Sermon on Easter 5 Year B 2021
(Acts 8:26-40)

\*\***Nota Bene: This is not an exegetical sermon but one in service of the theme we’ve been following this Easter Season, one that seeks to expand our definition of Resurrection into something as large as the Jewish people expected it to be at the time of Jesus’ death. Our theme is drawn from a talk given by Rowan Williams; at one point in his presentation a Bishop asks him “what does Jesus mean to you personally?” and part of what he says is “…Jesus holds the human race together even as it is continually trying to tear itself apart…” Our series this Easter is illustrative of how the Resurrection does just this!\*\***

My first Anglican assignment: two small parishes on Saskatoon’s west side, one that didn’t want me there (I’d been assigned by the Bishop), the other a small parish of 15-17 people who knew they were being called to lay their fifty-year history to rest but who were not ready to go gently into that night.

At times I’d trudge home at the end of the day and think, “what have I done?” I had been a staff member of a large church, travelled all over the world doing ministry; led house-groups that had saw up to forty people crowd into our town home and now here we were, 15 years into our marriage, three elementary aged children and two tiny churches in which the most exciting thing that happened each week was deciding which BCP canticle we would chant.

The story of how I ended up an Anglican is for another day.

Until, in my idealism, I thought, no way Jose, I’m starting a Bible study! The parish had never in its 50-year history had one! Five ladies showed up, all as unique as could be:

there was Win: around 60, recently bereaved, she had joined the church thinking it was a social club, a place to make some friends; she had no Christian background at all. She liked to talk about her favorite drinks and wasn’t shy about showing her feelings.

At the other end of the bookshelf was Molly: she had served in an international peace organization that had started after WWII. She and her husband, now fading with Alzheimer’s, had taught in refugee camps throughout Europe, helping refugees settle into a new life amidst the destruction of Europe.

She was British, from a Methodist background, and as prim and proper as I’d ever seen. As a Methodist she was a teetotaler and didn’t smile in amusement if someone talked about their favourite drinks!

And so began our adventure, the adventure of exploring texts from the most influential book in all the world and yet a book that seems to many people by its sheer antiquity and by it’s name “*Holy* Bible” to have all kinds of hocus pocus attached to it, all kinds of barriers around it.

And these barriers are real; clergy and theologians have tried for centuries to control its meaning; people are told that they don’t have the interpretive skills to understand it.

And if they try to read it they realize indeed that it is in fact, at least in places, daunting: a book that is really a library of different types of writing that span a thousand years; a book that reflects values often at odds with what we take for granted in the modern world – ever try reading Leviticus?

And then there were the social barriers. All of these women had experienced patriarchal barriers to one degree or another. And here I was a male clergy, a male “expert” in Bible and so at the beginning they always wanted to defer to my expertise which I needed to resist.

The breakthrough came when I suggested that we read the Bible together as if we were in a book club. We needed the freedom to react, to disagree with the author and to simply “read the Bible” as we would any other piece of literature.

I shocked them by talking about my emotions in connection with the Bible’s stories and gradually the barriers fell away as we experienced the Holy Spirit’s freedom to engage, to change our minds, to get excited about God’s commitment to the world, even to us!

I knew we were in on to something when, to my astonishment, Molly said, “I have trouble with what St. Paul says here…” I turned to her and said, “Molly, thank-you, this is a holy moment!”

I thought of these women when I read the story of Philip’s encounter with the Ethiopian Eunuch. Like these women, he was seeking God and experiencing all kinds of barriers in his quest.

His riches had gained him the ability to seek truth, he had found the account of Israel’s God convincing and had even bought a scroll of the prophets, probably as expensive as owning a Van Gogh in our world.

Perhaps he’d not known this when he began his pilgrimage but his ethnic identity and his sexual identity as a Eunuch, cut him off (pun intended) from a full inclusion in the Jewish community.

Perhaps his realization that even his wealth and power as Queen Candace’s treasurer couldn’t gain him access to the festival informed his choice of the text he was reading, Isaiah 53, part of the famous Servant songs, this chapter in particular the song of the suffering Servant.

Of the lines he and Philip read together I wonder if it was the line “in his humiliation justice was denied him” was in line with his emotional pain.

He can pray to Israel’s God, but because of barriers never feel like he has full access to the God that has captivated him.

How about you this morning; as we continue to celebrate the festival of the Resurrection; do you know you’re included? Do you feel like you’re always late to the party or that even though you’ve been coming to church, maybe most of your life, you don’t feel the freedom with God that you hoped could be yours?

Don’t worry I’m not setting you up for a one-time emotional catharsis or experience, although, as I’ve said a few times, experiences like that aren’t a bad thing.

But here is the thing, all of us, me included, experience humiliation, are denied justice, experience disappointment and barriers that have to do with human sinfulness.

Some of us much more than others. I’m not here to explore all the “isms” that make things difficult for many people even in what we proudly call an inclusive society.

Sadly, all of them alive and well in the church lest we imagine that this was only a fault of the Jewish faith.

All these things are barriers and here’s the thing they are *human* barriers! They are real barriers by virtue of our humanity; then we take these barriers, and we project them onto God.

But this story reveals the power of the Resurrection as that which draws us out of our isolation, into community and into the very nature of God’s life, a life that can appear distant from the other side of the human barriers we experience.

It is the very nature of the Resurrection to bring us together and hold us together while it is the nature of our humanity outside of God’s help to try and tear each other apart.

And so, to hearken not only to this story and to that Bible study at St. Luke’s, but to right now, to whatever dusty road we are on:It is indeed the Resurrected Christ whose living presence breaks the barriers down.

We see this, first of all, with reference to our Scriptures and the freedom God gives us to inquire. Like Rowan Williams advocates when he addresses the issue of the Bible in his brilliant small book *Being Christian*, we don’t need to protect the Bible.

We are not accepted by God because we believe the right things about this book; we are loved, forgiven and welcomed by God through the love and power of Christ!

We are therefore free to ask questions, critical ones even, as Martin Luther, the great reformer so clearly so when he criticized the NT letter of James as a “straw gospel.”

Though I think his judgement was wrong in that instance, and in many others, it turns out he was fundamentally right to ask questions and make interpretive judgments; that’s exactly the kind of freedom the presence of the Resurrected One gives us!

What holds us together is not that agree on everything the Bible says but that we are a community that engages with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Related to this is the way the Resurrected Christ calls us to engage this Bible in the context of a community, in the context of a community of guides.

The Eunuch’s question, how can I understand unless someone guide me? is exactly the right question, not because we need a priest or expert to tell us what is the case or because the Bible is a sometimes difficult book, but because that’s just how humans learn, we learn through being guided, not through authoritarian guides but through guides who themselves ask questions.

Notice Philip’s open-ended, “do you understand what you are reading?” I love that; it invites conversation, discovery in the context of respect.

Christ leads us to ask questions and it helps us guide each other in respect because, truth be told, we all need slightly different things at different times.

And all of this serves the truth that there are no barriers between us and God; they’ve all been torn down: “what is to prevent me from being baptized?” Nothing! You have died with Christ and been raised with him; this is Baptism, this is the truth of this wonderful story and it is your truth should you acknowledge it!

We too, whatever remains for each of us, regardless of the many losses and disappointments that we will each experience—and the Scriptures are so honest about all of this—can know what the Eunuch knew: no barriers between us and God, and the great joy that comes from experiencing a community in which that is being lived!

Let’s explore this and serve this kind of community into being!