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Acts 8:26-40

So this guy is on his way home from vacation in Jerusalem. And he's kind of tired, and his clothes are wrinkled from traveling so long. Everything had folded up and fit neatly into his suitcase when he left home, but going back things are squished and sort of lumpy, and he's worried the zipper is going to pop off.

There's this layer of grime on everything now, maybe some napkins crumpled up on the floor. He has to kick them out of his way to make room for his feet. The chariot feels smaller going home than it did on the way out.

And it bugs him, because life has already been feeling small for him lately. He's supposed to have everything. He works for the government, so he's powerful. He's in charge of the treasury, so he's rich. But none of that has been able to do much about that restlessness that's been gnawing at him for a while now. He keeps making people feel awkward at dinner parties when he gets too serious. He knows there's something more.

This vacation was supposed to be the answer. He'd been reading about the law and the temple and the prophets. Maybe there was something to this whole Israel thing. So he took his books and went looking, touched the walls, heard the prayers, watched the incense rise up. But nothing changed. Nothing caught fire inside. And now he's going back on this same empty road to his same empty life.

He's reading that page in the book that he'd folded over because it seemed so important, that page he never quite understood: "In his humiliation justice was denied him." He remembered reading it on the trip out, thinking that he would get it once he'd gotten where he was supposed to go. It still didn't make sense.

And this total stranger pops right up, out there in the middle of nowhere, and asks what feels like the most frustrating question in the world. "Do you understand what you are reading?" And he thinks, well, of course not, how the heck could I? No, I don't understand, no one is helping me. No, I don't understand, I have been far too alone in my search for far too long. How can I understand, unless someone guides me?

And in his frustration, he does the thing that people like him never do. He essentially picks up a hitchhiker. His whole life long, he's been the kind of guy who puts on headphones as soon as he's on the airplane so that he doesn't have to make useless conversation. And all of a sudden he's talking with some nut job who's hanging out in the desert. It's just too weird.

But then it all gets weirder: Because what Philip says is making sense. Because this Ethiopian who has been searching for so long now finally feels a rest for the restlessness in his heart. His ears are hearing. His eyes are opened. And he's just so *glad*.

They're riding through the wilderness, so there's not really supposed to be any water, but there it is, and so, hey, why not? "What is to prevent me from being baptized?" After a lifetime of carefully weighed decisions and well-chosen words, there is all of a sudden a tremendous freedom. After years of being told who he is supposed to be and who he can't even think about becoming, there is a blank slate. One worn-out, out-grown life gets tossed off, washed away. He comes out of the water clean. And he's content to get back in the chariot and keep riding. Because it's not *where* he is, but *who* he is that matters now.

We all have our imagined destinations. We all have the places we're supposed to be going, and the timelines for getting there, and the itineraries that we're supposed to accomplish along the way. Generally they are places that make us feel important, or at least competent. Quite often, we have decided that we will meet God when we are safely settled in one of them.

The thing is, God most often decides to meet us somewhere else. And it's usually not at all the place we'd pick. In fact, most of the time it's not even at a destination at all, but on some detour, some rest stop, some random flat-tire moment. It's not when we're fulfilled but when we're frustrated. It's not when we're certain but instead when we're confused. And a lot of the time it's when we are plain lost and the map is turned upside down and we are just there, by the side of the road, trying to make sense of it all.

I wonder, actually, if God finds us in such places because those are the only moments we are willing to be distracted. It's too hard perhaps, to get our attention when we're scoring points back in Ethiopia or when we're working at being holy in Jerusalem; too hard when we're busy in Damascus or Emmaus or wherever it is we think is so important to get to. But in that moment when we are neither here nor there, when we're just kind of watching the scenery go by: in that moment our guard comes down enough to let God in.

One of the earliest names for Christianity was simply "the way." Not as in the method, but as in the street, the avenue, the road. The early Christians understood that God showed up in the middle of things, and that holiness tended to take not the form of accomplishment but of encounter. So it was for the Ethiopian. So it is still. Think about the last really profound spiritual experience you had. Was it written on your calendar ahead of time?

Most of us have our destinations worked out for ourselves, road maps and goals and benchmarks and the like. At one point in my life, I was working off of what I referred to only half-jokingly as the five-year plan. God has a place it that plan, one that I had carefully scripted out and even was so kind to tell God about when I prayed. My plan was disrupted, of course. Most of our plans are, it seems.

Today's lesson tells me that's actually good news. Living after Easter, things aren't supposed to go neatly from point A to point B. We get derailed and we get interrupted and we get lost and we get disappointed that's actually a wonderful, gracious opportunity, because that's when we are finally open enough to listen to that new thing God is doing. We finally discover see the thing we couldn't have possibly imagined when we were writing out all our little plans because it didn't exist yet. We finally notice that there's water where we thought it was just desert sand.

Part of our Christian life is commitment to certain ways of action, certain choices, no doubt; we know that Jesus set his face towards Jerusalem and so we try to do the same. But part of our life is also a willingness to be traveling, a willingness to talk to stranger on the road, knowing that some of them are just strange but some might actually be sent by angels. We may not need to be baptized but we are all constantly being converted, our hearts won over and over again, bit by bit, as we meet God in all kind of unexpected people and places.

So don't be too distressed, this morning, if your road is not taking you where you expect it to. The truth is, expectations only get you so far in the Christian life. Real growth, real change, real transformation: those are not always things we can go out and find. Instead, they find us, awkwardly, uninvited, strangers by the side of our particular course. And so our job is not to be certain but instead quite the opposite. Be on the lookout for the strange: for guides in the wilderness, water in the desert, insight in confusion, joy in sorrow. Eastertide tells us that we will be found by all those things that our heart is seeking.