

Sermon Draft
Text: Acts 8:26–40
Sermon: “Faithful Witness”

The season of Easter dwells on the risen Christ as the life giver. These Sundays proclaim that, having returned to life from death, Christ has “all things under his feet” (*Gradual*). Where the cross was a place of death, it now serves as a distinct promise for life in Jesus. ***“Let everything that has breath [life!] praise the LORD!”*** (*Psalms*). ***“All your works shall give thanks to you, O LORD, and all your saints shall bless you!”*** (*Introit*). This is life not by our strength or from some spirit of the age, but, as we pray in the *Collect*, ***“that among the many changes of this world our hearts may be fixed where true joys are found.”*** The *Epistle* directs us to ***“test the spirits,”*** for the dead ways of man are not love, but only Christ has love that cannot pass away; it is life (1 John 4:1, 9–10). The analogy of “vine and branches” in the *Gospel* shows the purifying work of Jesus. His Word is what bears fruit for any disciple. For fruitful witness, the baptized rest all hope and confidence on him who gives life to sinners.

The First Reading heard during Sunday service typically comes from the Old Testament. If you've noticed, that hasn't been the case during this Easter season. A change occurs in the appointed Readings to give a glimpse of the Early Church's history in the Book of Acts. Since we are celebrating the resurrection of Christ, it only makes sense to celebrate also the new life risen up in his Church. This is different from a building, a cultural community, or anything else based on the works of man. Rather, it is the Spirit of the Gospel residing in the baptized that is traveling into the world.

Let's go back to our confirmation for a moment and revisit this question from the Small Catechism, *Question 158 in the older edition but question 188 in the newest edition*: "What has the Holy Spirit done to bring you to faith?" Those in Christ answer, "The Holy Spirit 'has called me by the Gospel,' that is, He has invited and drawn me by the Gospel to partake of the spiritual blessings that are mine in Christ."

In our text, a man of Ethiopia never sees the Spirit, but he does see the face of Philip. More important, he listens to his voice that shares the Good News of Jesus. We cannot separate the *work of* the Redeemer from how he now *works in* the redeemed. As Philip was a branch connected to Christ the vine, so today, we are in him by the Word and Sacraments, and from him comes fruit to life. Fruitful witness is alive by the faithfulness of Jesus.

Salvation won by Jesus is strength resting on the baptized. Early in the history of the Church, persecution broke out in Jerusalem. Christians were scattered all over. This would be a hindrance to the cohesiveness of any group, but not to the Spirit of God living among the baptized. Philip, one of the seven deacons selected by the apostles, ended up preaching in the city of Samaria (8:4–13). Then, he received a special revelation to leave this place of success and go to a desolate region, where he found one soul, a man in a chariot. It took a divine act by an angel to send Philip, but God would break down his fear even to speak.

We read, ***“The Spirit said to Philip, ‘Go over and join this chariot’”*** (v 29). The man was a foreigner from Ethiopia. He had a prestigious job. He’d even come to fear the true God. Nothing stood in the way of Philip speaking Christ to him, and Jesus gave Philip strength to do it.

Every one of us has a comfort zone. Getting outside of it easily exposes our weakness, but the Spirit of God comforts the baptized. So we look to the Savior by the promise of the words of those who had the Spirit. In our Epistle, John says, ***“In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins”*** (1 John 4:10).

Jesus breaks down our sinful fears and continued failures of self-centeredness. His forgiveness in Absolution and given at the Lord’s Supper is the voice of good news that gives strength to the baptized. The One who gives life to the world speaks with boldness by the cross for all. We may not meet foreigners, but the Lord sees the desolate places of our family, friends, and co-workers who never hear the name of Christ.

The Word is life, able to save all such sinners. That's why the baptized teach the Gospel. Philip had confidence to ask the Ethiopian, ***“Do you understand what you are reading?” He was not so much looking for an answer but extending an invitation. The man was far from prideful or careless, responding, “How can I, unless someone guides me?”*** (vs 30–31).

In view of the text of Isaiah, Philip had to explain the confusion over Scripture. It was not about feelings, personal experiences, or opinion, because God's Word had life in itself to speak. The man had questions, and Philip gave answers centered on the promise of salvation for sinners. Since Jesus had said in his Great Commission, ***“Go baptize and teach”*** (see Matthew 28:19–20), the Spirit would teach through the baptized. We read, ***“Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus”*** (v 35).

As society moves away from education at the center, it also affects the link between Baptism and the life-giving Word.

John warns, ***“Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world”*** (1 John 4:1). Could lack of education in what we believe as Lutherans say anything about how we speak the Gospel? Are we quiet because we really don’t have anything to speak to sinners?

We learn as the baptized because Christ loves us. What we learn goes out in love to others with God’s Word as life for them. Openly teaching why we believe what we believe is the responsibility of parents, pastors, and the whole Church, the Body of Christ.

Yet Jesus gives this promise: ***“Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me”*** (John 15:3–4). Like the Reading from Isaiah, God’s Word serves the purpose for all to meet the Savior, Jesus.

The promise of Christ is fruitful to bring others to Baptism. Who knows how long the conversation went on in the chariot?

However, what we do find out is that ***“as they were going along the road they came to some water. The eunuch said, ‘See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?’”*** (v 36). His words were not about how he decided to follow Jesus, willed his salvation, or how much water to use. His interest was in receiving salvation by water, for it carried the promise of Jesus’ Word.

By his teaching, Philip clearly directed the man to Baptism. It was the very source of life grounded in Jesus’ death and resurrection. This adult Ethiopian in all his glory humbled himself to become a child by repentance and faith in Jesus. After Baptism, Philip no longer was present, but the man was not alone. He had the blessing to be joined to the Body of Christ, the Church. He went ***“on his way rejoicing”*** (v 39) with life by God’s Word, which gave Jesus. What was unknown in his country would now become known.

What Jesus did for all by his suffering and death on the cross bears fruit. The victory belonged to Philip. He passed it on to the Ethiopian eunuch.

Now we have the same joy found to be at work in our Baptism. This connectedness comes from the Word and Sacrament, which still give Jesus. He teaches the truth for all to learn. He forgives the sinner and brings him to repent and believe in him. He promises that there are spiritual blessings in his name.

The chief blessing is Baptism, for it has spoken the living voice of Jesus into our lives. This did not happen in some mysterious way, as if the Spirit of the Lord fell out of the sky. It came from those who brought us to Jesus by teaching his Word. The baptized bring others to Baptism. Works do not save, but our works serve others with the Gospel in our lives.

Any good fruit always rests in what comes from Jesus. He brought life out of his death, blessing out of his burden, and hope out of his cross. Fruitful witness is alive by the faithfulness of Jesus.

Christ shines during this Easter season with his sacrifice as triumph. Righteousness won by the Savior is now life for any branch baptized into his name. The fruit is simply a benefit for others to share in the same blessing we all have in Christ.

Amen