariot. He was a man of prominence, wealth and education. He had come to Jerusalem to worship. Though we are not told, it was likely he got was rejection. He was a foreigner, familiar with the faith of Israel but likely turned away at the temple, for it’s written in Deuteronomy 23 that no one of his physical condition “shall be admitted into the assembly of the LORD.” (Deut. 23: 1) He

had come hundreds of miles, searching for the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, hoping to join in worship --- but likely turned away as unacceptable. Despite his prestigious, powerful position, he was separated from life as most people knew it --- no marriage, no children and now no worshipping in the temple. Discouraged and excluded, he was heading home, a “dry tree” on a desert road. Maybe he was seeing a bit of himself in the Isaiah passage he was reading, “Like a sheep led to slaughter.... in humiliation, justice was denied him.” But Easter was not over.

The Holy Spirit sends Philip to catch up with the Ethiopian’s chariot. Philip overhears the foreigner reading from Isaiah and asks, “Do you understand what you are reading?” The Ethiopian had to be surprised to have *this* Hebrew show genuine interest in him. “How can I, unless someone guides me?” Philip climbs over any racial, ethnic, sexual, economic boundaries, into the chariot to sit beside this man who wants to know more. “Is the prophet talking about himself or someone else?” That’s a question current biblical scholars are still arguing, but Rev. William Willimon imagines Philip’s reply went something like this:

“Oh! That’s about Jesus! Jesus was cut off. Jesus was rejected. Jesus was treated unjustly. But God is using Jesus to create a new kind of family, where everyone is accepted, and the doors are always open --- a family that breaks down barriers. There’s even a new name for this family: ‘Christians’”³

If you ever felt cut off, standing on the outside, like a stranger, unwelcomed or rebuffed, then you can imagine the Ethiopian eunuch’s excitement, “Wow! Can someone like me join the family? Can I be adopted into it? Can Christian be my name? Will God take me as God’s child? **Can I be baptized?**”

Miraculously there is water along that desert road. Philip baptizes the man, makes him part of the family, gives him a new name. The Ethiopian man returned to his region rejoicing, it says. He was now grafted on the vine of Christ and he would bring Easter to what was then called “the ends of the earth,” helping to found the Coptic Church, one of the ancient branches of Christianity that continues today. Easter wasn’t over. And it’s still not done.

It was the seventh game of the 1962 World Series. The San Francisco Giant had a man on second base. The Yankees decided to change pitchers, so the second baseman, Bobby Richardson, saw an opportunity. While the new pitcher was warming up, he walked over to the man on second and asked him if he knew Jesus as his Savior.

When the runner reached the dugout later, he asked teammate Felipe Alou, who also was a Christian, what was going on. “Even in the seventh game of the World Series,”

he said to Felipe, “you people are still talking about Jesus.”⁴ Richardson felt the Spirit nudge him to that second base chariot and he went. Easter isn’t over.

It was November 1996 and Kim Phuc, a young Vietnamese woman is laying a wreath at the Vietnam War memorial in Washington D.C. The world remembers her in a Pulitzer Prize winning photograph, as the nine-year-old, burned child running naked toward the camera, mouth open screaming in a Pulitzer prize-winning photograph. She spoke of the pain from the napalm bombing and Kim went on to say: “Sometimes I could not breathe. But God saved my life and gave me faith and hope. Even if I could talk face to face with the pilot who dropped the bombs, I would tell him, ‘We cannot change history, but we should try to do good things for the present and for the future to promote peace.’” Easter is not over.

In the DC crowd that day was John Plummer, Vietnam war veteran and now Methodist minister, who believed he had a part in coordinating that fateful air strike. He said he still had nightmares of screaming children. He had heard this young woman was going to be at the DC Memorial and traveled to be there. He listened to her speak and sent a note to her via a policeman. They met near the Memorial. The 49-year-old man and the 33-year-old woman. They embraced. He was sobbing. “All I can say is, ‘I’m so sorry. I’m just so sorry.’” “I forgive,” she told him, “I forgive.” Easter is not done. It runs through the vine and, oh, what life-giving fruit of love it can bear when the branches let Christ be their fuel and guide.

Jesus is the vine and we are the branches. The power of Christ begins flowing in our veins at baptism and we are charged with bringing Easter life to desert wanderers, to those cut off by social stigmas, guilt, hate or perhaps by a sense of worthlessness or senselessness. You may be surprised to find who is sitting in the chariot to which God sends you. He or she may be a co-worker or the parent of your child’s classmate or someone who sits in this sanctuary or a stranger who stands in line with you at Martin’s. It’s not a theological treatise they seek, but men and women who use their lives to point to a Lord who has created a new family, where everyone is accepted and doors are always open and barriers are broken down.

The lilies, jelly beans and chocolate eggs may be long gone, but Easter is not over. Like Philip, we are not to rest too comfortably or too long in the success of Samaria or in sixty-five plus years of being a church in Hagerstown. On the wilderness road or Haven Road, we must decide if we will sit down, passively waiting, getting more and more thirsty or do we chase chariots and find the water of life miraculously appear just when you need it? Branches that depend on the vine, children of God who give God access to their lives, will have the resources and strength they need for mission, they will always be chasing

after chariots of the hurt and lost, loving with a devoted parent's passion. Because Easter is not over. Easter is not done. And neither are we! And neither is Haven! Amen? Amen!

Linda M Alessandri

ENDNOTES

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1. The Rev. Dr. Janice Hearn, "Easter Isn't Over" Sermonmall.com, 2006 May Issue.
 2. Sermon refrain used by Rev. Dr. Janice Hearn, *ibid*.
 3. William Willimon as explained and quoted in Emphasis May/June 2006, p 20.
 4. Paul W. Kummer, "Hear, Hear", From This Day Forward, CSS Publishing, Lim, Ohio, 1999.