

We have two stories this morning that feature the risen Jesus. One story, within the Gospel, takes place before Christ's ascension. The other story, in Acts of the Apostles, takes place AFTER Christ's ascension. And in both stories, Jesus meets the other central characters where they happen to be - Jesus goes to them; he has not been sought out.

Both stories also occur on just a typical day. The trauma of the crucifixion is now a rather unpleasant memory. The joy and wonder of the resurrection lingers still in our Gospel passage from John, however, the disciples have left Jerusalem and are back on the water, back to fishing, back to "real life." And in real life, sometimes the fish aren't biting and there is no haul. Yet as they turn back to shore, a man on the beach shouting to be heard, tells them to throw the net on the other side of the boat. When they do as directed, they can barely bring the nets on-board. The disciples know who is waiting for them - it cannot be anyone other than the LORD.

After Jesus prepared breakfast on the beach and shared it with the disciples, he asks Peter whether Peter loves him in a self-sacrificial, all encompassing way. Peter responds, LORD you know I love you like a brother. Jesus gently asks Peter again, do you love me in a self-sacrificial, all encompassing, deeply compassionate way? And Peter responds, Yes LORD, I love you like a brother! So Jesus asks his question differently this time: Peter, do you love me like a brother? Perhaps exasperated, Peter responds ... that's what I've been saying, I love you like a brother.

Jesus accepts the love that Peter can offer and calls on Peter to continue the work that Jesus and the disciples have been doing together. Peter has not yet grown into the kind of love that Jesus himself provides. Peter will grow into that love, however, that will take more time and more of God's help. We, too are asked to love as Jesus loves and loving in this way takes God's help - it's a big ask and it takes a willingness on our part to live into this request, and God will do the rest.

Peter grows into this love, like many of do, through adversity. Our reading from Acts give us a sense of what the earliest disciples had to face from within their own community. There was a man named Saul, a Pharisee, who was doing everything in his power to eliminate the Jesus movement. He watched and approved of the murder of the first martyr, Stephen. Stephen, who DID love as Jesus loved, asked God to forgive those who were killing him, including Saul. Saul however, spent his energies on ridding the neighborhood of these people, men and women, following “the way.”

No doubt, Saul thought he was doing what a good, righteous man would do. He was attempting to stop blasphemy in its tracks. Jesus, though, has other plans for him. Like God before him, Jesus continues the tradition of choosing an unlikely person to fulfill his will. So, the risen Christ, already ascended into heaven although still very much active in the community of the disciples, blinds Saul as he is on his way to Damascus.

Some of us who remember the renewal movement of the 1970s, might remember being approached by evangelicals with a

question - are you saved? And these evangelicals had powerful stories about how they came to know Christ. Many of these stories were nearly as dramatic as Paul's conversion. I don't have a story like that and I suspect that most of us don't. I was baptized at three weeks old, my parents brought me and my sisters to church every Sunday, I was confirmed when I was 11. I didn't have a conversion per se - I am a dull Christian because I was raised one.

Saul's story is unusual - so unusual that Luke tells us about it in Acts three times. If Saul's story were to appear in a newspaper, it would be front page, above the fold - that's how noteworthy and unusual his story is. Somehow in being blinded, Saul turns on a dime from being an enemy of the Jesus movement, to the people of the Way, to its most ardent and most successful evangelist. It is through Saul after all, that the Jesus movement was made known to the gentiles and thus made known everywhere on earth.

Saul was so notorious in this early Christian community that Ananias knew of him and was incredulous that Jesus asked him to heal Saul. Are you sure, Jesus? Have you not heard of how much

evil he has done? Are you aware of how much danger you are putting me in? I could be hauled off to jail! Jesus reassures him, and to his credit, Ananias does as he is asked. The disciples, to their credit, believe that Saul's conversion is genuine. They baptize him, they shelter him and they feed him. Presumably they told all they knew about the LORD. How remarkable it must have been to the earliest disciples to have their greatest enemy and critic become their greatest friend and ally in spreading the Good News. Such a turn around can only have happened because God was the initiator of the change in course.

While Saul's experience was noteworthy, perhaps we know something of his experience. Corporately, as a church, we regret the Crusades or closer to our own time, we have been shamed at our lack of support in the Civil Rights struggle - at least three Episcopal bishops were addressees in Martin Luther King's Letter from a Birmingham Jail. As a church, we have changed course.

And as individuals, we have all made mistakes. Each of us has taken steps toward, if not actually travelled down the wrong path.

Who was it for us who said “stop!” or “think about what you’re doing!” or “were you aware that when you do this, this is the result?” Maybe it was a medical professional who said to us, if you don’t change a behavior, these are the consequences. In any of the scenarios, if our eyes widened, if the light bulb went off, then we know God is at work in us and we found ourselves changing course, backtracking and taking the better path. We can be grateful to the person, or persons who showed us a better way. It is God, however, who enables us to see and hear the better way and to actually pursue it.

It’s no mistake that our first identity was as people of the way. Christ will always meet us where we are, wherever we are and show us the right way. Through Him, we can love him and our neighbors in the way that he has asked us. Jesus makes all the difference. Amen.