

3 EASTER

1st MARSHALL

APRIL 11/14/15, 2018

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ACTS 9:1-19a; MATTHEW 6:24

PAUL'S CONVERSION

Dear friends in Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Prepare our hearts, Lord, to receive your Word. Silence in us any voice but your own that in hearing we may believe and in believing we may obey your will revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Amen.

We were blessed on Easter morning...when told that the Risen Lord appeared to Mary – he was upright, awake, and alive!



Since then we've heard that he **also** appeared to many of his other followers as well. Two weeks ago, Cliff Carmody preached about the Lord's encounter the disciple Thomas – he's the one who thought the others were trying to fool him by claiming that they'd seen Jesus alive.

You remember what Thomas told them all: *Unless I can put my finger in the holes made by the nails, I will not believe!!*

Well, Thomas got his wish – the very next week. Suddenly Jesus appeared – again...RIGHT in their midst!!! He looked at Thomas and said, *See the nail holes?... put your finger here!*

But...Thomas saw the light and simply said, *My Lord and my God!!*

These mysterious and sudden appearances by Jesus continued for a month or so, and then the time was finally right for the Lord to leave the past behind. So he gathered all of his followers one last time. Yet...just before he said his goodbye, his disciples asked Jesus this question: *Is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel???* (Acts 1:6).

Obviously we can't know how Jesus reacted to their query, but I wouldn't be surprised to learn that it took every bit of divine self-control for him not to slap his forehead in frustration and say, "ARE YOU SERIOUS???"

These are the folks who have lived with Jesus for the last three years. That means day in and day out for at least 36 months they've heard the Lord TEACH, they've listened to him PREACH, they've watched him HEAL the SICK, CAST OUT DEMONS, WELCOME the FORSAKEN, FEED the HUNGRY, RAISE the DEAD, COMFORT the AFFLICTED and AFFLICT the COMFORTABLE.

And they were there at the height of his popularity, when the crowds actually tried to kidnap the Lord and force him to be their king (John 6:15).

Yet Jesus would have none of that and escaped from their clutches to continue humbly serving God's will, not feeding on humanity's desire for power, strength, wisdom and glory...

...but in the end, in spite of **all** that Jesus had done to prepare his followers for the changes that his resurrection would introduce to **their** lives **and** to **the world**... they still believed that Jesus had come:

- to establish the kingdom of God...on earth;
- to resurrect the nation of Israel...as God's fortress;
- to fulfill every promise of grace, truth and life in the here and now...and back it with an army of angels...

Their question: *Is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?*, reveals the answer they were hoping to hear...that NOW, NOW:

- the meek will inherit the earth...by wielding the power of heaven;
- the poor will fare well...by taking from the rich;
- the persecuted will find peace...by getting their revenge...

It's a completely human thirst for right-handed, worldly-obvious, unquestioned power...a thirst that lies buried in the meat of every human heart – yours and mine included. It's one of the reasons why the disciples asked their question – they had to – they couldn't NOT ask it!

Truly it's a sad parable of our inability to understand the truth about God's gift of grace in Jesus Christ.

At every step along the way, Jesus refused to be king: he escaped the mob, he refused to fight in the Garden of Gethsemane, he allowed King Herod and Pontius Pilate to mock his kingly status... His only claim was this: My kingdom is not of this world! And then... as if to prove that very point... Jesus died...

And if he'd stayed dead, then his followers might have come around to his way of seeing life, and death, and ministry, and love. Yet after his resurrection gave them all a fairly major experience of spiritual whiplash, the heads of the disciples once again started filling with lofty thoughts... *Lord... is now the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel???*

They. Don't. Get it. Or... maybe they do. I mean, think about it for a moment. Think about the glories of their past – King David or King Solomon – those were the good old days, right?, the golden age, the time when all was right in the world – or so it seemed. And maybe, just maybe, the disciples, who see Jesus standing before them alive have just done the math – and they've figured out that if Jesus has defeated the power of Death... then, literally, who can stand against him???

If you take DEATH off the table as threat, then the sky's the limit for his worldly power.

- Their borders? secure forever
- Their armies? unstoppable
- Their power? absolute

I'm sure that they were imagining all the good they could do with power like that... And yet, we all know how the saying goes... absolute power... corrupts absolutely!

I'm guessing that Jesus just smiled at them and said something like: I'm sorry boys and girls, but...

- we're not going back to the way things were... we're moving forward.
- we're not settling for how things used to be... we're entering a brave new world.
- we're not going to be defeating enemies... we're going to be creating children of God, families of faith, communities that come together in peace, hope and love!

But...I'm also convinced that the disciples asked their question about restoring the nation of Israel for another reason as well: it had every bit as much to do with their fear, their anxiety, their un-ease about the massive **change** that was looming on the horizon: namely, Jesus' physical absence from their day-to-day life.



