

**Struck down and Raised Up
Acts 9:1-20; John 21:1-19)**

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One of the promises of the resurrection of Jesus on Easter morning, is that we who follow in his footsteps will participate in his resurrection; that when we die there will be a great release in which we enter into a life with God. But that promise of resurrection is also meant for the midst of our lives; that we may live in part now, in the resurrection that is to come. And sometimes it can be hard to imagine how that can be.

This morning's story of the conversion of Saul, once the persecutor of Jesus's followers, to Paul, the man who became his most ardent servant, gives us "insight" into how this happened in one person's life one, and a better understanding of how it can happen in our own lives.

We don't often think of Paul's conversion as a resurrection story, because we usually think of conversion and resurrection as being two different things. But I'd like to encourage us to consider how being converted from a life of sin and death to a life lived for the Gospel is another way of talking about our participation in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

The story of Paul's conversion encourages us to think of conversion in light of Jesus's death and resurrection, because when Paul is struck blind and speechless, he remains this way for "three days" before his encounter with Ananias.

The number three in the Bible indicates completion. Like hammering a nail into a board. The first hit sets the nail in place. The second drives it in and the third hit finalizes it. And so, when Jesus is in the tomb three days, it's a way of saying he wasn't a little bit dead or mostly dead. He was really dead.

And so, the reference to "three days" in the story of Paul's conversion has a similar meaning. But the choice of words is also clearly meant to get us thinking about what happens to Paul in light of Jesus's death and resurrection, to consider how the one story mirrors the other. So that, I think we can consider the moment when the scales fall from Paul's eyes and he sees reality in a whole new light, as his moment of resurrection.

If we look at it this way, the story of Paul as a whole becomes the story of a man who dies to himself and is raised to live the rest of his days in Christ, before finally entering with him into life everlasting. It is itself a resurrection story.

Rev. Hattendorf's Take

This week I read a poem written about this very passage by a UCC Minister in Danvers, Mass. named Rev. Johanna Hattendorf. I'd like to read it to you because through it, I think you can see how she, as a survivor of some unnamed trauma, identifies Paul's conversion/resurrection story with her own life story. She writes:

Some changes come slowly,
creeping in as we saunter along in our life,
Other change comes in an instant
Turning our lives upside down and inside out.

Some changes we control:
"I'll eat less junk, more whole foods,
I'll exercise more, get out, take a walk.
Get a new job, move to a new home."

Other changes are thrust upon us,
A sudden death of a loved one,
A car accident, a shooting, a pandemic,
A sudden tornado or firestorm,

Those changes, those thrust upon us--
The ones beyond our control--
Those are the ones that shake us--
That challenge us to our very core

These are the trauma's and tragedies
That ones that are too much, too fast,
or go on for too long.

These changes shatter us--
Who we think we are,
How we are in the world,
--All of it gone.
And we are left to wonder:
who and how will we be?

This is the situation that Saul finds himself in.
He knows who he is--a lawyer--a very good one--
And he knows his job: to prosecute, to persecute, to imprison.
That's who he is.
That's how he is.

But, suddenly, in an instant, his life is changed.
He is "Blinded by the light."
Dropped to his knees.
Shaken to his core.

This sudden blinding casts everything into doubt.
Who he will become
And how he will be
Knowing is replaced with confusion,

In moments of trauma, all we can know
Is that what went before
Won't work anymore.
How we used to be, won't help us now.

In his confusion, Saul is given direction,
Guidance,
A clear mandate:

“...get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.” (vs.6)

Of course, we know the end of Saul’s story.
And he only needs to wait 3 days for his instructions.
Ananias come to heal him.
He changes his name to Paul
He changes his job from prosecutor
To a new job of preaching, teaching, spreading the good news.

Those of us who have lived through trauma know—
This is how it is.
Healing takes time (usually a lot longer than 3 days!).
And we need a lot of help.
We cannot just get up and go on with life as it once was.
We cannot just go forward.

We must wait.
Wait to see what will come.
Wait, pray, hope that the change that follows
Will somehow be better
That the future will hold something worthwhile,
Even if it isn’t how it used to be.

As individuals, nations, even as the world,
We are in a time of tragedy, trauma, and change.
As we struggle with everything that is “too much, too fast,
and has been going on for “too long”,
I pray that we all find words of love and support,
Helpers willing to be with us in the confusion,
And the Light of God to help us to find the way forward.

Fracture and Grace

So that is the end of Rev. Hattendorf's poem. I think it really helps us to see as she did the connection between Paul's conversion and our own lives. It helps us to see that it is very often the huge fractures in our lives that God uses to raise us up and bestow on us a share in Christ's resurrected life.

And I don't think it has to be a big external trauma that creates this fracture. It doesn't have to be something that has been done against us. In Paul's case, the trauma was self-inflicted.

The fracture could be caused by a realization that develops slowly and unnoticed deep inside us, the way pressure builds underground between two plates before an earthquake.

Then one day, while you are driving around and suddenly you get knocked off your Subaru. Bam! For no reason that anyone else is aware of, and perhaps you yourself were not quite aware of, you are struck as though by a lightning bolt. You are blindsided by the realization that the way you are living is so far from who you are that you can't do it any more and your life as you know it is done. You don't know what's next, but you know what was is done. And

you have to wait for instructions to come from somewhere. And all you can do is pray.

I can imagine that something like this might have been going on inside of Paul before he was struck down by the words of Jesus. Perhaps the cries for mercy from the Christians he had witnessed being stoned to death, had quietly worked their way into his being, troubling his conscience until suddenly it all came crashing down, and Jesus spoke.

Ananias's Encounter

It is possible that this story of Paul's conversion/resurrection is really the conversion/resurrection story of two people, the other being Ananias. As God's messenger to Paul, he is also a central figure in this part of the story. But unlike Paul, who has been the persecutor, Ananias is the persecuted. And he is in need of a different kind of liberation.

When he comes to Paul, it is as though he is making a statement. "We will not be intimidated by you. You will not stop us from loving. And I am risking my life to show you that I love even you."

What stands out most about Ananias is his courage. He is fully aware of Paul's reputation as the one "breathing threats and murder against Jesus's followers" and that meeting with him could go very badly.

But in spite of this risk, he trusts in the vision he receives from God and goes anyway. And when he comes before Paul, he speaks to him as though to a "brother," as a servant of Jesus, to help him regain his sight. And it is in this moment of encounter that the scales fall from Saul's eyes.

This points to a theme that is repeated over and over again in the story of the early church. The Holy Spirit speaks to people, gives them visions and urges them to visit with each other. But the decisive life changing event (the conversion or resurrection moment) doesn't during these visions and realizations. It comes in the actual encounter between the people the Holy Spirit has moved to bring together. So it is encounter itself provides the moment of grace and fulfillment. In other words, it is not enough to hear the word from Jesus, but to do it.

“Feed My Sheep”

And that is also part of the point in the exchange between Peter and Jesus at the end of our reading in the Gospel of John, when Jesus repeats the question three times ” Do you love me?”

Each time Peter insists that he does Jesus adds, “then feed my sheep.” The love he has received from Jesus has to be completed by a coming together, where both parties are fed and receive what they need in order to go on living.

And so one of the things that both of this morning’s readings share is the understanding that participation in the resurrection life of Jesus cannot simply be a private realization. It also involves a new found courage to follow through and engage with others as he is calling us to do that, in this life, resurrection doesn’t happen unless people come together and have the courage to let their hearts touch.