

“The Missing Chapter”

Reading: 1 John 4:7-21; Acts 8:26-40

Written and preached by [Luke Richards](#)

In the years since this church purchased Five Loaf House, we've had news reporters bring camera crews to the building a few times to report on how things are going. One of the things I've learned as I've been able to watch this process a few times is that journalists really like being able to have a story. And I mean that quite literally; they don't just want an article or a blurb or a slideshow of pictures, they want a story, a narrative, a plot with characters and a setting and some emotion. One time we had some videographers there making a video for Habitat for Humanity's anniversary celebration, and they were so excited because they were able to get a video of the neighbor's adorable beagle wagging his tail at us through the window. Of course the neighbor's dog has nothing to do with the work at Five Loaf House, but just that split-second clip of a cute little dog added so much humanity to the video. Or another time when one of the news producers moved a hammer that was lying around onto a ladder because he liked the look of the shot, and he thought it would add to the feeling that there was work going on in the building.

And it's not to say that they were lying or even that they were manipulating the facts in any real way, though of course we can find examples of journalists who have done that. No, they were trying to take a set of facts and give them some structure and emotion so that people could hold onto something, even in a little ninety second local news report. You could just give a list of bare facts, but people would get bored and wouldn't remember them. But if you put those facts in the context of a story, people can connect. We love stories.

With something like Five Loaf House it's pretty straightforward and it's mostly harmless if you get the story a little bit wrong, but of course we have other issues in our world where different people can take exactly the same facts and tell different stories from those facts, and those different stories can have a huge impact. Think of what's going on in Baltimore right now: depending on who you listen to, these riots are either the result of systemic injustices that have been ongoing for a long time, or they are the result of bad people committing crimes and wanting to get away with them. It's either the fault of the people in charge or it's the fault of the people smashing store windows. Same facts, but very different narratives. Of course in reality, it doesn't have to be either/or; it can be both/and. An issue as complex as racism and urban crime in America is unlikely to fit into a simple narrative of only one side's fault or the other.

We make sense of reality and our place in it by telling stories, and so the stories we tell about ourselves are extremely important in our lives. Our perceived reality shapes the stories we tell, and then in turn we shape our reality based on our stories. We tell our stories to one another, and to the next generation, and our stories become shared stories, and together we shape more of our reality based on those stories.

We have stories within stories in our Scripture passage today. On the surface it's the story of the Spirit of God speaking to Philip, who was one of the seven deacons chosen to care for the poor in the church of Jerusalem, and guiding him to a meeting with this official of the court of Ethiopia so that the man might hear the good news of Jesus Christ. Pretty straightforward; the facts of the episode aren't hard to understand. But these facts are telling us a much bigger story.

We might begin a couple of chapters earlier. This congregation in Jerusalem has been growing and preaching in the weeks since Jesus was raised from the dead, and their numbers have increased to the point that the Twelve most prominent followers of Jesus are no longer able to carry out their work and take care of all the needs they're seeing. So they decide to delegate the care of the poor to a group of seven deacons. But the people who killed Jesus are still in power and things are still pretty tense, to the point that there is a conspiracy against one of the Seven, a man named Stephen, to accuse him of blasphemy, which was a capital offense. During his trial, Stephen boldly proclaims the gospel of Jesus Christ in front of some of the very people who were responsible for crucifying Jesus. But Stephen is unjustly found guilty and is stoned to death by a mob, and a great persecution breaks out against the Jerusalem Christians, forcing them out of the city and scattering them across the country.

Philip, another one of the Seven Deacons, is among those Christians scattered in this persecution. And here's where the story, the narrative, the lens through which we view the facts, comes into play. Put yourself in Philip's shoes: this fledgling movement has just suffered the loss of two major leaders, first Jesus, then Stephen. Some of the other leaders have been put on trial and persecuted. And now the persecution has reached such a level that Christians are no longer safe in the city. It would be easy to reach the conclusion that things are not going well, and apparently they're unlikely to change for the better any time soon. Maybe it would be wise to just keep this Jesus stuff under your hat for a while, rather than continuing to stir people up.

But of course there's a chapter to this story that we haven't taken into account yet: Jesus wasn't just crucified, He was also raised from the dead, and He proved to His followers that He truly is Lord. That changes their story, so that instead of being persecuted and oppressed, they are ambassadors of the victorious King. This missing chapter gives meaning to their story and gives it a new direction. And so Philip the Deacon becomes Philip the Evangelist, and as he scatters into the surrounding countryside, he scatters the seed of the word of Christ, and plants churches. That brings us to the passage we read today.