This would have been true for us had we been there as well. Some of you've heard this story, but it's one of my favorites so you all get to hear it again. A parent puts her daughter to bed: reads a story, sings a song, says some prayers, and then...says goodnight...turns out the light...and leaves the room. Before too long the little girl cries out, and the mom goes in to lovingly lay down the law. She says, *Don't worry honey, Jesus is always with you.* Through her sniffles, the little girl responds, "I know...but I want someone in here...with *skin* on."

That is the disciples' cry as well – and it's caused by that very human reaction to the fear of...change... We talk about this often at our Men's Bible Study, as well as at our Bible and Brew gatherings: it's ironic that change happens to us every day – and yet we always secretly hope that it never will...at least, not for the bad.

So this is the milieu, the Sitz-im-leben, the setting in life in which the disciples fearfully find themselves. But Jesus side-steps their question about power and instead gives them a mission: *When I leave*, says the Lord, *the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and will send you out to be my witnesses in all Judea and Samaria – and to the ends of the earth!!*

That's the exact opposite of hoarding, localizing, concentrating God's power in one people or place. Instead, it's about sending people (which means you and me!) sending *us* out in the power of the spirit to serve our neighbors, to forgive as we've been forgiven, to love as we have been loved – in spite of all that might happen to us...

Jesus' early followers knew this well. For a while those first Christians were able to worship at the Temple in Jerusalem and in the churches in the surrounding villages called synagogues. Unfortunately, the day soon came when they were kicked-out of the Temple *and* the synagogues. And as more time passed, when these trouble-making Christians refused to stop worshiping Jesus as the Messiah, the leaders of the nation started arresting them. Some were even put to death.

One of the men responsible for weeding out those pesky Jesus-believers was named Saul s you heard in our lesson for today. Later we'll know him better by the Greek version of his name, Paul – but right now, he goes by Saul, and he is not a nice man – if you happen to be a Christian.

In fact, for the followers of Christ, he's pretty much the boogey-man, the monster in the closet, the meanest, scariest, baddest man you could imagine. Saul's job, which he is VERY GOOD AT – is hunting down Christians, arresting them, and then hauling them back to stand trial in Jerusalem.

You may remember the story of Stephen, the first Christian martyr.



He was put on trial before the Jewish leaders for preaching blasphemy that Jesus was God. The leaders were so enraged that they hauled him outside, threw him on the ground and started pelting him with rocks, a punishment that was called *stoning*. Obviously it was very painful, and almost always ended in death – which is exactly what happened to Stephen on that very sad day. **Can you guess the name of the man who was in charge?**

You got it – **SAUL!!**

A short time later, Saul is on his way to the city of Damascus with the authority to arrest any Christians he finds there and haul them back to Jerusalem to be tried and punished. Everything's going according to plan:

- they're making good time on the road,
- he's got a good team to help him out,
- Saul can't wait to get his hands on some more of those nasty Christians...

And then...in a moment...in the blink of an eye...

BAM!



A flash of light from heaven knocks Saul to the ground. Then he hears a voice that says, *Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting...me???* The Lord speaks again to Saul and sends him to a home in Damascus where he languishes in the dark: both physically and spiritually.

Three days later, a Christian man in Damascus named Ananias, hears the Lord speak his name. *Ananias, says Jesus, I've got a job for you...*

You name it, Lord, says the man.

Jesus tells him, *I want you to go to a certain house and look for a man there named Saul, from Tarsus...he's expecting you.*

Um...Lord, says the man, *I know who this Saul is...he kills people like me...*

Don't worry, says the Lord, *I'll be with you. I want you to pray for him that he might regain his sight – and become my servant. Then I will show him how he will serve the Gospel, and suffer for my sake.*

That's how Saul changes...from being the worst enemy of Jesus...
to becoming the best servant of Christ.

From being the cruelest persecutor of Christians...
to becoming the best proclaimer of grace.

From being a slave to the LAW...

to becoming the most devoted servant of the Gospel.

And that's exactly where the resurrection of Jesus Christ comes alive in our story - where the proverbial rubber meets the road in our lives.



This is, in fact, a glimpse at God's vision of life for the entire Church:

1. God does not want us looking back in longing for the good old days...
2. God does not want us trying to recreate what worked in the past for a vastly different future
3. God does not want us hunkering down behind walls that divide *us* from *them* (physical, behavioral, spiritual, racial, creedal, or ethical walls) **THOSE DON'T MATTER TO ME**, says the Lord.

No one is beyond hope.

No one is so bad that they cannot be forgiven.

No one will be abandoned by God as someone who is worthless.

Instead, Paul is living proof of Jesus' power to give life and salvation to anyone, to EVERYONE... Paul learns this well, and later says that:

Everyone is loved by God.

Everyone is forgiven by God through Jesus Christ.

Everyone is called by God to serve Jesus by loving and serving each other.

This is the amazing story of Saul/Paul, one of the worst who became one of the best. This is also the story of you and me – ordinary people who are sometimes at our worst and sometimes at our best – but who are also ALWAYS regarded by Jesus as God's beloved children.

Thanks be to God!!

Amen.