

Scripture Readings for April 18, 2021

Acts 9:1-9; 19b-22 (NIV)

9 Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest ² and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. ³ As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

⁵ "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked.

"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. ⁶ "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

⁷ The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone.

⁸ Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. ⁹ For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.

Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. ²⁰ At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. ²¹ All those who heard him were astonished and asked, "Isn't he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn't he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?" ²² Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Messiah.

1 Corinthians 15:1-11

15 Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. ² By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.

³ For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, ⁵ and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. ⁶ After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. ⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, ⁸ and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.

⁹ For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. ¹⁰ But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.

¹¹ Whether, then, it is I or they, this is what we preach, and this is what you believed.

Sermon: An Unlikely Witness to the Resurrection

The forty days of Lent are traditionally taken as a time of reflection, soul-searching, fasting, and preparation for Easter. Then Easter comes and goes all too quickly. That lengthy fast is not followed by forty days of *feasting*; rather, just a special meal or two – and lots of chocolate! However, in the weeks following Easter Day, the Lectionary does continue the celebrations with mention of the resurrection appearances of the risen Jesus to his closest followers. We were reminded of the story of Thomas last week. In our reading from 1 Corinthians, which was written in the early 50's AD – about 15-20 years *before* the first gospel [Mark] was written, Paul catalogs some of those first resurrection appearances.¹ He says that “Jesus appeared to Peter, and then the rest of the disciples.”² After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have died.” Paul continues, “Then he appeared to James, the brother of Jesus,³ and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.”⁴ Paul clearly recognizes the importance of *witnesses* to the risen Jesus, and stresses that fact to his readers.⁵ He also knows the *incredible nature* of the very idea of “resurrection.” That was just as true then as it is now. “No, this *wasn’t* a series of private *visionary* experiences reported by a select few of close followers of Jesus,” preempts Paul. That *cannot* explain the fact Jesus was seen alive by “more than five hundred people at the *same* time.” Moreover, since most of them were still living at the time Paul was writing, he implies that they could be cross-examined if the Corinthians wanted to pursue that line of action. Curiously, Paul then adds his own name to that list of those who have seen the risen Lord. Yet he knows that his own experience of Jesus is not in the same category as the others on that list. This is for two reasons; the first is obviously because Paul’s “road to Damascus” encounter occurred *after* the ascension. But more importantly, Paul was not a disciple of Jesus but a zealous Jewish *persecutor* of the early Church; consequently, his strange encounter with the risen Christ can only be described as a gracious act of divine revelation.⁶ After all, it *must* have taken something very dramatic to result in Paul’s U-turn! Yet that event has changed world history - and we are here today because of it. So let’s explore Luke’s description of that story this morning, as well as consider what all this might mean for us today.

¹ This is preceded with what has become a creedal statement: “For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures” (1 Cor 15:3-4). This is “common ground” (1 Cor 15:1) and from this basis Paul goes on to discuss implications of the resurrection and the nature of that body.

² Paul uses the expression “the Twelve,” however – according to Matt 27:5 and Acts 1:18 - Judas Iscariot had committed suicide by then.

³ James eventually becomes head of the Jerusalem church; see Acts 15. (This appearance is not mentioned elsewhere.)

⁴ 1 Cor 15:5-8 (adapted for clarity; see also 1 Cor 9:1). The reference to “abnormally born” refers to a premature birth, a miscarriage, or an aborted child. Paul uses it as a powerful figure of the unexpected, abnormal nature of his apostolic call. See also: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Nailing-Our-Colours-To-The-Mast.pdf>.

⁵ Unlike the gospel accounts, no women are mentioned here as Paul presumably knows that would undermine the credibility of his later argument.

⁶ 1 Cor 15:9-10 contain language that sounds to us like boasting! This hyperbole is part of Paul’s rhetorical technique to assert his authority (again – see 1 Cor 3:4-11) so that they will continue to take him seriously over this last key point. What was also a sign of God’s grace was the effectiveness of Paul’s missionary work amongst the Corinthians (and elsewhere), which no one could dispute.

