

Easter 5 Year B 2021

May 2, 2021

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

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

As we journey through this Easter season, we have asked the question a few times: “What does resurrected life look like?” And we’ll continue along that theme today, but we’re going to rephrase the question a little bit. Instead of asking, “What does resurrected life look like?” we’re going to ask, “How wide is the resurrection?”

I think this is an important question in our world today. When we ask how wide the resurrection, we are asking who is included and who is excluded, and this is a question churches are regularly asking themselves. As the body of Christ, who are we called to include? Now, I’m sure you can all come up with a story of someone you know being excluded from the church. My mom once attended a church and as she was getting up to receive communion, two ushers blocked her from walking up the aisle. In that church, it very quickly became clear who was in and who was out.

So today, as we hear the story of the Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts, we find ourselves called to ask these kinds of questions. Question like, “How far is the church willing to stretch itself for the sake of finding itself?” And questions like, “Is Christ’s life, death and resurrection *really* for all people?” “How wide *is* the resurrection?” And these are good questions. But in truth, I don’t think these are the types of questions many churches are asking these days.

We’ve talked before about how you can pull a verse out of the Bible in order to support any argument. No matter what you’re trying to prove, there’s most likely a Bible verse you can pull out of context in order to make it sound like your view is justified and condoned by the Christian faith. We call this proof-texting. But there’s another concern when reading the Bible, and that comes in the kinds of questions we ask. Perhaps we’re not proof-texting, looking for Bible verses to support our arguments, but the way we phrase our questions as we read the Bible can lead us to very different, and very troubling answers.

And so, I don’t think many churches today are asking themselves the right question. Instead of asking themselves, “How wide is the resurrection?” or “Who are we called to include?” I think many churches approach the Bible with the question, “Who can I exclude?” And for that question, you can get all kinds of answers. Take the Ethiopian Eunuch, for example. Philip could have come up with all kinds of excuses from scripture as reasons to exclude him, as reasons to prevent him from being baptized. But, the problem is that asking the question, “Who can I exclude?” is the wrong question. We get a very different answer when we ask the question, “*Who must I include?*” This is the question that we as a church are called to ask ourselves. Who must I include? How wide *is* the resurrection?

And we aren’t the first ones to ask ourselves that question. Philip had to ask that question when he met the Eunuch. And in truth, Philip’s entire life and ministry seems to have centered on this question. How wide is the resurrection? Who must Philip include?

Earlier in the book of Acts, back in the 6th chapter, a crisis arises. While the widows of Jewish descent were being fed and cared for by the early church, the Greek-speaking widows—the gentiles—were not being fed. Now, the gentiles had already been allowed to join the Christian church after Peter proclaimed the gospel to three thousand of them on Pentecost. And that was one thing. But feeding the gentile widows was another issue altogether. It would take far more time, people, and resources to care for all these extra women. I’m sure some of the apostles asked themselves, “How wide is the resurrection? Is it wide enough to take from our meager treasury and time to feed these latecomers to the body of Christ?”

Their solution was that a gentile man named Stephen, along with six other gentile men—including Philip—would take care of distributing food to the gentile widows. They were called to “wait on tables” as the disciples described it. The gentile Christians would take care of the gentile widows.

But Stephen and Philip didn’t stop there. They didn’t “just wait on tables” as the disciples had asked them to do. Before long, these gentiles were preaching. They were sharing the word of God with one another and with their communities. And not long after this, Stephen became the first Christian martyr—dying while proclaiming the good news of Christ.

Again, I can imagine the early church seeing these gentiles *preaching*, and these gentiles *laying down their lives* for the sake of the gospel, and asking themselves, “How wide is the resurrection?” Wide enough, it seems, to let unclean lips proclaim perfect peace. Wide enough for the gentile Stephen to share in Jesus’ resurrection.

And Philip was among these gentiles. Philip’s life was changed because the early church was willing to welcome him into their body, and allow him to spread the gospel.

And Philip’s journey doesn’t end there. Philip later preaches in the region of Samaria, and a sorcerer by the name of Simon is so stirred by Philip’s words that he asks to be baptized. But, I can again imagine the church looking at this convert of Philip’s and asking, “How wide is the resurrection?” Is it wide enough that a sorcerer—a man the book of Exodus says ought to be put to death—might partake in it? Did we make a mistake? Was letting gentiles into our church the beginning of a slippery slope?

And finally, in the 22nd chapter of Acts, we find Philip living with his family, which included four daughters—daughters that are described as “prophetic.” Now, don’t forget how male-dominated the ancient world was. Again, perhaps you can imagine someone asking, “How wide is the resurrection?” Is it wide enough to include women who prophesy? Was the prophet Joel *really* right when he said “your sons and your daughters shall prophesy”?

How wide is the resurrection? From the beginning to the end, Philip’s ministry involved expanding the types of people who were brought close to God through Christ. He expanded the church’s understanding of who Christ died to save. He widened the meaning of the statement that the resurrection changes everything.

And today’s reading with Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch is no different. Philip is in the wilderness. He approaches a man in a government issued vehicle, a man of a different social class, and a different race and ethnicity than his own. And Philip rides along the wilderness road with this man, reading scripture and proclaiming Christ as the risen Lord. Then they stop, and the Eunuch asks, “What is to prevent me from being baptized?” And once again, that persistent question could have popped up in Philip’s mind, “How wide is the resurrection?” Wide enough to include a Eunuch, who Leviticus says may not come near God, and Deuteronomy says cannot be amongst God’s people? Philip certainly could have justified barring this man from baptism because he was a Eunuch.

For that matter, Philip could have said, “I can’t baptize you because there were no Ethiopians present when the three thousand were converted on Pentecost.” Or he could have made up excuses based on this man’s position as Treasurer. But that’s not what happened. Philip did baptize the Eunuch. And if the tradition of the Ethiopian church is to be believed, that Eunuch in turn brought the faith to his country, and that Christian faith continues on in the lives of over 70 million Ethiopians today.

So, how wide is the resurrection?

It is so wide that waiting on tables becomes proclamation.

It is so wide that sorcerers are baptized and daughters prophesy.

It is so wide that race, ethnicity, treasures, and Eunuch-hood are not barriers to the Kingdom.

How wide is the resurrection?

So wide that Christ is raised and dies no more.

So wide that he broke death’s fearful hold and turned our despair into blazing joy.

So wide that he gathered all people to himself at the foot of the cross.

So wide that by water and the word we share in his saving death.

So wide that we share his Easter life and live as members of Christ’s body.

So wide that the Spirit shakes the church of God and turns it upside down.

So wide that a new creation comes to life and grows.

So wide that the universe, restored and whole, will sing Hallelujah.

Thanks be to God. Alleluia. Amen.