

# **An Easter Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church**

## **“Philip & the Man on the Desert Road”**

**By Eric Howell**

**Acts 8**

If you were sitting around one day with a group of people . . . let's say you were riding in an elevator and it got stuck between floors and there's a group of you there. And you realize you are going to be stuck for hours. With this group. And you don't know them . . . yet. But you will. And you aren't claustrophobic, so no worries there. And actually, it's kind of nice because, well, it's lunchtime, and someone brought a bucket of chicken and a gallon of sweet tea, and someone else happened to be holding a bowl of banana pudding. And someone else was carrying some homemade potato salad, so you knew immediately that you were with a bunch of Christians. You think for a moment that you are with a bunch of Baptists with the chicken and all, but you soon realize that every denomination tells that joke on themselves about the kids who bring items for show and tell and the one kid says, "I'm catholic and this is a rosary," and the other kid says "I'm Jewish and shows a dreidel," and the kid who brings a casserole dish and he's a \_\_\_\_\_. Fill in the blank. I've heard this joke now about Methodists, Baptists, and Lutherans. Of course, for the Anglicans it's a keg, not a casserole dish, but it's basically the same joke.

So with the chicken and the potato salad, a conversation breaks out about how each of you became Christians. And with the banana pudding, everyone's willing to share.

And someone started, "I was raised in the church with my parents. I always went. There was one time when I went down the aisle to make a profession of faith, but it wasn't a big emotional thing. I just felt right. I believed. The faith was mine. And I was baptized. And I've had some dry patches, but I've been a Christian all my life."

And then someone else said, "I had never gone to church but started dating this girl. She was beautiful. And I would do anything she told me so I started getting up on Sundays and going to church with her. At first I couldn't hear anything but my heart thumping next to her in the pew. But eventually, I started to listen to what I was singing and what the preacher was saying. It started, you know, to get hold of me. And I started meeting with this small group studying the Bible. You know the funny thing, the more I got, the more I wanted. I was so hungry for it. It was like tasting food for the first time. By the way, a little pudding here. Thanks. Eventually my girlfriend broke up with me, but I was hooked by then. I was baptized down in the river. And those weren't water drops coming off my face. I'm not ashamed to say I cried like a baby. It was great."

After a moment, someone else says, "I'm a Christian, but it's got nothing to do with church. I'd say I'm a Christian despite the church. The one I was dragged to early on was full of hypocrites and busybodies. I don't really even like fried chicken. Honestly, it was only after I dropped out that I really started following the real Jesus."

There's a moments silence while everyone else in the room digests the bombshell that's been dropped. He doesn't like fried chicken?

Then from the corner a dark, handsome, quiet man begins speaking telling his story. "Well, it's just like everyone else's, except that I was riding in my chariot, returning home from Jerusalem, just reading the Bible I swiped from the hotel room. Who are these Gideons anyway? Just kind of flipped it open and started reading and got really captivated by this passage about someone suffering a great deal and that kind of sounded like me. I've always been officially honored, but just kind of left on the outside of things. Only I knew the passage wasn't about me, but then who? And this guy comes jogging up beside me like he was supposed to be there at that moment (Honestly, I thought I must have the slowest chariot in all of the kingdom). And he strikes up a conversation with me. I don't usually talk with strangers like this, but he asked the right question at the right moment. It was like the Spirit in him was speaking to the spirit in me. And the question he asked surprised me. 'Do you understand what you are reading?' 'As a matter of fact, I don't. How can I unless someone guides me?'

"He jumped right in without hesitation and started explaining it. You know, it was the way he did it. And this is important. I needed a guide. Like a sheep needs a shepherd. Like a team needs a coach. Like a seeker needs an advisor. I didn't need a teacher, or a preacher, or someone to beat me up for not knowing. I didn't need someone to yell at me, or seem like they were trying to recruit me to their cause. I didn't need a treatise on the theology of the Trinity or someone to tell me what a sinner I was. I also didn't need someone to tell me that it didn't matter what I believed as long as I believed in anything.

"What I needed was someone to come alongside me, just right where I was, right where I was struggling and help lead me step by step down the path where this lay. Him getting in the chariot with me is really a metaphor for something important I learned then. Well, I mean he did get in the chariot with me, but you know, since I'm 2000 years old and all in this elevator with you, I thought I'd explain a little more. He came alongside me and got in my chariot with me.

