

“Confronted by the Risen Jesus”
Acts 9:1-20
March 31, 2024 (Easter Sunday)
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pastor Nicoletti

The Reading of the Word

We have heard this morning about the risen Lord’s work in Melissa McMillan’s life.

Now we will consider a story of his work in the life of a man named Saul.

And for that, we’ll hear now from Acts 9:1-20.

Please do listen carefully, for this is God’s Word for us this morning.

^{9:1} But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest ² and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. ³ Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. ⁴ And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” ⁵ And he said, “Who are you, Lord?” And he said, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. ⁶ But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.” ⁷ The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. ⁸ Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. ⁹ And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

¹⁰ Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, “Ananias.” And he said, “Here I am, Lord.” ¹¹ And the Lord said to him, “Rise and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul, for behold, he is praying, ¹² and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.” ¹³ But Ananias answered, “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem. ¹⁴ And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name.” ¹⁵ But the Lord said to him, “Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. ¹⁶ For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.” ¹⁷ So Ananias departed and entered the house. And laying his hands on him he said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” ¹⁸ And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized; ¹⁹ and taking food, he was strengthened.

For some days he was with the disciples at Damascus. ²⁰ And immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, “He is the Son of God.”

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let's pray ...

Prayer of Illumination

Lord, as we come to your word this morning,
Give us eyes to see it and ears to hear it,
minds to understand it and hearts to accept it.
Do this, we ask, for your glory and for our good.
We pray this in Jesus's name. Amen.

Introduction

It is Easter Sunday, and our theme this morning is the resurrection of Jesus Christ: the historic claim of the Christian faith that after his crucifixion, after his death, and after spending three days buried in the tomb, Jesus Christ rose from the dead, with a renewed physical body that would never die again.

That is the proclamation of the gospel that we especially celebrate on Easter.

But today, rather than read from one of the accounts of that first Easter morning, I've picked a story from something that happened a bit later – but something that shows us how the risen Jesus continues to work in the world and in our lives.

Because the Bible tells us that after his resurrection, Jesus remained on earth for forty days. And then he ascended to heaven. But he did not ascend to disengage with this world or with us. Rather, from heaven, he continued to reign over the world and to be at work in the world – both on a grand big-picture scale, and also on an individual scale of each person's life.

And in our text this morning we see how the risen Jesus's ongoing work played out in the life of a man named Saul.

And as we consider Saul's experience, we see four things this morning. We're going to see how:

- The risen Jesus confronts us,
- the risen Jesus exposes us,
- the risen Jesus changes us, and
- the risen Jesus gives us his people.

So that's what we'll reflect on together this morning.

The Risen Jesus Confronts Us

First, we see in Saul's experience here that the risen Jesus confronts us.

Now, we should note up front that Saul's story here is pretty dramatic, and not everyone's story is.

Within the Book of Acts itself – the book of the Bible we have heard from this morning – we see that different people have different kinds of encounters with the risen Jesus.

Saul's is quite dramatic. But just a chapter earlier we read of the conversion of an Ethiopian court official, which comes through a simple Bible study with a man named Philip. A few chapters later, a business woman named Lydia will convert in the context of a simple prayer group. As visibly miraculous as Saul's encounter with the risen Jesus was, there are plenty of experiences described in the Bible that, at least externally, are fairly undramatic. [Keller, 105-106]

But still, they share certain things in common – certain characteristics that are more overtly displayed here in Saul's more dramatic experience.

And we should also note that in the Bible these confrontations with the risen Jesus are not all transformations from unbelief to belief. Throughout the Bible, the Lord confronts not just unbelievers calling them to belief, but he also confronts believers, calling them to deeper faith and knowledge of him.

Sometimes he confronts believers because they are in sin and need to repent. But other times he confronts faithful believers, not so much calling them to urgent repentance as calling them to an even deeper knowledge of and relationship with him. Job comes to mind as one obvious example among several.

So, the level of external drama, the initial faith of the individual, and the reason behind the confrontation all may vary ... but the consistent reality is that the risen Jesus is at work in the world. And as he works, he confronts people in real ways, and calls them to a deeper and truer knowledge of him.

That is what Saul experienced on the road to Damascus. And as he did, in his case, he was confronted with several truths about Jesus. He was confronted with the reality that Jesus is real, Jesus is personal, and Jesus is risen.

He Is Real

First, Saul is confronted with the reality that Jesus is real.

Saul didn't encounter Jesus as simply a feeling in his heart. Saul didn't encounter Jesus as simply a therapeutic help in dealing with his troubles. Saul didn't encounter Jesus as simply a story that

resonated with him or made sense of the world for him. But Saul encountered Jesus first as a real, objective reality in the world.

