



Sermon for The Fifth Sunday of Easter

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene

Rev. Mary L Ayers

Acts 8:26-40

1 John 4:7-21

Psalm 22:24-30 John 15:1-8

"Abide in me as I abide in you." John 15:4a

Twenty-one years ago, I found myself at a spiritual crossroads. After living nearly 30 years as a born-and-raised Catholic, I was becoming ever more disillusioned with the church.

I didn't think it was right that the laity had no power to make any real decisions in our parish, or that women couldn't be ordained priests or deacons, among other issues. Many voices were sidelined and that didn't seem healthy or Christian to me. This bothered me so much, that I found myself sitting in church most Sundays fuming about all that was wrong, rather than praising God.

I began to wonder if this church I'd known all my life was really my home anymore. Was God calling me to stay or go somewhere else? And if I was to go—where would that be?

I received an answer in the most unlikely place—working as a temporary secretary at the Hanford nuclear site in Richland. There, I met Danae, the person I was meant to replace. During the two days we spent together as I transitioned into her job, we got to know each other better.

Her demeanor was so open and interested that I soon found myself telling her about my spiritual conundrum. Her immediate response was as simple as it was profound: "Why don't you come to visit my church?"

Though I was uncertain about what God might be leading me into, I decided to take her up on her offer. Walking through my first set of red doors that Sunday, I noticed how the layout of the church was much like the Catholic church. The liturgy, too, was very much the same. The big difference was juggling the Prayer Book and the Hymnal.

Then the moment came when the priest elevated the bread and wine, and we began to sing the doxology: "Praise God from Whom All Blessings Flow / Praise Him all Creatures here below / Praise Him above Ye Heavenly Host / Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost!"

As we all sang these words together, with our eyes and hearts uplifted to God, something deep and true settled within my heart.

It was in that moment that I knew that I belonged—that ***I was at home***. Here, in the Episcopal Church, amongst my fellow Christians, with Jesus at the very center of it all, like a heartbeat.

On that day, the Holy Spirit also reminded me of a *deep truth about Jesus and my identity as a Christian*: no matter where I am on my journey of faith, whether roaming in a wilderness place of frustration, uncertainty, and spiritual thirst or taking a chance at something new and walking into an unexpected,

spirit-altering understanding of my own identity as a Christian, Jesus was and is ever-present and **abiding** in me—and, indeed, in all of us along each of our journeys of faith.

And I realized that deep, unwavering presence of Christ can give us all hope and courage to live fully into our call as Christians, wherever we find ourselves and wherever God calls us to go—even if we don't exactly know where that call will lead.

In today's gospel from John, Jesus encourages his disciples to: "Abide in me as I abide in you." He tells them this / at a crucial moment in their relationship. Jesus will soon be handed over to be crucified and won't be with them any longer in the flesh. For the disciples, this is a time of great anxiety, uncertainty, and grief. Without Jesus with them, who are they? Where will they go? What will become of them?

Jesus assures them that he will be there—he will *abide* with them. In the Greek, the word for abide is *meno*—which not only means to be present, but to reside, live, make one's home in, to fellowship, commune, and companion. Jesus assures his friends that he will make his home in and among them. They have no need to fear that he will desert them. They belong in him, and he in them, always.

Through his Word and Spirit, Jesus will not only remain, but continue to bring them life. A life of belonging and meaning that will take deep root. A life that will give them the confidence, faith, and openness of heart they need to go out into the world and engage in God's transforming work of love wherever they are called.

And we know when God calls us, we can expect the unexpected!

That is certainly the case for Phillip in our lesson from Acts. After sharing the Good News of Jesus with large crowds in Samaria and the surrounding area, the Spirit calls Phillip to perhaps the most **unlikely** place for God to be at work—on the wilderness road from Jerusalem to Gaza—and during the hottest hour of the day.

Yet instead of worrying about possibly being robbed on this wilderness road, or complaining about the heat, or considering other, better, ways to spread the Good News, he leans into the confidence and faith—the life—he has in Jesus, who abides in him. And he waits. And he listens.

And suddenly, he finds himself chasing after a chariot—with one regal-looking person inside, puzzling over a passage from Isaiah. When he asks the passenger "Do you understand what you're reading?" He responds by inviting Phillip in.

We don't know exactly the words that Phillip shares with the Ethiopian Eunuch. Perhaps, knowing what means to truly live and belong in Jesus, it is the Good News that Jesus, who died for the love of the world and rose again, abides in **him**, as well. Even though the Ethiopian Eunuch might differ from many others who follow Jesus. Even though he is rich and from a far-away land. Even though he may not be considered fully a man by the Greco-Roman standards of the day. He is beloved of God—and Jesus is with him on his journey, both physical and spiritual. And as he steps down out of his carriage to be baptized, I think he too knows that he has found his home, his abiding place, in Jesus.

This Easter Season, I invite you to consider in what ways the Risen Christ is at home in you. How does he abide? Who in your life—whether expected or unexpected—has shown you that, in Jesus, you belong? Whether you are uncertain about your faith journey or feel you might be too old or too young or too

different to belong. I invite you to reflect on the people and the circumstances that remind you of Jesus' abiding presence in your life.

And I invite you to consider how you—how we as a congregation—are called by Jesus who abides in us, to lean into the life he has given us and carry that Good News of God's love and belonging into the world. Are you rooted in the truth that Jesus is in us and we in him so that you are ready to go wherever the Spirit calls you? Whether that be in what you might consider the most desolate place, where you couldn't imagine God could ever be present, or right here and now, with your fellow Christians sitting right next to you?

How are you leaning into the confidence and faith—the life—that you have in Jesus, who abides in you?