"It seems like we have to do that if we are going to share the story of Jesus with anyone. Your Native Americans talked about walking a mile in someone's moccasins. It's sort of like that. You've got to get your hands dirty in someone's life. Don't expect that you get to witness to your neighbors unless you've watered their flowers and got their mail when they were gone and had them over for barbeque in the backyard. And maybe then everyone will drop the masks we wear and talk about what's really going on in life. You know sometimes we don't do that so quickly. The things of God are precious things and not to be flippantly thrown around. You don't just get on a bus and say, 'Excuse me, is this seat saved and, oh by the way, are you?' You've got to be sensitive to the, what do you call it, to the Spirit—to that inner voice that prompts you when to speak and when to be silent. When to make phone call, extend that invitation to church or Bible study, when to speak a prayer for someone, and when to simply whisper it. Christians seem like they spend so much time yelling that no one can hear what they say. I needed someone to accept me just as I am without one plea. You know, that would make a great song! Hey buddy, can I have your piece of chicken?"

“Ok, so this guy, Philip was his name. I’ll never forget him. What was he doing out there on a desert road at noon? Hot! I don’t know, but it was like God put him there just for me. He was the right person at the right place at the right time. You know what I mean? I just don’t believe that was an accident. You know they say that coincidence is just God’s way of acting anonymously. I believe that.

“And so he gets up in the chariot and starts talking, guiding me through the Bible. He didn’t have all the answers, but clearly he spent time in the scriptures regularly. He knew them, but even more, he loved them. They were alive to him.

“So we talked about this passage I was reading:

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

“Who is this talking about, I asked? I learned a lot that day:

“I learned that this is part of Isaiah, but most scholars think of it as 2<sup>nd</sup> Isaiah, a 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter in the long book if you will. And that the suffering servant we read about probably first was a metaphor for the whole people of Israel. The one man in the poem stood for the whole nation that was led to the slaughter by the invaders and that made sense to me.

“But then he took it a step farther to talk about how now the whole nation has been personified as one representative man, the Son of God. And not just the whole nation, but all of humankind is personified as one man. We read in Genesis about Adam who sinned and Abraham who followed, and in Exodus about Moses who redeemed, and in 1 Samuel about David who led, and later about Elijah who healed, and all through the Bible about Israel whom God chose to be a light to the nations to bring all people to God. And he said that there’s a new Adam who is without sin, and a new Abraham through whom we can be adopted into God’s family, a new Moses who is the redeemer, a new David who shepherds us, a new Elijah who heals our souls, and a new Israel who dies and is resurrected to new life that the same can happen to us in Him and that we can have eternal life with God.

“More pudding, please. Thanks.

“I mean, it was amazing. All the scripture just came alive for me. It had always seemed kind of dry and inaccessible, but now it just came alive all those old stories. They were about God revealing himself to me. And I was excited. Kind of like you with the girlfriend with your heart beating. That’s the way I felt as we talked. John Wesley talked about his heart being strangely warmed one night as he sat on a pew and heard about Jesus. Well, mine was on fire. I still had a lot of questions and there is still much I just don’t understand. But I knew there in that moment, that God loved me and that Jesus was the Son of God for me and the world.

“So right about then we come to this little pond. Like a little oasis. Which is appropriate because the whole day had been an oasis for me. And when I saw the water,

I asked, ‘What’s keeping me from being baptized?’ There are some textual traditions that report that Philip replied, ‘If you believe with all your heart, you may.’ And I said, ‘I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.’ But I don’t really remember if I did say all that. But I did believe. And so he stopped my chariot right there.

“And we both went down into that little pool of water. And he said that Jesus had told his followers to baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And he did that; he said, ‘I baptize you in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.’ And he lowered me in the water and then raised me up. And it just felt right. It felt like there was life in those waters. Like God was in them. And I came up dripping wet like a newborn baby, which in a way I guess I was then.

“You know, Philip just sort of disappeared after that, but I’ve never forgotten it or forgotten him. He was at the right place at the right time. He loved God and it showed by the way he showed that love to me. And that was all that mattered. And I’ve followed Jesus ever since.

“So that’s my story. Thanks for listening.”

Right about then the elevator motor somewhere way up there starts grinding and the box starts lowering. Everyone stands up, wiping crumbs and straightening ties. The box strikes the first floor, the doors open, and a crowd is gathered there and they start cheering. “How did you make it?” “Were you scared?” “How did you handle it for so long?” And you start to tell them about him. Him . . . where did he go? And you see him going out of the building, through those big glass turning-thing doors and head down the sidewalk. And it looks like grace is following him with every step.

A little while later you take the same steps, out the same door into the same street, but you are changed. Something’s different about the world. You remember what you heard a long time ago. There’s a Spirit at work all around you and even in you. And you decide that you’ll try to really listen for that prompting, that inner voice that says—call my sister even though it’s the middle of the night, go into the office next door and check on my coworker, pause a moment to really listen to someone’s day when you ask “How’s it going?”, tell someone that Jesus is why your life is a bit different when they ask. Walking out, you don’t know if you’ll be an evangelist or not. But you know you’ll be a guide when someone’s ready. And when they are ready, and the Spirit prompts you, you’ll be there.