

FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER [B]

Acts 8:26-40; St. John 15:1-8

April 28, 2024

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Wichita, Kansas

In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.
Alleluia! Christ is risen! ***He is risen indeed! Alleluia!***

At the heart of our Easter faith is the truth that Christ Jesus ***is risen***, and he is alive among us, acting in our lives and in the world. The image of the vine and the branches from today's Gospel goes even further — we live and act fruitfully only as we abide in Jesus. So the Gospel of John proclaims again and again: “*In him was life*” (Jn 1:4). “*As the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself*” (5:26). “*As the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will*” (5:21). God the Father offers you, and indeed ***gives you*** life — life in his risen Son.

And the risen Jesus calls you to ***abide*** in him — to ***remain*** with him — to ***dwell*** with him — to make your home in him, such that he is the pattern and guide of your life — the vitality of your life. Indeed, he ***is*** your life, now and forever. St. Paul sums it up like this: “*I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer ***I*** who live, but ***Christ who lives in me***; and the life I now live in the flesh, I live by ***faith*** in the Son of God*” (Gal 2:20). Faith receives this gift of life. We ***live*** by faith — faith in the Son of God, who was crucified and died, but now is risen and lives.

Now we are not left on our own to construct meaning for our own isolated existence. In Holy Baptism we have been ***joined*** to the risen Christ, so that our lives may be meaningful and fruitful. And our Lord Jesus himself calls us to abide in this relationship. In today's Gospel, on the night of his betrayal, the night before his crucifixion, Jesus speaks and gives us this image of the vine and the branches.

Jesus is the true vine, we are the branches, and the Father is the vine-grower. Actually, the Greek word (γεωργός “geōrgós”) simply means “farmer” or “gardener.” The Father is the “gardener.” All things begin with the Creator, the ***original Gardener*** — the Owner of the field or vineyard in all the agricultural parables — the Sower of the Word who became flesh and made us members of his resurrected Body — branches of the living Vine.

As with all the agricultural parables, so in this image of the vine and the branches, the goal, the purpose, is to ***bear fruit***. More specifically, when we abide in the vine, when we remain in Christ Jesus, we bear the fruits of the Spirit: “*love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control*” (Gal 5:22-23). To abide in the vine is to abide in Christ. And to abide in the vine is to abide in Christ's Body, the Church.

The Church — the community of faith — helps those still on the outside to understand the source of meaning for our lives — most notably, the scriptures. This is what happens in today’s First Reading when an angel sends the deacon, Philip, to the road from Jerusalem to Gaza, and then to a chariot in which a man is sitting, reading the prophet Isaiah.

The man is an Ethiopian, a court official of the Queen. He is a eunuch, a man who has been castrated. It was customary for eunuchs to hold positions of importance in oriental courts. It would seem this court official is wealthy and educated. He can apparently afford a chariot, and he can also afford a large and expensive scroll of the Book of Isaiah, which he is reading aloud.

One important detail about the man is his relationship to Judaism. Philip encounters the eunuch as he is traveling home *from a pilgrimage to Jerusalem*. Worship there for this man must have been a rather bittersweet experience, because as a eunuch, he could go no further into the temple than the outermost Court of the Gentiles. The book of Deuteronomy teaches clearly that no eunuch is eligible to “*enter the assembly of the LORD*” (23:1). He could not participate fully.

Nevertheless, this man wants to make sense of, and to comprehend, the scriptures. Philip asks him if he understands what he is reading, and he answers, “*How can I, unless someone guides me?*” (v.31).

The eunuch is reading from the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah — the fourth Servant Song — and he doesn’t understand it. And so he asks Philip: “About whom does the prophet say this?” Philip responds and proclaims the Gospel to the Ethiopian, beginning with this song of the suffering servant — the song of the suffering Messiah, Jesus. Philip’s ability to interpret Isaiah’s servant song in order to proclaim Christ Jesus to the Ethiopian, is a continuation of the risen Jesus’ interpretation of the scriptures to the disciples as applying to himself.

For the Ethiopian and for all others in Acts, the understanding of the scriptures becomes complete *only* when they have both *heard the prophecy* and then received it as interpreted to *apply to the crucified Jesus*.

This interpretation — that the Law, the Psalms and the Prophets are all pointing to the crucified and risen Jesus — this is the *heart* of all apostolic preaching under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

And this apostolic preaching of the Gospel begins with the scriptures and leads to Baptism — it leads to incorporation into the risen Christ himself and into his Body, the Church.

This Ethiopian eunuch had been excluded from full participation in the *old* covenant. But now, having the scriptures opened up to him, he is encountered by the risen Jesus, and he requests that he too might be baptized. They come upon some water, and the eunuch asks: “*Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?*” (v.36). And the answer is, *nothing!* Nothing now prevents

his full inclusion and participation in the community of God's people. And so Philip baptizes him on the roadside. Philip grafts him into the true Vine, Jesus. This Ethiopian eunuch is one of the many people from among every nation whom God is calling to be his own, and joining them to the Vine, his Son. The story concludes with the man going on his way **rejoicing!**

Brothers and sisters, we also have cause for rejoicing. Joined to Christ Jesus and to his Church, you do **not** operate now out of your **own** power or goodness. You are **not** left to your **own** devices. No. You are connected to the true source of power, the true source of goodness, and the true source of life — Jesus, the Vine.

Today's Second Reading from First John sets forth the basic touchstones of this abiding life — believing that Jesus, the Son of God, came into the world to reveal God's love, and keeping his commandment to love our brothers and sisters. Just so we abide in God and he abides in us.

"*God is love,*" says St. John. And love is **not** an emotional state. True love is defined by the character of the risen Son of God, who lives and acts in our midst, who bore your sins that you might live through him, doing the will of the Father who sent him, empowered by the Holy Spirit who has been given to you, so that you might bear fruit. The story of God's love shown in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ becomes **the truth** by which we **live** and **understand**, and **die and rise again**, every day of our baptized life.

The work of the vinegrower, to keep us fruitful in the true vine, is baptismal work. But you can only see this, or **hear** this, in the original Greek. St. John writes that the vinegrower "prunes" — in Greek, the word is "καθαίρει" (katharei) every fruitful branch. And you are already made clean — in Greek it is "καθαίροι" (katharoi) by the word of Jesus. Which is to say: You were **made clean** by the Word in Holy Baptism, but you still need **daily pruning**, you still need **daily cleansing**.

Just so, it takes a **lifetime** of **daily returning to Baptism** to abide in Christ, to tap into the source of living, cleansing water, to remain joined to the living, holy Vine — Jesus.

Amen. May it be so.

Alleluia! Christ is Risen! **He is risen indeed! Alleluia!**

In the name of the Father, and of the ✝ Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