Now, don't get me wrong. Jesus did reach out to and connect with Saul's heart. Jesus did help Saul deal with his troubles in the world. Jesus did provide a story that resonated and made sense of the world around him. All that was true.

But that was also all secondary to the reality that Saul encountered Jesus first as a real person, an objective fact that confronted him from outside of himself. Jesus was not just Saul's personal truth, he was the truth – true truth, a brute fact of reality.

When Christians speak of Jesus, we're not speaking primarily of an idea we find helpful, or a story that helps us make sense of things, or a sentiment that warms our hearts ... we are making a claim about objective reality – about what is true of the universe we live in. In that universe, the risen Jesus is a reality that we must all deal with on some level.

And here Jesus confronted Saul with the reality of his objective existence and presence.

He Is Personal

But he also does more than that. Because second, Saul is confronted with the reality that Jesus is personal.

Jesus here isn't just an idea or a force in the universe. He is a person. And so Saul does not encounter Jesus the way one would a rock, or a theory, or an astronomical phenomenon, which Saul might simply observe or study ... Saul must encounter Jesus first as a person he must relate to.

And that's made clear in the first words Jesus speaks to Saul. The first thing he says to him is: "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"

Think about that.

The first thing Jesus says to Saul is: "Why are you relating to me so wrongly?"

Jesus, the Messiah, the King of the Universe, appears and speaks to Saul, and the first thing he says is not some cryptic spiritual principle, it's not some mathematical or philosophical proclamation – the first thing Jesus speaks to Saul is an expression of dismay over how Saul has chosen to relate to him.

Jesus is personal. And so our link to him is always, fundamentally, relational.

Jesus isn't first and foremost a principle or a sentiment or a worldview. First and foremost, Jesus is a person. And he is concerned about your relationship with him.

When you think about Jesus ... how do you tend to depersonalize him?

Jesus's words to Saul remind us that we must not do that – because Jesus is personal, and our connection to him is always relational ... whether it's a good relationship or a bad one.

That's the second thing Saul is confronted with.

He Is Risen

But then third, Saul is also confronted with the reality that Jesus is risen.

Remember that, in Saul's experience, Jesus was first and foremost a man – a human being, with flesh and blood, who walked the same streets of Jerusalem that Saul himself walked, likely around the same time that Saul walked them.

Saul's experience recorded here was not that long after Jesus's crucifixion. And Saul was deeply involved in the work of opposing and even arresting those who claimed that Jesus was risen.

Saul knew of Jesus as a recent man in the current events of Jerusalem and Judea. He knew that the Jewish and Roman authorities had had him executed. He knew that many of Jesus's followers, and soon other Jews, were claiming that this same man, this Jesus of Nazareth, had physically, bodily, been raised from the dead, and then later ascended to heaven, where he was now reigning as King, seated at the right hand of God the Father. And Saul heard this message as lies and heresy, and he worked diligently to oppose it: arguing against such claims, and working to arrest and persecute anyone who would believe such things about Jesus being risen from the dead and reigning in heaven.

And then, on the road, as he went about this task, Jesus himself appeared ... and spoke to Saul, and powerfully knocked him to the ground, and rebuked him for what he was doing, and how he was relating to him.

Saul didn't just have a mystical experience. He was confronted with the reality that this Jesus of Nazareth – this man who had walked the streets of Jerusalem, and had been condemned and executed by the powers that be – this same man, Jesus, really had been raised from the dead, and really was now reigning as King, at the right hand of God, with the power of heaven at his disposal.

This text is not itself an Easter text, but it is a text about how Saul had to come to grips with reality that Jesus really had risen from the dead on that first Easter Sunday.

Jesus is real. Jesus is personal. Jesus is risen. These were the truths that Saul was confronted with on the road to Damascus. And they are truths that the risen Jesus confronts us with as well.

The Risen Jesus Exposes Us

But then second, the risen Jesus also exposes us.

Think of what this looked like for Saul.

Saul, as our text begins, is a powerful man, on the road to even greater success and achievement.

He has access to the high priest, we see, in verses one and two, meaning he has already reached a level of achievement where he is well connected with some of the highest powers in his circles. He is gaining even more power over others – having the power now to arrest people if he judges them a threat to the Jewish faith, as we see in verse two. And with that, Saul was on his way to still greater achievements: he was going to bring those he arrested to Jerusalem, to be dealt with there. Jerusalem was the heart of religious power for him, and so, surely his work in this area was going to move him even further up the ladder of success and accomplishment.

