

## THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER | MAY 1, 2022

ACTS 9:1-20 | PSALM 30 | REVELATION 5:11-14 | JOHN 21:1-19

The story we heard today is one of the most dramatic in the New Testament. It's the story of a dramatic roundabout, a U-turn in someone's life. At the beginning of the book of Acts, Saul is an opponent of the early church. And not just an intellectual opponent but a killer, someone who actually seeks to physically harm and destroy this community. And by the end of Acts, he's not simply a part of this community, but one of its most charismatic and influential characters. And the inflection point of his life comes on the road to Damascus.

You may know that we have a commemoration of Paul on our calendar in late June. But this road to Damascus story is so important that it actually has its own day—January 25—on our liturgical calendar. And that feast day is called “Conversion of Paul.”

And we have some mental model of what that “conversion” entails. When we convert, we change our sense of who we are. We check a different box. We leave something behind and go somewhere else. When we use the language of “conversion,” particularly in religious contexts, we mean that someone left one community and joined another.

But there's something about calling this a conversion story that doesn't quite capture what's going on. After all, what exactly is Saul converting *to*? We might think it's Christianity. But Christianity as we think of it doesn't really exist yet. We might think he's converting to become a member of the church. But “the church” doesn't really exist as an institution in quite the same way either.

There's a bit of a hint in the way Luke tells this story. You notice how Luke refers to the people Saul persecutes? Not as members of the church. But as followers of the Way. This is how Luke refers to the followers of Jesus after his resurrection. The “way” comes from the Greek “hodos,” which means something like “road” or “path.” Think “odometer.” The image of the church here is not an institution that you're a member of or a set of beliefs that you ascribe to. It's a community of people that follows in the path of the risen Jesus. To follow the “way” means participating in the practices of service, prayer, and fellowship of the risen Jesus, and it also implies a kind of movement. Not a one-and-done “check the box” decision but a dynamic and evolving relationship.

When you get that image in your head, you get the irony of the story. Saul is travelling on the road to Damascus, the way to Damascus. Metaphorically, he is on the Way to killing and destruction and violence when the risen Jesus turns him toward a different Way. The Way of reconciliation, the Way of peace, and the Way of the cross.

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If this is a conversion, it's not conversion as end but conversion as beginning. After all, to be on the Way means that you're not at your final destination yet. To be on the Way means you're still being called by God to follow the risen Jesus into the world.

And that image becomes even clearer when you read about the other great character in this story: Ananias. Ananias is a member of the Way, one of the people that Saul has been persecuting. And one night, the Lord appears to Ananias and says that he has to go find this man named Saul so he can help him regain his sight. And what does Ananias do? He hedges. "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem." Essentially, Ananias is saying, "Isn't there someone else I can go help? Someone a little more sympathetic?" And God replies, "Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen." Which is an eloquent way of saying, "No."

And when Ananias finally reaches Saul, look at how he addresses him: Brother Saul. Are they actually brothers? No. Of course not. But they are brothers in the body of Christ, fellow travelers on the Way. One of them has been on the way for a while, and one of them has just started. But what matters isn't how long you've been travelling, it's that you're on the journey at all. Both of these people are changed in the process. Saul is changed from his ways of violence and oppression. And Ananias is changed, too. He comes to see the horizon of God's saving purpose is wider than he assumed. And perhaps wider than he preferred.

Maybe you hear this story and you identify with Saul. You feel as if you are too far gone to be of any use to God and your neighbor. And for you, the message is that redemption is always possible. Our lives are never completely closed off to God. And there is always the potential for change and newness of life. There is never a moment where God views your life as a lost cause or beyond hope. Maybe you don't have a dramatic experience like Saul did, but God continues to interrupt our lives and invite us into a better way of being.

Or maybe you hear this story and identify with Ananias. You feel like an insider who knows what's what. To be on the Way means that we're always moving, always growing, and always changing. There's never a point where you can say, "I'm done. I've followed Jesus and seen everything he wanted to show me." There's always newness, always fresh perspectives, always things to be learned on the journey.

Two very distinct stories and experiences but one consistent action of God. For Saul, for Ananias, and, of course, for all of us. The risen Christ comes to meet us where we are we are again and again and again, bringing us onto the Way of life and peace.

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