

Easter 3, Yr C: Turning Around. Acts 9:1-20

In reflecting this Easter Season on the effect of the Resurrection, our reading from the book of Acts today gives us a powerful example. Paul, after a vision on the road to Damascus of the risen Christ, makes a complete reversal of the direction in his life, and goes on to found communities of believers throughout the Greek world. Each time we celebrate the Eucharist, we use the language of Paul's account, from his letter to the Corinthians, of Jesus' celebration of the last supper.

How many of us have had a "Road to Damascus" experience, a moment we can remember when our eyes were opened and we became a follower of Jesus? I have not, but I've sometimes wished I had. I think it would be reassuring to have that moment in time to point to, to remember, to rely upon.

I started attending church at age 6 weeks, and most Sundays since. Is my faith diminished because there was no dramatic experience, no turning around to follow a new path? I heard Billy Graham preach on three occasions when I was in the 8th or 9th grade. Let me tell you, the pressure was intense. Billy granted no exceptions for those raised in the church. Everyone had to have a distinct conversion experience, now, lest you die on the way home. But I stayed in my seat, resisting the call to come forward.

Paul was raised and schooled in the Jewish tradition, and was extremely knowledgeable about the Scriptures. In one of his letters, he says he was a Pharisee among the Pharisees: loyal to the Torah; maintaining his Jewish identity in the face of an all-encroaching pagan world; and awaiting the coming of God's kingdom, the "age to come," promised by the prophets, and Israel's redemption. And Paul as a Pharisee rose to the challenge posed by the followers of Jesus who proclaimed the new way. Indeed, Paul would travel to distant cities-Damascus, for example, was about 135 miles north of Jerusalem- and capture followers of a messianic movement within Judaism, tying them up and bringing them before the religious authorities in Jerusalem.

Paul's first appearance in the book of Acts is found in chapter 7, the account of the stoning of Stephan, who was killed for proclaiming the story of salvation which, Stephan asserted, the Jews had rejected. Paul was there, and held the coats of those who stoned Stephan.

Latter, he traveled to Damascus to find and capture Christians.

During the journey, as he approached Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven encircled him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice asking him, "Paul, Paul, why are you harassing me?" Paul asked, "Who are you, Lord?"

“I am Jesus, whom you are harassing,” came the reply. “Now get up and enter the city. You will be told what you must do.”

After [those traveling with Paul] picked Paul up from the ground, he opened his eyes but he couldn’t see.

In Damascus a man named Ananias was told in a vision to meet Paul on a street called “Straight”. Ananias objected, saying

“Lord, I have heard many reports about this man. People say he has done horrible things to your holy people in Jerusalem. He’s here with authority from the chief priests to arrest everyone who calls on your name.”

But God responded,

Go! This man is the agent I have chosen to carry my name before Gentiles, kings, and Israelites. I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.”

Paul, after Ananias laid his hands on him, was filled with the Holy Spirit, his sight was restored, and he was baptized. Paul immediately began to preaching about Jesus in the Synagogues.

On his way to Damascus before his vision, I wonder what was going on in Paul’s mind about his witness of Stephan’s stoning. Was he anguishing over Stephan’s murder, a killing in which Paul knew he was an accomplice? There is no hint of this in any of the several accounts in Acts and in Paul’s letters

that he was feeling any remorse. And I would suggest, Paul’s turning around, his conversion, was not Paul’s idea but instead was entirely God’s initiative. God called Paul in an unusually direct manner, and Paul responded. The same is true of the other conversion stories in Acts: the Samaritans, the Ethiopian, the Roman centurion. All involve seemingly unlikely people from diverse backgrounds, touched by God.

Paul wrote in his first letter to the church in Corinth:

I’m the least important of the apostles. I don’t deserve to be called an apostle, because I harassed God’s church. I am what I am by God’s grace, and God’s grace hasn’t been for nothing. In fact, I have worked harder than all the others—that is, it wasn’t me but the grace of God that is with me.

And the same is true for those of us who have not had a dramatic or clear cut conversion experience. Each of us been called by God’s spirit to a new way of living. That is what the Resurrection means.

The New Testament uses the Greek word *metanoia*, which is translated in English as “conversion” to describe the experience of becoming a follower of Christ. That Greek word, *metanoia*, literally means to turn around. Paul did not reverse the direction of his travel,

but he certainly reversed what he intended to do upon his arrival. Instead of capturing followers of Christ, he joined them in proclaiming the risen Christ.

But what is it that marks those of us that have not had a dramatic conversion experience?" The word used in this context in the NT is the word "believe": we believe in Jesus, we believe Jesus as the Son of God, we believe in Jesus' resurrection. When we hear the phrase "believe in Jesus" we understand the phrase to mean, we believe some factual assertion, something that can be proved, about Jesus. But "believe," when it was first used in the English translation of the NT 450 years ago, had a different meaning. The phrase "believe Jesus" in the 16th century did not mean to accept as true some factual proposition about Jesus such as he was the Son of God or he rose from the dead. "To believe on" someone meant to love, hold dear, prize, and give one's loyalty or commitment to someone.

This is what happened to Paul as reflected in how he lived his life after his vision of Jesus. Paul attitude toward Jesus changed to loving Jesus, holding Jesus dear, giving his loyalty and commitment to Jesus, and immediately his behavior reversed. Rather than condemning Jesus, Paul proclaimed Jesus. It wasn't that he believed new facts about Jesus. Paul had a new and

unshakable loyalty to Jesus, and that new loyalty changed how he saw to world, his place in it, and how he would thereafter live his life.

I can only speak for my self, but I know that sort of belief in Jesus, as the one who commands my allegiance, shapes my values, and guides how I live my life, has inexorably grown within me. I did not believe anything new about Jesus; I did not suddenly subscribe to everything asserted about Jesus in the Creed, or in the Catechism I was taught as a child. And I have doubts about some of what I read in the NT about Jesus. But like Paul, I have somehow been touched by God and I have given my allegiance to Jesus. And if we give our allegiance to Jesus, it changes how we live our lives.

Paul in his letter to the Corinthians says that the Gospel, the good news, that Jesus was crucified and then raised from the dead, was the last thing a faithful Jew educated in Greek thought, would accept: "Jews ask for signs, and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, which is a scandal to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles. But to those who are called—both Jews and Greeks—Christ is God's power and God's wisdom."

Without the resurrection and God's initiative, I don't think Paul would have given his loyalty to Jesus. And nor would I.
Amen.