Saul was already a man characterized by achievement and power, and he was on his way to still greater achievement and power.

And then, on the road to Damascus, the risen Jesus exposed him for what he truly was.

Jesus knocked him to the ground. And rebuked him with his words. And blinded him with his light.

This powerful man is quickly reduced to a man who needs to hold someone else's hand in order to be led down the road ... a man who, far from arresting and exerting his power over others, ends up sitting alone, in a room, not doing, not speaking, not eating, not drinking, not seeing.

Saul thought that he was someone great. And in a literal flash, Jesus exposed him for what he truly was: a weak creature, who could not do anything on his own.

And Jesus often confronts us in similar ways.

When he does, it may, as with Saul, be an act of stern rebuke. But it can also be an act of loving care towards a faithful disciple. The Lord did a similar work in Job's life, and Job was among his most faithful followers. Sometimes the Lord exposes us, laying our hearts bare, in order to rebuke us. Sometimes it's a more gentle correction, like a father to a child. And sometimes it's an act of loving reward, given to a faithful servant, so they can grow even more in their relationship with the Lord.

Melissa experienced such a confrontation in her own life. Hers was not one of rebuke, as Saul's was. But it was one that suddenly knocked her life off track and exposed her more deeply to her utter lack of control over things. Her work and career were going well, as she taught and did the work she loved. Her family was healthy and growing. They were believers, and life was going well. And then, at age 37, cancer came and disrupted everything.

Now, I don't for a minute claim to know why the Lord allowed that ... or why he allowed the cancer to return ten years later. If I'm honest, it baffles me, and believe me that I want to question

why on earth God would allow such a thing. And he hasn't told me, or Melissa, or any of us all his reasons.

But I do know that among his various intentions and plans, the risen Jesus is using this to expose deeper spiritual realities to Melissa: to push her to be even more dependent on him than she already was ... to lead her to see on an even deeper level how much all she has is out of her control and in his hands ... to help her gain even more of an eternal perspective than she already had as a Christian. The cancer upset the trajectory of her life. The cancer exposed her limitations. And with that, the cancer pushed her to think even more deeply about the purpose of this life, and what a successful life really looks like.

And the Lord often does the same sort of thing for us.

I don't know what your trials look like. I don't know what your disappointments, or losses, or frustrations in life look like. I don't know how your plans or intentions have been disrupted. And even if I did, I would not claim to be able to see all the Lord intends by those disruptions, or losses, or frustrations – the Lord does not ordinarily reveal such things to us in this life.

But what I do know is that in every loss, in every disappointment, in every struggle, big or small, the Lord is exposing, in some way, who we really are. Maybe, as in Saul's case, he is exposing our sin and powerlessness. Maybe, as in Melissa's case, he is exposing our utter dependence on him. Maybe it's something else. But either way, often through the circumstances of life, the risen Jesus is at work to confront us by exposing to our own eyes more about who we are ... and therefore more about how we need him.

How has the risen Jesus recently been exposing you? It might be a topic you are feeling pretty sensitive about this morning. It might be a situation where you cannot (and will not) understand why he has allowed such a thing to happen in this life. But whatever it is, ask yourself now: What is it exposing about you? In what way is it showing you even more your need for Jesus's work and presence in your life?

Left to ourselves – unchallenged by Jesus – we are prone to see ourselves as so successful, so in control, so virtuous, so smart ... but that is when Jesus so often steps in to show us our weaknesses ... to show us our powerlessness ... to show us our sin and shortcomings.

Where is he doing that in your life?

The second thing we see is that the risen Jesus exposes us.

The Risen Jesus Changes Us

The third thing we see, is that the risen Jesus also changes us.

When we encounter the risen Jesus, whether in a dramatic or an undramatic way, whether it happens in a moment, or gradually over time, Jesus not only confronts and exposes us ... but he also changes us. And he does that in a variety of ways that are alluded to here.

But primary among them here, is that he makes us see. And that is displayed in a few ways in Saul's experience.

When Saul encounters Jesus, he is struck blind, we're told in verse eight. And then, in verse nine, we're told that Saul remained without sight for three days.

But here's the thing: In those three days, I suspect that Saul saw himself and saw the world more clearly than he ever had in his life up to that point. Jesus took away Saul's physical ability to see. But with that, he gave him the ability to see his heart more clearly. The letters that Saul would write in the years ahead would display an incredible amount of spiritual self-knowledge. Saul clearly lacked that self-knowledge before his encounter with Jesus. No doubt that self-knowledge grew and matured over the years that followed. But I suspect that much of it started over those three days, when he could not physically see the world around him, but he suddenly could see his own heart.

