

Easter 5

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St. Peter's by the Sea Episcopal Church, Morro Bay, CA

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The Ethiopian Eunuch's Story

My name is Herald – no not Harold, Herald and I am full of hope. One of the apostles, Philip himself gave me that name the day I was baptized and it is a name I bear with pride because I have hope. I haven't always had hope, in fact, I have lived most of my life without hope because you see I am black and I am a eunuch. Now, I have always been black, but I have not always been a eunuch. I was about 11 or 12 when it happened. One fine day I was just minding my own business on the edge of the village where I grew up and where my people lived and I was tending the goats which was my job. All of a sudden I heard this huge commotion. People were yelling and screaming and then I smelled smoke. It seemed like the whole village was on fire and everyone started running in my direction. They said the village was under attack and that everyone had to run and hide. I ran and I hid. I hid well and I would have gotten away too if it wasn't for that darn goat. Well he gave my hiding place away and they found me and grabbed me, and dragged me away to their village. You know what they did to me next but I don't want to go there and trust me neither do you. I will say this, the worst thing about becoming a eunuch is not the loss of your manhood, it is the loss of hope. You can still love but you lose all hope of your love being returned. You still are desperate to belong, but there is no place you do belong. Like everyone else you want to be respected and admired, but instead you become the butt of every joke and an object of ridicule. But I am getting ahead of myself.

Anyway I became a slave to the head man of the village of the tribe who captured me. Actually, I was one of many. He had fields and flocks and a small store and he did not like to work. He liked to drink and to gamble and to have others do the work for him. So on any given day I would be weeding the fields or tending the flocks or if I was lucky working in the small store. Every so often a shipment of goods would come in and I would help unload them and put them on the shelves. The head man was generally asleep in his chair in the back. It was wonderful there were all kinds of things I had never seen before. Cloth that was as smooth as a baby's skin and things made out of metal and all sorts of things I did not know the names of or what they were used for. I was mesmerized. I probably would still be there today if it had not been for the card game. But I am getting ahead of myself again. People ask me why didn't you run away. When you were out tending the animals you could have just taken off. I told them, "Where would I go?" There is an old African proverb that says "The problem for the thief is not how to steal the head man's bugle but where to play it." Anyway one day I was working in the store putting things on the shelf and a customer walked in. He picked up several items and the clerk was having a hard time figuring out how much the total was. He told him one figure and then I said "No that is not right, it should be this much." I thought my master was sleeping in the back but he overheard every word. He sacked the clerk right there and put me in charge of the store. At the end of each day I was to tell him what I

had sold and for how much and give him the money. At the end of the first day, I did so and his eyes got big with surprise. "What are you surprised about?" I asked him. "That the money is all there!" he replied. After that I was assigned to carry his money in the evening when he went off drinking and gambling. I would keep track of how much he had won and how much he had lost. One day an important traveler from the south rolled into town. He announced that he was looking for a friendly game of cards. My master's eyes lit up. That night we went to the tavern and the game began. My master was good at cards but he was no match for the stranger. In short order he had lost everything he had brought and I expected it was time for us to pack up and go home. But, like all gamblers, he wanted to play one more hand. What have you to offer the stranger asked. "My word" replied my master. "Your word may be fine around here but where I come from it is more like a whisper" the stranger laughed. "How about him" the stranger continued pointing to me. "Oh I could not part with him", said my master "He is like a son to me and he is good with figures and as honest as the day is long". "Very well" said the stranger, "I don't believe a word you say, but I will give you twice what I think he is worth." I am on my way to the palace of Queen Candace and I need someone else to help carry my goods"

The next morning I was on the road to the palace of Queen Candace carrying a heavy pack on my back. Three long, hot, dusty days later we arrived at the palace. I had never ever seen so many people in my whole life. As a matter of fact, if you assembled everyone I had ever seen in my whole life in one place, they would be fewer than those crowded in the street in front of the palace. We went inside and were ushered into the throne room. I can't exactly tell you everything I saw, but I will tell you that there were so many things I had never seen and could never have imagined in my whole life. I almost fell about four times because I was trying to move my head in every direction at the same time. The throne room was the most magnificent of all. Silk pillows everywhere, gold this and silver that, people dressed in finer clothes than I ever knew existed. My new master bowed low to the queen. "What have you brought me my fine courtier?" the queen asked. "All this your majesty," he replied opening the packs. "Silks and spices I have in abundance" she replied. "What have you brought me that is unique and different and exotic." I'll say one thing for my new master he thought quick. "This" he said pointing to me. "This young man is a mathematical genius and he is honest beyond measure." The queen laughed, "Your gift pleases me" she said, "as for whether everything you say about him is true we will find out in due time. Take him to the royal treasury she ordered and tell the treasurer we have a new clerk. And so I became a clerk in the palace of Queen Candace. People there were nice to me. They taught me to keep accounts and to use an abacus and to do all sorts of accounting things. Much to their surprise and mine I was good at it. They kept telling me I was a natural. It was the first praise I had received since I left my village and I soaked it up like a sponge.

