

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
May 1, 2022 – 3 Easter
John 21:1-19; Acts 9:1-20
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During Easter season – the weeks between Easter and Pentecost – we hear readings from the gospels and from the New Testament book called The Acts of the Apostles that describe Jesus' appearances to the disciples and other extraordinary events that took place after the resurrection. This morning we heard accounts of two events that have much to teach us about the power of the risen Lord to change people's lives.

Let's look first at our lesson from the Gospel of John. What we just heard is most of the final chapter of this gospel and the last encounter between Jesus and his disciples recorded by this author. Before this the risen Christ had appeared to the disciples on two occasions when they were together in a house, once when Thomas was not there, and again a week later, when he was. Christ had given his followers the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Yet we learn that seven of Jesus' disciples who had gathered on the shore of the Sea of Galilee (also known as the Sea of Tiberias) were still lost without their leader and teacher to direct their lives. Simon Peter, who had been a fisherman, decided to go fishing, and the other men joined him. But all night they caught nothing. Remember that darkness and light are important symbols in John's Gospel, so "night" and "day" mean more than time. The men are still in darkness. Then at daybreak they see a man who suggests that they cast their nets on the other side of the boat. When they do, there are so many fish that they couldn't haul in the net. And they recognize that the man is Jesus. Light and abundance. Jesus, their risen Lord.

Jesus fed the men a breakfast of bread and fish. Do you recall – as they must have done – the occasions when Jesus took a little bread and a few fish and fed thousands of people? Jesus after the resurrection is the same Jesus. He feeds his followers abundantly and guides people to abundant life. After breakfast Jesus and Peter had a conversation that was revolutionary for Peter. Remember that after Jesus had been arrested, Peter had denied knowing Jesus three times. Now Jesus asks him three times, "Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me?" Jesus gives Peter the opportunity to repent of his past faithlessness, and Peter says "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus will soon ascend to heaven, and he instructs Peter to take his place as a good shepherd, feeding and tending the people who know the voice of the Lord. "Follow me." Whatever the cost, "follow me." Jesus had taught that those who lose their lives for his sake and for the sake of the gospel, will save their lives. Discipleship is costly, but it is the way of salvation. Peter will, in fact, be killed for the gospel.

The events described in our reading from The Acts of the Apostles took place some years after the disciples' breakfast with the risen Lord. Much had happened. Filled with the Holy Spirit, the disciples had carried on Jesus' ministry of healing and had preached the good news of Christ to Jews and Gentiles. The number of people belonging to "the Way" of following Jesus was growing.

Saul was a faithful Jew, highly trained in Jewish teaching and practice. He thought that the new faith was filled with error and could mislead God's faithful people, his own people, the Jews. By his own account, Saul was "violently persecuting the church of God and ... trying to destroy it" (Galatians 1:13). You can read in the Acts of the Apostles that Saul held the coats of the people who stoned Stephen, the first Christian martyr, to death. Saul was a dangerous enemy of the followers of Jesus.

Then, while Saul was on his journey of persecution, God suddenly appeared to him. Light flashed and Saul fell to the ground, blinded. He and his companions heard a voice: "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" "Who are you, Lord?" "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." Jesus instructed Saul to go into Damascus, where his life would be turned around. Ananias, a disciple of Jesus, healed Saul's blindness. Saul was baptized and went to the Jewish synagogues, not to have the followers of Jesus arrested, but to join them in preaching the good news about Jesus. Saul's name would be changed to Paul, and he would spread the gospel far and wide before being killed in Nero's persecution of Jesus' followers.

There is another man in this story who experiences the revolution of God's call. Ananias. He was a faithful follower of Jesus with a gift of healing. He knew about Saul and his persecution of the followers of the Way. Ananias must have been shocked when the Lord told him in a vision to seek out Saul and heal him of his blindness. Heal the enemy of Christ in the name of Christ and by the power of Christ? Yes. Heal in the name and by the power of the one who taught his disciples: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:43-44).

Jesus called Peter and Saul and Ananias and challenged them to a revolution of vision and life. Each one might have refused the call. Peter might have said, "Yes, Lord, I love you," and yet have spent the rest of his days in fear of persecution, not acting as the good shepherd of Jesus' followers. Saul might have chosen to remain blind and use what power he had to continue persecuting the church. Ananias might have refused to look for Saul and lay his hands upon Saul's blind eyes, choosing to trust his own understanding rather than God's plan. But all three men chose to listen to the call of Christ and turn their lives around to the way of Christ.

Christ is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. Christ still calls his followers to change how we behave and how we see life and other people. Christ still calls us to the Way of Love, to the life of healing and feeding God's people, of giving ourselves to promote the well-being of all God's people. Christ also still leads his followers to see and find abundant life, even where there has been darkness and emptiness. We have all known that to be true, haven't we?

I am convinced that to look back and recall how the Lord has brought us out of darkness into light is important "soul work." Liberating work. Enlightening work. Empowering work. When we look to the past and recall how God's light has broken into the darkness of our sin or the evil in our world or the despair of our hearts, we take a step toward being free of the darkness. We make a choice to embrace the power of the light. The darkness hinders us. The light of the Lord shows us a way forward, the next step to walk on the Way of Love.

The risen Lord works powerfully now, in our lives, just as he did in the lives of Peter and Saul and Ananias. Many years after his conversion Paul wrote this to the church in Rome: "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God" (Romans 8:28). Think about the truth of these words in your life and believe in the salvation that comes from God. In the name of the risen Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.