But I also suspect he considered far more than himself in those three days. Saul knew the Scriptures. And then Saul was confronted with the risen Lord. And he had to wrestle with how those two things fit together. Again, I'm sure that that understanding grew and matured over the span of years ... but I suspected it started as he sat, unseeing, over the span of those three days. [Keller, 109-111]

And what had become a heart reality over those three days, became a physical reality when Saul was visited by Ananias. In verse eighteen we're told that with his baptism, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he regained his sight. But I bet that in that moment, when the scales fell from his eyes, the world looked very different to Saul than it had three days earlier.

Saul had viewed the world wrongly. And encountering the risen Jesus gave him new eyes to see himself, to see God, and to see the world, more truly as it actually is.

And we often need similar experiences. Christians may have seasons of life like this – not where they go from unbelief to belief, but where the risen Jesus confronts and exposes us in some ways, and in that process gives us new eyes to see ourselves, and to see him, and to see the world more truly. In these experiences, the risen Jesus is not an idea or a concept, but he is a real, living person, who is actively working in our lives.

And more dramatically, he often does the same thing with those who don't believe, by bringing about the radical transformation from unbelief to belief, as they see the world in new ways, not reshaped by their own clever thinking or new human concepts, but by an encounter with the risen Jesus.

Have you had such experiences yourself?

The risen Lord changes us. And as he does, he gives us new sight.

But, of course, he changes us in other ways too. As Saul emphasized when he retold the story of this experience a few chapters later, Jesus also cleansed him. He washed away his sins, forgiving his earlier hard-heartedness and rebellion. [Acts 22:16]

He also transformed Saul's heart, filling him with the Holy Spirit, as we read in verse seventeen.

And finally, he reoriented Saul's life. Saul's life would never look the same after this. Because if Jesus really is risen, if Jesus really is the Messiah, if Jesus really is the Son of God, reigning over the world from heaven, then that changes everything. And we need to live differently in a world where that is true than we would live in a world where it's not true.

To be clear, Saul's life didn't get easier after this encounter. In terms of his external circumstances, it got much harder, as verse sixteen alludes to. But even so, it actually got better. It got deeper. His life became rooted in the eternal life of Jesus Christ. And that gift was worth far more than the struggles and even the suffering that came with it, in this life.

And so, as we encounter the risen Jesus, he not only confronts and exposes us, but he changes us. He gives us eyes to see. He cleanses our soul with his forgiveness. He transforms our hearts. He reorients our lives.

He can do this because he's not dead, but he is risen. And he is reigning from heaven.

The Risen Jesus Gives Us His People

Fourth and finally, something important and worth noting here is that the risen Jesus also gives us his people.

Given the assumptions of our culture, this is a point we need to pause on.

Jesus doesn't let Saul do spirituality on his own. Jesus doesn't even let Saul complete his conversion experience on his own. Jesus, in our passage, forces Saul to interact with other believers – with other Christians. And in that, Jesus gives Saul the Christian community of the Church ... whether Saul wants it or not.

Because, after all, Jesus could have completed this process without involving other people. He could have returned to Saul himself three days later. Just as Jesus appeared on the road to Damascus to rebuke, blind, and call Saul, so he could just as easily have appeared to Saul again in Damascus to proclaim his forgiveness, and restore his sight, and baptize him with water. Jesus could have come down again and done all that himself.

And let's be honest – to many of us, that would have seemed a lot more spiritual ... wouldn't it have?

We live in a culture that values highly individualized, privatized spirituality – just us and God. The more it’s just us alone interacting with God, the more spiritual we tend to think it is.

It’s popular to dismiss “organized religion” with a scoff, in our culture. But if we’re honest, most of the time, what we mean by “organized religion” is “other people’s presence in our spiritual lives.”

And Christians and non-Christians can both feel this way in our culture. It’s a common assumption among non-Christians. And as researchers are noting in more and more studies, it’s more and more common for those Americans who do identify as Christians to rarely, or almost never attend church.

Private, solo spirituality is seen as more pure and virtuous. Other people only contaminate our spiritual lives.

Do you see that assumption or that pull in your own heart and life?

It’s noteworthy that the risen Jesus will have none of that.

Saul may be having new spiritual insights as he sits alone in a room for three days. But Jesus does not leave him there. Jesus will not leave him alone. Jesus sends in another believer – he sends in Ananias. Though he doesn’t need to, the risen Jesus uses Ananias to speak to, and heal, and baptize Saul.

