

“Get Up and Go”
Acts 8:26-40
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5th Sunday of Easter
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“Get up and go” – if you asked me to quote some of the most important words in the Bible these would probably make the list. Some version of “arise and go,” “get up and go,” or just “go” is issued by God in just about every book of the Bible. They are not always easy words. Abraham is told to go from the land of Ur to a land that God will show him. Moses is told to return to Egypt and lead God’s people out of slavery. The voice of God comes through Deborah the prophet and tells Barak to go and defend God’s people even when they’re outnumbered; it comes to Samuel and tells him to anoint David as King while the current King is still on the throne. It comes and tells Jonah to get up and go to Nineveh and Jonah tries in vain to resist. It comes to Isaiah and Jeremiah, and even Mary and Joseph telling them to get up and go to Egypt.

If you’re familiar with the Bible by the time you get to the book of Acts, you’re not surprised by all this unexpected movement initiated by God. The Get-Up-And-Go God is always doling out new assignments. The Get-Up-And-Go God doesn’t allow you to stay in one place for long. There’s movement involved in the relationship – often more movement that we would choose on our own.

Sometimes that movement is directed toward individuals. Other times that movement is directed toward the community itself. The church in the Book of Acts is constantly forced to renegotiate its boundaries – expanding from Galilean Jews only to Galilean Jews and proselytes (those who had converted to Judaism), to Galilean Jews and proselytes and Hellenist Jews, then Samaritans, then law-keeping Gentiles, then anybody who is called by the Spirit. The Spirit calls the church to move again and again – enlarging its welcome, enlarging its community.

The Get-Up-and-Go God doesn’t let the church or its members stand in one place for very long.

The Spirit tells Philip to get up and go and Philip is probably not surprised. By this time he’s used to the movement involved in God’s community and its people. Get up and go, the Spirit tells him - receive

further instructions when you get there. All through the books of Acts, people don't question this get up and go approach, even though there are good reasons not to live like this.

Not if you want to accomplish anything, hold down a job, or practice accountability to others. Not if you want to set appointments that you intend to keep, check off assignments that you set on your own. Not if you plan out your days with lists you intend to check off and calendars you intend to follow. There are good reasons to cling more tightly to the control of your day, and stay focused on goals instead of on what is put immediately in front of you.

And yet that's the practice of the church community in Acts and the individuals who are part of – get up and go. It's almost as though we need a little jarring from time to time to keep us from getting too comfortable. A little jarring to wake us up to the power of the gospel, to knock off the cobwebs, to keep us attuned to the change that God is always bringing about in our lives and in the church. We need a regular shakeup as individuals and we need it as a church.

The shakeup going on into today's story involves both an individual *and* the community. Philip is sent to what used to be a Philistine town, chatting with a member of the African royal elite. Chances are this Greek-speaking Jew from the Holy Land has never before found himself chatting with a dark-skinned African eunuch. An ordinary Jew from Jerusalem chatting with an upper-crust member of the African wealthy elite. That's how Ethiopian reads in the culture of New Testament times. Not a person from what we know today as the nation of Ethiopia, but a person of dark skin from the African continent who (according to most scholars) would have captured the imagination of Greek readers. Not a person to be despised, but a leading member of a wealthy court – a person most Greeks would rarely have encountered.

The African official is reading Isaiah. Philip shares the good news. "What prevents me from being baptized?" the Ethiopian eunuch asks Philip. Philip remains silent but there are any number of answers that come to mind. "What prevents you from being baptized?" To start, the Bible – right here in Deuteronomy 23 eunuchs and foreigners are not included as a part of the community of God. Isaiah 56 contradicts Deuteronomy 23 which only says to me that there is ongoing disagreement within the community of faith over who is to be included and who is to be kept out. "What prevents you from being baptized?" Church order – as far as I can tell Philip doesn't know the status of this

Ethiopian eunuch – is he a Jew? Is he a believer? Given his level of biblical knowledge, probably not. All we know is that he's come to Jerusalem to worship. As this point in the story, the church in Jerusalem hasn't yet ruled on the status of eunuchs, or Ethiopians, or non-Jews. What is to prevent you from being baptized? Plenty.

But Philip doesn't think twice – as soon as the eunuch spots some water by the road, the one who wants to be included is included. The foreigners are in; the eunuchs are in. Later the Gentiles are in. The church's boundaries are muddied on the banks of some unknown body of water by the get up and go God who won't let the church or its individuals stay in one place for long. The get up and go God who seems to enjoy jarring us from our tightly held schedules, our self-made stabilities, to shake us up with the joyful, frightening movement of the Spirit that is always a few steps ahead of us.

We forget that in the church. White people forgot it for thousands of years when they forced people with the same glorious dark skin as the eunuch in the story to stay out of the church or up in the balconies. Some Christians today forget it when they restrict the leadership of LGBT Christians – as if we don't have examples right here in our stories of sexual minorities who are explicitly included in the family of God, as if we didn't have specific examples where clear biblical prohibitions are rejected or overturned. The Roman Catholic bishops seem to have forgotten it not too long ago when they criticized Roman Catholic nuns for caring too much about the poor and not enough for towing Church lines. We forget that the Spirit isn't as interested in church order when it impedes the power of the Gospel that is intent on redeeming the whole world. The Spirit will disrupt the boundaries setup by tradition, the lines set down in church doctrine, yes even Holy Scripture itself to push the church to receive the community of Jesus that seems always to push the church beyond whatever boundaries we construct.

And I know that's a dangerous thing to say in these times. It's dangerous to insinuate that the church's interpretation might change unexpectedly from previous ways of reading the same texts. I know it's dangerous to insinuate that the Spirit might enlarge the church's view beyond where it's been in the past for no other reason than the unexpected movement of the Spirit. I know it raises all sort of questions about why we have church order, how scripture should operate in the life of the church. I know it raises more questions than it answers.

But that is where the Spirit always pushes the church. Beyond our comfort zone. Beyond our regulations. Beyond our worshiping of texts over people. Beyond our understanding. Beyond our racism. Beyond our classism. Beyond our control.

The church that is faithful, does its best to cultivate within its own life the ability to respond to the Spirit's disruptive presence by going with it, by following the Spirit. That's what Philip does – the Spirit tells him to get up and go and that's what he does – he goes to a place he's likely never been before, to meet with a kind of person he's likely never met with before, to change the community in a way it's never changed before. He trusts the Spirit.

And maybe, just maybe, if the church in 2015 trusted the Spirit like that, we could face our current travails with less fear and more joy. Less fear about what we are losing, and more joy about where the Spirit is leading us next.

Philip didn't have time to process his most recent experience with the eunuch. The Spirit snatched him away to the next assignment. But I can imagine that Philip must have been awed to become the latest participant in the church's unfolding story, delighted to be on the receiving end of some of God's most important words for transforming us as individuals and as a community: get up and go. Trust the Spirit to tell you what you need to do or to know when you get there.

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