Luke tells the story of Saul's conversion *three* times in the book of Acts.⁷ (I remind you that "Saul" later used his Roman name, "Paul," for his mission to non-Jews.⁸) Curiously, Luke doesn't tell us anything about Saul's background, his education, or inner motives. We know from Paul's own writing that he was, from his earliest days, a deeply devout Jew, for whom prayer and meditation would have been a daily reality, and the study of scriptures his lifelong passion. He was also a Pharisee, in other words, keenly concerned for holiness and keeping the Mosaic law. It was this zeal for religious purity that resulted in Saul persecuting his fellow Jews for abandoning what he saw as the true faith to follow the Jesus Way.⁹ Luke picks up Saul's story on the road to Damascus. In those days, Damascus was an important Syrian city, about 200km north of Jerusalem, a significant commercial center of the Roman Empire and had a large population of Jews. It was as Paul was approaching the city that "a light from heaven flashed around him, and he falls to the ground."¹⁰ This mention of flashing, bright lights is typical of an Old Testament prophet's encounter with God, and points to a manifestation of the glory of God.¹¹ The appropriate response is to fall to the ground in humility. He then hears a voice saying, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"¹² This moment of revelation is both an epiphany and a divine audition; in the Old Testament, when God calls you, God often says your name *twice!*¹³ Saul's response seems to be one of confusion. After all, he sees himself as being on *God's* business so how *can* this divine voice be asking "*Why* do you persecute *me*?" In other words, why would Saul's persecution of what he regards as errant Jews be considered an act against God himself? So Saul asks, "Who are you, Lord?"¹⁴ And the voice responds, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting."¹⁵ This is an startling epiphany which reveals that the glorified Jesus is now at the authoritative right hand of God, and therefore speaks for God himself.¹⁶ And Luke's readers will recall what Jesus had said to his disciples much earlier, namely: "Whoever listens to you listens to me; whoever rejects you rejects me; but whoever rejects me rejects *him who sent me.*"¹⁷ As Saul later processes this information, he makes the connection with Jesus being the Israel's *true* Messiah, the Son of God.¹⁸ For him to proclaim that message is without doubt a radical U-turn for this pharisee. However, what happens first is that the risen Jesus gives Saul some instructions for his "next steps." The intention is evidently not to frighten Saul into obedience but to reveal a plan

⁷ See Acts 9:1-22; 22:3-16; 26:4-23. This repetition must therefore be of great importance. (Remember this is *Luke's* account, not Paul's own. In fact, Paul never describes his "Damascus road" experience! See Gal 1:11-23.)

⁸ See Acts 13:9. (The point being that Jesus did not rename Saul, as he did "Peter" (from "Simon" or Cephas in Aramaic.)

⁹ Acts 8:1-3. In Acts 9:1-2 Luke says Saul was officially sanctioned to pursue/persecute the Jewish Christians in Damascus.

¹⁰ Acts 9:3-4a. Luke *never* says that Paul was on a horse, though that is often how it is often portrayed in art/paintings! See also Acts 22:6; 26:13; 2 Cor 4:4-6.

¹¹ See Acts 9:3b; Exod 19:16; Ezek 1:4, 13, 28; Dan 10:6 (cf. Acts 7:55).

¹² Acts 9:4.

¹³ See Gen 22:11; 46:2; Exod 3:4-10.

¹⁴ Acts 9:5a. The use of "Lord" is perhaps ironic. "Lord" is the Greek (LXX, *kyrios*) name for God, yet it can also mean a respectful "sir." I suggest it is the former in this context. What it is *not* – at this point in time – an acknowledgment of Jesus as "Lord."

¹⁵ Acts 9:5b. Note: some scholars see a direct comparison between the call of Moses in Exod 3:4 and the call of Paul here (see [13]), including God's response with "I am who I am" to Moses, and "I am Jesus" here to Saul.

¹⁶ See also Acts 7:55; 2:36.

¹⁷ See Luke 10:16; recall too Luke 9:35.

¹⁸ Acts 9:20, 22.

of action, one that both *commissions* Saul for service and *introduces* him to the Christian community in Damascus.¹⁹ This is graphically portrayed in Saul coming to Damascus initially in a position of authority and power but arriving in weakness, temporarily blind and needing to be led by the hand.²⁰ From then on, Paul claims to have seen the *risen* and *glorified* Lord and so adds his name to those who witnessed the resurrection. Everything that Saul of Tarsus said and did from that time on, in particular everything that he wrote, flowed from that sudden, and shocking encounter with the risen Jesus.

What are we to make of this today? First, note that this experience is *not* what Paul was seeking or anticipating. If you think about it for a moment, that is true for *all* the post-resurrection witnesses to the risen Christ. That's because no one was *expecting* the resurrection, and certainly not Saul - who until this encounter – totally rejected that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah.

Second, this U-turn is also described as a “conversion” account. But we need to be careful here in that Paul is converted *to Jesus* and *not* from one religion to another.²¹ Paul is *not* repudiating his Jewish heritage and remains a pious Jew and a teacher of Israel.²² Moreover, Paul doesn't have his mind changed by a persuasive sermon from a talented preacher! No, Paul's change of mind is because he now *sees* Jesus as alive and *no longer dead*, and therefore that Jesus must be God's Messiah sent into the world to rescue everyone.²³ In Luke's account, it is God who *takes the initiative* and reveals that fact to Saul. I suggest that this still true today, even if our *aha* moments are nowhere near as dramatic as Paul's. The Holy Spirit still opens our eyes to Jesus today, but usually *only* if we are *looking* for him or are *open* to that possibility. That process is as varied as there are people; it's deeply *personal*,²⁴ so we can't be overly prescriptive as to *how* God works or reveals himself. There are many who are taught from childhood to love Jesus and this is something that shows itself quietly over the years. Consequently, there are many Christians who can't remember a time when they were *not* believers. In contrast, there are others who discover the reality of the risen Jesus as an adult through some personal crisis. This could be concerning a major medical or job situation, or a relationship problem, or some other emergency. Perhaps a prayer was graciously answered in an unexpected way, and that started a journey of discovery as to what all this means. Regardless of the method, what's important is that *the reality of Jesus being alive* is vividly *real to an individual*. By the way, too many people think - or assume - that Saul's road-to-Damascus experience is the normal way for coming to know Jesus, and so they are disappointed that they haven't had anything like that. Well, it's *not!* That story *not* just about his “conversion”; it's also an emphatic call narrative for Paul's future ministry – one that is in-line with the Old Testament prophets. Never not forget that!