And it doesn’t stop there. Because Ananias was only the beginning of Saul’s entry into the larger Christian community, we’re told in verse nineteen that Saul then spent “some days” “with the disciples at Damascus.”

The risen Jesus chooses to use his people in our lives. And so, if we are to be faithful to him – if we are to know him – then we need the local church.

We just heard the same thing in Melissa’s experience. In her times of suffering, when the Lord drew near to her, it was so often through his people, as they provided for her prayer, and support, and meals, and more.

Contrary to our culture’s assumptions, we ordinarily need the Church if we are going to know the Lord.

If Saul had sent Ananias away and said “No, no – I don’t need you. I’m just going to handle this between me and Jesus.” ... that would not have been a step forward for him, but a step backwards.

And yet ... where do you see ways that you have done something like that? Where have you spurned the gift of being connected to the risen Lord’s people?

It can be a difficult gift – I will be the first to admit that. Saul would be hurt and sinned against in many ways by the Church and fellow Christians in the years ahead. Maybe you have been too. I’m

not denying that or minimizing that, and if that is a barrier for you, than I and others here would be interested to hear your story and walk through that struggle and past hurt with you.

I'm not minimizing those things. But the fact remains: the risen Lord calls us to his people. He works through them. How do you need to be more connected with the local church, so that the risen Jesus can work in your life, through others, now, in the sorts of ways he worked in Saul's life, through Ananias and others then?

Conclusion

Saul's life was changed because he had a dramatic, miraculous encounter with the risen Jesus, in which Jesus confronted him, exposed him, changed him, and called him to his people.

Each and every Christian in this room is here because the same fundamental thing – maybe in a less dramatic form, but still in reality – the same fundamental thing has happened to them.

If you're here and you're a Christian, then you need to consider this morning whether you have forgotten or ignored that truth.

Have you forgotten the root of your faith in the ways the Lord has confronted you in the past, and drawn you to himself in a real and personal relationship? Have you set those truths aside, or depersonalized Jesus, or neglected real relationships with his people in the Church, or come to treat Jesus more as an idea or a thing to be studied or debated than a real person who cares deeply about the quality of his relationship with you?

Have you ignored the ways he is confronting or exposing you now – thinking of them as meaningless events or frustrations, unrelated to your relationship with him?

Jesus – the person, the man who walked the streets of Jerusalem, the Son of God who truly reigns in heaven – this Jesus is at work in your life. Christian, do not forget or minimize that.

And then, if you're here this morning and you're not a Christian ... can you see the ways that Jesus might be at work confronting you? Can you see the ways he might be exposing you? Can you see the ways he might be trying to change your heart or your life – to give you eyes to see him, and yourself, and this world more clearly? Can you see ways he is pointing you towards his people?

Friend, do not resist that. Do not run from it. But face it this morning. Deal with it head on.

That will mean listening to the words of Jesus, as Saul did in verse four. You can find those words in the Christian Scriptures, and you can ask a Christian to help you understand what they mean or where to start.

Responding to Jesus will also mean talking back to him – just as Saul did in verse five. That's what prayer is – it's speaking to the Lord – asking him questions, sharing with him our thoughts and struggles.

Responding to Jesus will mean following his instructions, as Saul does in verse eight, applying what he says to your life.

Responding to Jesus may mean deep thought, and honest reflections, about our own hearts and what Jesus's resurrection means for how we understand the world around us – just as Paul went through in verse nine.

And responding to Jesus will mean forming real relationships with his people – with a local church – just as Saul did in verses seventeen through nineteen.

Brothers and sisters, friends and guests, Jesus Christ is at work. He is risen and reigning from heaven. He is confronting not just this world in general, but each one of us individually.

Let us receive his work in our lives, and embrace him by faith, just as Saul did.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

Keller, Timothy. *Hope in Times of Fear*. Viking, New York, NY: 2021.

Note: In my preaching I often cite and draw from a range of sources, which includes material from Christians within my theological tradition, Christians outside my theological tradition (in keeping with our church's core value of "Reformed Catholicity"), and also (following the Apostle Paul's example in Acts 17) non-Christians who are well outside of Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy. And so, when I cite an author or a source, that citation should not be understood or construed as me necessarily agreeing with, endorsing, or recommending to others anything else from that author or source, except for what I explicitly say I agree with, endorse, or recommend. When engaging with different materials and thinkers, all Christians must exercise wisdom and discernment to determine what is helpful, appropriate, and edifying for each person, taking into account their current needs, wisdom, and spiritual maturity.