And again, there are stories being told on multiple levels. One of the characters in this story is an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official for the queen of Ethiopia. He has been to Jerusalem to worship and is on his way back home when Philip meets him. As an Ethiopian, he probably would have been considered quite exotic in that part of the world: he was from a long way away, beyond the borders of the Roman Empire. As a foreigner you could become a convert to Judaism, but it wasn't quite the same as being born a Jew. But this man is in a different category. As a eunuch, he was automatically and permanently disqualified from being truly included in Jewish worship, no matter what else he did. Without going into graphic detail, there were laws in the Torah making it clear that eunuchs were excluded. So this man obviously has a desire to know and worship God, and he's obviously devoted enough to make the long journey toward Jerusalem, but I have to wonder what the experience was like for him: coming all that way, getting right up to the threshold of the house of God, but never being allowed in, not being allowed to take part. He's doing well in life, since he obviously has great power in his homeland, but his story is still a sad one.

But there's a chapter missing from his story. When Philip meets him, the Ethiopian is reading from Isaiah 53, a chapter that speaks of God's suffering servant, this one who serves God but is

terribly persecuted, and is usually understood by Christians to be a prophecy about Jesus. And if you don't know about Jesus, you might ask the same question the Ethiopian asks: "Who is Isaiah talking about? Himself? Did he really suffer like that? Or someone else? And if so, who? And why are they so important?" Philip tells him the rest of the story; he provides the missing chapter about the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, the one who makes sense of the story and gives it a new direction.

And just as the missing chapter gives new meaning to Isaiah 53, this missing chapter in the Ethiopian's life gives *him* new meaning, too. The man who is permanently excluded from the full worship of God, the man who can come up to the threshold of God's house but never any further, hears the story of Jesus and responds. "What can stand in the way of my being baptized?" he asks Philip, and you can almost hear the note of longing in the man's voice. Being a eunuch has stood in the way of being included in the worshipping community in the past; will it still stand in the way? No. Philip baptizes him, welcoming him into the community of the followers of Jesus, and the man goes on his way home, rejoicing in a way that he has probably never done before.

What about you? What story do you tell yourself about your life? Someone may look at you and know the facts about your life, but they don't necessarily know what story you're living in. I may know some of the things that have happened to you and some of the things you're dealing with, but I don't know how you're fitting that reality into a narrative, what you think the plot of your life is, and where you think your story is heading. Everyone around you may think you're just fine, and to them your story may appear perfectly normal. But what story do you tell yourself? Maybe the story that you tell yourself and that you picture yourself living is that your family is a wreck, and you're just trying desperately to rise above their problems. Or maybe your story is that you're just a failure, no matter what you do or how hard you try, it's just not good enough. Or maybe your story is that there is some dark event in your past that you will never get over, and there isn't really any hope. Or maybe your story is that you're a fighter, or a protector, or a worker, or a parent, or a child, or that you're better than everyone around you, and on and on. Whatever story you tell yourself about yourself and your life, whether it's good or bad, true or false, that story is incomplete until you add the chapter about the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The story will not be complete, it will not make sense, and it will not go in the right direction.

Our question for this season after Easter is this: what does the cross of Christ really *do* in my life? The church is centered on the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus above all other things, and we tell these stories about how the work of Christ frees us from sin and conquers death so that we can know God and have an eternal hope. But if that's all, then it doesn't really make a difference until after I die; my eternal hope doesn't really kick in until I hit eternity. So what else does the cross and the empty tomb of Christ do? And what we're seeing today is that the work of Jesus is the missing piece in the story of Scripture; it makes sense out of this grand story of God's work with humanity through thousands of years, and without this missing chapter, you can't really get the whole story. It's the missing chapter that gives direction and meaning to the entire story of humanity, and so it is also the missing chapter for each one of us as well. Our own stories, whatever they may be, simply will not make sense without this chapter.

That's true of you, and that's true of the people in the world around us, as well. Philip knew the story, and so he told the story to someone who was missing the chapter. The work of Christ makes sense of our stories, and therefore it leads us to intersect the work of Christ with other

people's stories, as well. As Jesus guides and makes sense out of our lives, we are naturally moved outward to share the work of Christ with those who need Him. When I say that the story of Jesus is the missing chapter in everyone's story, that doesn't mean that we shoehorn the gospel into every possible conversation and every relationship. But it does mean that as we share life with people, as our stories intersect, and as people realize that maybe their story doesn't make as much sense as they'd like, or maybe their story is heading in a direction they don't want to go, we have the opportunity to share the missing chapter with them out of love for them.

So what story are you telling yourself? What stories are the people around you telling themselves as they live their lives? How is Christ calling you to share the missing chapter with them?



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-Share Alike 2.5 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/2.5/)