Something else happened at that time too. Possibly the only good thing about being a eunuch is that people seem to trust you inherently. So from the very beginning I had almost the whole run of the palace. I loved the garden the most. It was cool and green and reminded me of home. One day I heard a voice in the garden. I looked around the corner and there was a girl sitting there with a scroll on her lap. She looked nothing like anyone

I had ever seen before. Her skin was olive colored rather than brown, her nose longer and more angular, her lips smaller and her hair straight. She was talking out loud. I looked to see who she was talking to and I could see no one. I moved closer, but I could still see no one. Finally, I got up the courage to ask her. Who are you talking to? Are there ghosts in this garden? She laughed and said no I am reading. What is reading? I asked her. These marks on the scroll are letters she explained and the letters make words and the words can be said out loud. Everything seemed overwhelming. The girl, the scroll, reading. Almost as if she had read my mind she said to me. I am a Hebrew. I come from a land up north, from a city called Jerusalem, the city of David. I am a slave like you serving the queen. I borrowed this scroll from the royal library. The queen lets me borrow any scroll I want. Sometimes she calls me to read to her before she goes to bed at night. After that I was hooked. Every day I would go and listen to the girl read. Then I asked her if she would teach me Hebrew and then I asked her to teach me to read. I remember I cried the first time I was able to read a word on the page. She thought something was wrong but I was just so happy I cried. She told me of the God of the Hebrews and how he had rescued His people and how he cared for the poor and the lowly. We read from some of the scrolls of the Hebrews holy book. I liked the prophet Isaiah best because he spoke of the poor and the downtrodden and he spoke of hope. She told me that was because at the end of the book Isaiah was speaking to the Israelites who were now slaves in Babylonia. I felt a deep longing rising in me to be free and to belong. How could I ever be free? How could I ever belong?

Actually the chance came sooner than I could have imagined. I was now one of the queen's most trusted accountants. One of the tax collectors from a far off part of her realm was giving his accounts. The queen turned to me. "Are those accounts accurate master eunuch?" Your majesty, those accounts are far below what we have received in prior years. "I thought so, she said to the tax collector "You are fired!" I saw him pull the knife from his belt and leap toward the queen. Instinctively I sprang forward and put my shoulder into his middle. I heard the sharp exhale as the wind was knocked out of him and he crumpled to the ground. The guards were on him in an instant. "Get him out of here!" the queen ordered then shaken but unruffled she turned to me. Master Eunuch it appears I owe you my life. What can I give you in return? Suddenly all my longing burst forth. I want to go home and live with my own people in my own village. I want to go to a place where I belong. The queen looked at me strangely and sadly. Master Eunuch, what you ask is understandable and I bid you god speed, but I am afraid you may not find what you are looking for. If you do not come back here to the palace and serve me as a free man.

She was right you know. I went back to my village but I just didn't fit in. To them I was damaged goods and they didn't know what to make of me. As for me I had seen and done things they could not even imagine. In the end we parted with tears. They because I was lost to them forever and me because I had lost my hope. I went back to the queen and asked for my old job back. Queen Candace said to me "Well I have filled your old job, but I do have need for a royal treasurer so I guess you will just have to take that job!"

And so I did. I worked hard and became the queen's most trusted advisor. Her kingdom prospered and so did I. She was a generous woman and she rewarded me handsomely. But there was one thing she could not give me and that was hope. I remembered the slave girl in the garden. One day I went to her. I have something for you I said, but first you must answer a question. Where can I meet this God of the Hebrews your prophets speak of. "In the temple in Jerusalem she replied without hesitation. Here is your freedom I said handing her a scroll from the queen proclaiming her free. She looked at the paper and she looked at me then she looked at the paper and she looked at me. Then she kissed me. I can never repay you she said and I will never forget you. And then she was gone.

I asked the queen for leave to go to Jerusalem. She didn't say anything but by then we knew each other well enough that she didn't have to. She just shook her head as if to say "My royal treasurer is off on one of his wild goose chases again. She was right. The trip to Jerusalem was a disaster. The folks at the temple were not used to seeing a black man and when they found out I spoke Hebrew that made them more suspicious rather than less. And then there was the eunuch thing. In order to convert to Judaism I had to be circumcised but since I could not – well you get the picture. They were nice enough about it but it was clear there was no place for me in Judaism.

And so I turned my chariot around and headed south again. How could I have been so wrong? It sounded so good. I must have made a mistake in my reading. I got out the Isaiah scroll again and started reading. Suddenly bold as brass this guy comes running up to me. Do you know what you are reading he asks? How can I, I say I have no guide. Hop in I say and in he hops. Ok so who is Isaiah talking about here I ask. Let me explain he says. And he proceeds to tell me the story of Jesus of Nazareth and how he was one of Jesus' disciples and how Jesus kept telling the disciples that God's love encompassed everybody and how Jesus kept expanding the disciples horizons in spite of themselves and how they really didn't understand until after Jesus had been killed and resurrected and how the Holy Spirit had told him Philip to take the road I was on and meet me and tell me this stuff. All I could do was sit there mesmerized. A God whose love is so wide it embraces all. A God whose love is so wide it embraces even me. A God whose love is so deep, He is willing to suffer and die for us. It was all too much. A God who cared enough about me to send one of his most trusted servants directly to me to answer my questions. My mind was reeling and I could feel a seed, a kernel within me begin to sprout – the seed of hope. We came to some water and I said recklessly "So what is to prevent me from being baptized?" Then I waited – waited like I have waited so many times before for the rejection to come. All eternity seemed to hang in the balance. The seed of hope in my heart stopped growing. Philip was out of the chariot and down in the pond before I could even move. The next thing I knew water was being poured on my head, but it did not feel like water. It felt like love pure and simple. If you have ever experienced having love flow over you and around you and through you it is a joyful experience. You need a new name said Philip so I will baptize you Herald for you will be God's herald of the coming Kingdom – the first fruits of the new order. Incredible, amazing, wonderful and then he was gone. I was filled to overflowing.

A week later I pulled up to the royal palace. Queen Candace took one look at me and said Wow, I have never in my life seen someone glow as you do. It looks like you found what you were looking for. We need to have a long talk. And so we did.