

Pastor's Message – 5/1/2022  
Acts 9:1-20

Easter was only two weeks ago, but I remember reading the account of Jesus' resurrection from Luke's gospel and how Peter and the other apostles didn't believe the women's crazy story that the tomb was empty, and Jesus had been raised. I mentioned in my Easter sermon that the disciples should have known that resurrection of the dead was possible. They would have known about the Old Testament resurrections and would have been present at Lazarus' resurrection. We'll hear about another resurrection next week, that of the woman named Tabitha also known as Dorcas.

Then last week, Jesus appeared to the apostles in the upper room, but Thomas did not believe until he had seen "the nail wounds in his hands, put my fingers into them, and place[d] my[his] hand into the wound in his side." He did and he did, i.e., saw and believed. The disciples met the risen Jesus, and they were changed from fearful into bold and courageous. Indeed, in the midst of threats on their lives, they preached the good news of Christ risen to anyone who would listen and even to those who were hostile to that message, including Saul who we hear about today.

Earlier in the Book of Acts, less than 2 chapters ago, at the end of chapter 7, those who gathered to witness the stoning of Stephen, "laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul" (Acts 7.58). Saul approves of the killing, and then takes a leading role in "ravaging" the church (8:1-3). He has been rounding up followers of "The Way," what Christians were called at that time. He is now on his way to Damascus to hunt down Christians there.

You heard what happened on the road to Damascus; Saul has an encounter with God and everything changes. This encounter begins with a flash of light that puts Saul on the ground. There is a voice that calls Saul by name and directs him what to do next. And there is the ensuing loss of Saul's sight. Saul is blind for three days -- he is deprived of the physical ability to see, and his condition is a mirror for

his spiritual blindness. God jolted Saul, who will later be renamed Paul, out of his worldview about who was righteous and who was not – what was right and what was wrong.

Saul's goals were religious, political, and cultural -- he wanted to defend the traditional Jewish faith he had been schooled in and keep it at the center of life and culture by returning to the golden days of Israel's kingdoms.

Moving on from or giving up on the good-old-days can be hard. We can get comfortable in what we've always known and what we've always believed. We can grow accustomed to what has always been and what has worked before and the way we think things should be.

Sometimes we, like Saul, can be blindly moving along, and God has to go to dramatic lengths to get our attention. There may be times when God stops us in our tracks to change our direction or opens us up to new possibilities.

It is those times when we have to examine what happens after the light flashes and the voice is heard and everything changes. The change in our minds is the first step, and then we have to make it real in our lives. The most interesting time is after the mental change -- what do we do next? How do we change long-standing patterns of behavior and attitudes? Saul's experience of transformation can be a catalyst for all those who follow "The Way" to consider transformation as well.

Sometimes overlooked in the drama of Saul's experience of encounter with God is the story of Ananias' encounter with God. It, too, is a story of transformation. Like the rest of the Christian community who were being hunted, Ananias had good reason to mistrust Saul. Saul had done "terrible things ... to the believers in Jerusalem" (Act 9.13).

Yet, here on the Damascus road, Saul's direction has been changed. So now Ananias is challenged to a turning of his own. Ananias is to go to Saul and bring healing to this former enemy. This is

also an encounter with Jesus, an encounter with the Holy Spirit, whose call to transformation remains as timely for the church and for all of us today as it was for Ananias.

Peter once thought, similar to Paul, that the Jewish way was the only way. In a story that we will hear in a couple of weeks, on the 15<sup>th</sup>, Peter eventually learns that God shows no partiality and plays no favorites. God calls and reaches out and loves and offers healing to all who are in need. Our God is the Lord of the broken in whatever form that brokenness may present itself. Saul, Ananias, and each one of us are in the same need of God's transforming grace and presence. Despite our brokenness, God, through His Holy Spirit, can catch us up short, transform us, and work through us to transform others.

There are some people and some denominations that believe God only comes to us dramatically, as he did to Paul. They aren't sure we are really saved unless we can point to a day and hour when the Lord came to us. Jesus certainly had to stop Paul from heading in the direction he was going. Of course, it is possible for God to come to us in such a spectacular way. Sometimes that is the only way he can get our attention! We also know, through the words of the Bible, that sometimes God reaches out to us in gentle whispers – that still small voice we can read about in 1 Kings 19.

In whatever way the Holy Spirit comes to us, the radical transformation of human life in response to divine action is at the heart of our Bible reading today, and this gives us a wonderful opportunity to examine what we believe about Christian conversion – when and how and where it happens. How does your experience compare to Saul's experience? How does your experience compare to Ananias' experience?

Conversion. It's when you take something and change -- usually for the better -- its function or use. That's what happened to Saul. The conversion process started when he saw a bright light and hit the ground on the Damascus road. He thought he had been converted then and there. But Jesus told him to go into town where he would get

further instructions. What happened, essentially, is that Jesus sent him to church, or at least to some church people: a place and people that specializes in conversions. Not a bad way to think of the church: a place and people where we meet Jesus.

Encountering Christ calls, restores, and commissions Christian community. It happens in many different ways, but they all lead to renewal. They all remind us in whose presence we live and move and have our being and in whose name we serve.

Encountering Jesus changes our lives. Knowing that we are, by the pure grace of God, loved and accepted and forgiven of all the mistakes and sins we have committed changes our perspective. It changes our beliefs about ourselves and about other people. It changes our mission and purpose in the world. Once we encounter Jesus and are converted, we want to give our lives over to serving him for the rest of our days.

Part of our journey and experience as people of faith is to follow where God is leading us into something new -- but change is hard. The road to change is one of many steps, often slow ones, with even a few going backward. Sometimes we need someone to lead us by the hand, and other times we are the ones charged with doing the leading. Even when change is slow or unspectacular or seems incremental that leading by the hand is also God's leading into something new.

Someone has said, "The church is not a museum for saints, but a fellowship of sinners." We serve and follow a God who is Lord of the broken. We serve and follow a Lord who calls and offers to heal and restore all who put their faith and trust in Him. May our church put this statement into practice. Let us be about listening for God's call and helping each other listen and follow and be a church which still and always proclaims, "He is Lord" and "Christ is Risen!"