

Faith Mennonite Church  
May 6, 2012 - 5th Sunday of Easter  
Signs of Resurrection  
Joetta Schlabach

A wilderness surprise  
*Acts 8:26-40; John 15:1-8*

[The eunuch:] The road was fairly smooth that day as my chariot sped along, leaving Jerusalem behind and heading through Gaza on my way back to Egypt. I loved those trips to Jerusalem, to see the temple, to enter the Gentile court and to worship.

I had been a slave of the Queen of Egypt since late childhood. My parents were slaves so I had no choice in the matter. Somehow my parents had come to believe in the One God of Israel, but never in their entire lives did they get to make the trip to Jerusalem. They were ordinary slaves, working in construction and doing laundry. They were never sure how I came to the attention of the palace officials or why I was chosen to be made a eunuch. They, of course, grieved--both for the damage done to my body but also for the loss of relationship because I was soon groomed for a high-rank position in the queen's court. To become a loyal, trusted servant required severing the ties with my familial household...I would not marry or become a parent or give them grandchildren. I would not develop outside relationships that might threaten the palace.

How strange, that for all this pain in my early life, my position of trust with the queen would mean that I would ride in a chariot--a symbol of power--and read from a scroll, and travel to another country to worship in the way my parents had taught me. Yet the pain was always near at hand--just below the surface. Among the people of Israel, who worshipped the One God I had come to know and love, I would always be an anomaly. The book of Deuteronomy (ch. 23) commanded the people of Israel to hold Egyptians in respectful regard, because their ancestors had sojourned in our country. Yet the same chapter of that book forbade eunuchs from entering the assembly--the place of worship--because we were considered damaged, blemished. It seemed that I could never be fully accepted for who I was.

But on this particular trip, an amazing thing happened. I had purchased a scroll of the writings of the prophet Isaiah while I was in Jerusalem, and was reading it out loud as I rode through the desert of Gaza. I came upon a passage that I couldn't help but read over and over.

“Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,  
and like a lamb silent before its shearer,  
so he does not open his mouth.  
In his humiliation justice was denied him.  
Who can describe his generation?  
For his life is taken away from the earth.”

The prophet was describing someone who had suffered the kind of humiliation and injustice that I had suffered. Who was the prophet describing? I wanted to know more...

[Phillip]: Wow...so much happened so quickly, and in ways none of us would have imagined. I'm Phillip, a follower of Jesus. After Jesus died and we began to live in the new reality of his resurrection, things could get pretty wild some days. We didn't have Jesus to follow and listen to like before; now we had to figure out how to live what he had taught us. It wasn't always so easy. We were committed to sharing and making sure that everyone was taken care of, but as the church grew and included people who weren't Jewish, we often encountered cultural clashes. One of those clashes emerged when some of the Greek

widows said they weren't getting as much food as the Jewish widows. The apostles decided to delegate that problem to a group of seven of us, whom they called deacons, so that they wouldn't need to be distracted from their teaching ministry.

It's a funny thing though. A couple of us in that group found ourselves being used by God in ways that went way beyond distributing food. Stephen, for example, preached a sermon that got him in big trouble, and he became the first Christian martyr. I felt God's call to go to Samaria to spread the word there about how God was moving in the world through the love, life, and death of Jesus. And people were very receptive, as if they had been waiting for this message.

But the most memorable day was when the Spirit sent me from Samaria out to Gaza. How strange it seemed to be going from the hub of the city, where there were lots of people, to the wilderness road toward Egypt. All at once I spotted a chariot. I hesitated a bit when it seemed the Spirit was telling me to go closer. As I got close, I could hear the man inside reading. And it wasn't the *Jerusalem Times*; he was reading from the prophet Isaiah. Jesus often quoted this prophet, and after he died, we began to understand the prophet's words in a wholly new way. We used to think of the "suffering servant" as referring to Israel in exile, but we had begun to see how Jesus also embodied this image.

I was a bit impulsive when I asked the man if he understood what he was reading. Was it the Spirit or was it my prejudice, assuming that an Egyptian in a chariot couldn't possibly understand "our" sacred writings. But he didn't seem offended. In fact, he admitted that he had questions about what he was reading and he invited me to join him. Talk about a clash of worlds. All at once this simple Jewish Christian, who always gets around by foot or perhaps with the aid of a donkey, is riding in a chariot alongside an Egyptian, high official of the queen. It didn't take long to realize, too, that this man was a eunuch. One part of me recoiled at the enigma -- someone who I've always been taught is to be excluded from worship is sitting next to me wanting to discuss the prophetic writings! He didn't give me long to figure this out, but jumped right in with a question: "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" (8:43).

I couldn't have asked for a better lead-in to talk about Jesus! I told him about Jesus' ministry, how he taught and healed and forgave and spoke of God's kingdom which was good news to the poor, and how his ministry ultimately led to his death. And that the story didn't end there, but rather continued with his resurrection and how the Spirit was sending us out to share this news in ways and in places we hadn't dreamed of going.

It was like he'd been waiting to hear this his whole life and before I could think of what should happen next, he noticed we were passing by a stream and he stopped the chariot and asked me to baptize him. "What is to prevent me from being baptized?" A little voice in the back of my head yelled: "Everything!" But another voice, the voice of the Spirit calmly whispered, "Nothing." Then I knew that it was for just this moment that the Spirit had called me to the wilderness.

We went down into the stream and both of us were washed by the healing waters of God's Spirit that day. The eunuch received the loving embrace of acceptance as a full, beloved, complete member of the people of God. And I, I received a confirmation that no one is to be excluded from the grace of God. The eunuch was my brother, one whom I would always love and pray for even though we immediately parted ways as he returned to Egypt and the Spirit called me in another direction. We went our separate ways rejoicing.

And now, a few comments:

1) Philip and the eunuch may seem like two people from very different backgrounds, yet they shared one very important thing: they both were attentive to the spirit. They modeled the words from John 15, that

were in our call to worship this morning, where Jesus describes himself as a vine and invites his disciples to remain intimately connected as branches. Had Phillip and the eunuch not been listening for the voice of God, I doubt the encounter would have happened. How do I/we abide in the vine and listen for the voice of the Spirit?

2) The Spirit of God, is the main character of this story, bringing together two people who needed each other in order to grow in their faith: The eunuch needed Phillip to answer his questions, and Phillip needed the eunuch to gain a more expansive understanding of God's kingdom. Some of us are hesitant about the idea of sharing our faith because we fear we will be imposing this on another. This story encourages us to allow the Spirit to lead us into the "wilderness"--into those seemingly scary places of deep conversation about faith and spirituality--where we might be surprised by what we learn and share. Are you willing to venture into the wilderness?

3) This is a story about God's grace in the midst of marginalization and humiliation. The eunuch found release and the fullness of joy in learning that God became marginal and suffered humiliation through the death of Jesus. In what ways have we experienced humiliation in life. Like the eunuch, we are invited to allow our humiliation to draw us into a relationship of solidarity with Jesus. And like Phillip, we are invited allow our walk with Jesus to draw us into solidarity and advocacy with those whom our society marginalizes.

It is this divine humiliation, Jesus' life-giving love, that we commemorate as we gather at the table, sharing the bread and cup. This meal is a gift to us and a symbol of our commitment to being the reconciling body of Christ in the world. It is both celebrative and solemn and we prepare ourselves in song and confession before we come.