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"FROM PERSECUTOR TO PROCLAIMER"

Acts 9:1-30

The central miracle of the Christian faith is the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. All four gospels report Jesus' tomb was empty, meaning no one could produce his corpse. But far more important than the empty tomb as evidence of the resurrection, are numerous reports of appearances of the Risen Jesus to both individuals and groups.

In his First Letter to the Church in Corinth Paul wrote about those to whom the Risen Christ appeared. "For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas (Peter), then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James (Jesus' brother), then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one

untimely born, he also appeared to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain” (1 Cor. 15:3-10a).

Some skeptics have noted that nearly all of those to whom the Risen Christ is said to have appeared were already devout followers of Jesus, or in the case of James a family member. These are people who might naturally want to believe Jesus was alive. In that entire list there is only one person who was an enemy of the church, Paul himself. He had no reason whatsoever to want to believe Jesus’ resurrection was real. In fact, he had every reason to want to deny that truth since it would require a complete reorientation of his life!

The story of Saul’s conversion and commission as an apostle is so important that Luke records it 3 times in the Acts of the Apostles! While Luke narrates Paul’s conversion in chapter 9, in chapter 22 Paul speaks to a mob in front of the steps to the Antonia Fortress in Jerusalem after a Jewish crowd has been trying to lynch him in the temple. (photo) In chapter 26 Paul

speaks before King Agrippa and governor Festus in the latter's palace in Caesarea. (2 photos)

Saul of Tarsus first appears in Acts when those who stoned Stephen, the first Christian martyr, lay down their coats at his feet, as he approved of their action. Saul surfaces again in today's text, Acts 9:1-30, found on p.127 in the NT section of your pew Bibles. It's a long text, and we're going to hear it in 2 parts, so I encourage you to follow along and keep your Bible open.

Read 9:1-9; Saul is so zealous to squash the early Christian movement at this point called "the Way" that he carries warrants for the arrest of any Jews who had become Jesus-followers within Jewish synagogues of Damascus. Apparently the Jewish High Priest, has subpoena power recognized 150 miles away in Damascus, the capital of the Roman Province of Syria.

Nearing Damascus Saul saw the Risen Christ and was blinded by the brightness of the vision. It's hard to know what the others saw who accompanied Paul. All heard the voice, but only Saul apparently could understand the words, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" Paul asks who is speaking and the

reply comes, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.” The Risen Christ identifies so closely with members of his Body, the church, that when they are persecuted, He is persecuted directly. Earlier in his good news document Luke had recorded Jesus’ promise to his disciples (10:16), “Whoever listens to you listens to me, and whoever rejects you rejects me, and whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me.” So there are consequences when people reject Jesus’ spokespeople!

Read 9:10-30; Not only did Saul receive a vision, but so did a Jewish Christian named Ananias living in Damascus. He was instructed how to find Saul and to lay hands on him so that he might regain his sight. When Ananias protested that Saul was an enemy of the Christian movement, the Risen Christ replied, “Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.” Paul will have a wide evangelistic ministry to Jews and especially to Gentiles, including those in positions of power. Notice that while Paul had earlier inflicted much suffering, the

Risen Christ says in future Saul will personally undergo much suffering for his sake! (4 photos) The persecution Paul once headed would now be directed against him. In the words of NT scholar David Peterson, “The great antagonist of the gospel will become its outstanding protagonist” (p.309; Pillar NT Commentary – Acts; c.2009; Grand Rapids; Eerdmans).

Ananias says a healing prayer over Saul so that he was healed and received the Spirit and was baptized. Almost immediately Paul began sharing his faith in Jesus as “the Son of God”, arguing “that Jesus was the Messiah.” His preaching drew Jewish opposition as some hatched a plot to murder Saul. When the plot was leaked, a group of fellow Christians lowered Paul over the Damascus city wall in a basket so that he might escape.

When Paul began preaching in Jerusalem about the Risen Christ a group of Hellenistic, Greek-speaking Jews plotted to murder him there also. So for safety, the Christians brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to his birthplace, Tarsus.

I want to make 2 reflections about this text. The first is a question - “how did Paul become a Jesus follower?” One

psychological theory is that Paul had a deep, repressed sense of guilt for his involvement in the persecution of Christians, including the death of Stephen and perhaps others, and eventually that guilt produced a hallucinatory vision and mental/emotional breakdown which led to his conversion.

It is dangerous to psychoanalyze anyone from a distance, especially 2000 years later. In Paul's case, from his own writings there is absolutely no indication he felt any guilt at all about his zeal to persecute Christians and his efforts to destroy the Christian movement. NT scholar Richard Longnecker comments, "Paul's own references as a Christian to this earlier time in his life . . . suggest that humanly speaking he was immune to the Christian proclamation and immensely satisfied with his own ancestral faith" (p.164; The Expositor's Bible Commentary; Acts; c.1995; Grand Rapids; Zondervan).

For example in the autobiographical section of his Letter to the Church at Philippi which we used in our call to worship, Paul proclaimed "as to zeal, he was a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless." Later in this same

document (Acts 23:1), while speaking before the Jewish Sanhedrin in Jerusalem Paul said, “Up to this day I have lived my life with a clear conscience before God.” And at 2 Timothy 1:3 Paul says, “I am grateful to God – whom I worship with a clear conscience. . . “ Therefore Paul’s conversion to faith in Jesus as Messiah can’t be explained by an inner guilt that needed addressing. Instead it can only be adequately explained as a result of his personal encounter with the Risen Christ! So this text assures us of the reality of Jesus’ resurrection.

Second, this text suggests that if God can forgive and redeem Paul, an arch-enemy of the faith, who shared in the responsibility for the deaths of some Christians, God can forgive and save anyone you and I know, no matter how resistant they seem to the gospel, no matter how hostile they may be presently to Christ and the church! So the outreach possibilities for us are endless! Think for a moment about people you know who are particularly hostile toward the Christian faith, people who reject any need for Christ and the gospel. This text tells us that such persons are not beyond the reach of Christ’s grace!

Though a deeply religious person Saul was convinced the Christian faith was based on a lie – Jesus was not the promised Messiah, nor had God raised him from the dead! And yet the Holy Spirit convinced Paul otherwise and commissioned him as an apostle!

One individual who like Paul thought that the resurrection of Jesus was a lie, a legend, a made-up story was British skeptic Frank Morison. He began writing a book to debunk Christian claims that Jesus had been raised from the dead. But the more closely he followed the gospel narratives, the more he became convinced that the resurrection was not fiction or fantasy but a real event! In his book Who Moved the Stone? Morison's first chapter is entitled "The Book That Refused to be Written." He comments, "It was as though a man set out to cross a forest by a familiar and well-beaten track and came out suddenly where he did not expect to come out. The point of entry was the same; it was the point of *emergence* that was different" (p.9; Who Moved the Stone?; c.1969; Downers Grove, Ill; Inter-Varsity Press).

The same thing could be said of Paul's journey on the road to Damascus. He started as he planned but ended up in a spiritual state that was completely unexpected!

Friends, today we celebrate the Lord's Supper. In the NT the Lord's Supper is not only a memorial to the saving death of Jesus, but also a celebration of Jesus resurrection! The Apostle Paul spoke of the Lord's Supper as the opportunity to take part in a meal at which the Risen Christ is our host and in which we have fellowship with him. So friends, it is the Risen Christ who invites you to partake of this meal, a meal in His honor, at which He is our host! Amen.