¹⁹ See Acts 15:6-25. Saul also (dramatically) receives the Holy Spirit through Ananias. This is an authoritative “call narrative.”

²⁰ See Acts 15:8, 18.

²¹ This is important for Christian mission today; one can be a Jesus-follower and still be a *cultural* Muslim, Buddhist, etc.

²² While Paul's ministry is to the non-Jews, he *first* goes to the Jews in the synagogues on his missionary journeys.

²³ Saul recognises what Simeon did in Luke 2:29-32.

²⁴ Acts 9:7-9 suggests Paul's dramatic encounter did not impact his travelling companions. Our own stories might be misunderstood by families and friends today.

By way of an example, let me tell you something of my own story. I was raised in a Christian family, attended Sunday School regularly and so loved Jesus from an early age. Even so, I consider myself as becoming a Christian at the age of 13, when I consciously came to understand the notion and need of forgiveness and repentance. I was later baptized at 18, since I hadn't been baptized as a baby. Yet it was really during my university years that my faith matured. It was through an active process of questioning and study that the faith I absorbed from my parents became my own personal faith. And that maturing process still continues to this day; I have found that growth process to be both gradual and, from time to time, has spurts. This leads me to my next point.

Third, if someone then continues to partner with God, the Spirit will – over time - transform that person's life – their behaviour and character. Even so, that transformation process is *never coerced*; God doesn't override our free will. God didn't *coerced* Paul to believe. It was his own religious devotion and worldview – along with the gentle nudging or influence of the Spirit - that pretty much led Paul to his new-found recognition of Jesus as God's Messiah. Paul's *passionate personality* didn't really change; it was the *object* of his zeal that was redirected. Moreover, while Luke's narrative makes it sound like Paul's transformation occurred in a matter of days, Paul's own account implies it took at least three years.²⁵ And that is much more realistic; Paul had a lot to process!²⁶

Fourth, Luke also portrays Paul's change as occurring in the context of a Christian *community*.²⁷ His first steps took place in Damascus where Christians accepted and supported Saul through a process that changed everyone involved, as he moved from an enemy to a brother. More generally, Luke's description of the early church in Acts suggests that Christian discipleship is far too demanding for an individual to face alone.²⁸ It's only within a caring community that believers can find those resources and relationships to forge an enduring faith. The Christian life is too hard to go-it-alone - though you hear folk today say that they love Jesus but hate the church and so never connect with a healthy Christian community. Look, I understand why: People have been burned by bad experiences of the church. And that's terrible; sadly, it happens and it creates barriers between people and God and is totally counterproductive to God's mission. Church's need to own up to that, to repent, and be changed by the power of the Spirit. However, when a Christian community *is* functioning well – it shines like a beacon on a hill for others to see. Paul, though highly individualistic in his future ministry, believed passionately in the church *community*; we know that from his letters.

Let's try and wrap this up! Paul's encounter with the risen Jesus was unique to him and most unlike our own. Yet there is a similarity with ours, in that it was a *post-ascension* experience. Let's not envy Paul's dramatic experience without also remembering that it led him on a path to martyrdom! God reaches

²⁵ Compare Acts 9:9, 17-22 and Gal 1:16-24.

²⁶ We don't know about Saul's inner turmoil or doubts, or his struggles in the "dark nights of the soul." But I suggest that his theology was substantially reconfigured/reformulated during these three years.

²⁷ See [24]. While I still believe in the role of community, Paul's *rhetoric* in Gal 1 is to establish his (independent) authority.

²⁸ See Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-35.

different people in different ways; our journeys are each unique. Yes, we can share our stories with others to provide *encouragement* of the reality of the risen Jesus, but *not* to boast. And as we hear someone else's story, let's not feel belittled or cheated but rejoice in what God is doing in someone else's life, as well as our own. Even so, in this post-resurrection season, let us again reflect on the reality of that pivotal event. I end with these two questions for each of us to consider. Do I *know* that Jesus is *alive* – risen from the dead? I ask this because if a person believes Jesus remains dead, they are simply following a good man's teaching. While this may be no bad thing in itself, it robs the Jesus' message of its power and it dismisses the uniqueness of Jesus as God's Chosen One – the Messiah. So, I ask again: Do I *know* that Jesus is *alive* – risen from the dead? My second question is this: What *difference* does that make to me - not just as I look back on my life, but looking forward? Amen. Let us pray.