

Third Sunday of Easter, Year C – May 1, 2022

John 21:1-19

Epiphany, Winnipeg

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People can change, you know. I'm pretty sure they can.

There was this man named Saul, and he changed. Or he was changed. Something or someone changed him. Saul was a deeply deeply faithful teacher; committed to his people and committed to following God in faithful ways. He was devout. Zealous. But we can all get carried away with devotion and zeal sometimes, and when a new movement of people we call Christians arose, Saul and other devout and zealous people did whatever could be done to get them silenced. And it wasn't long, of course, until "whatever could be done" turned violent and deadly.

Today we heard a story about how people can be changed. Saul was on the road to Damascus to round up Christians and bring them back to Jerusalem for questioning, and suddenly he was knocked flat to the ground, and blinded by a blazing light...and he heard that voice we heard today: "Saul, why are you persecuting me?" The voice was Jesus, and Saul's life changed that day when he met Jesus on the way. He stopped silencing Christians and started following Jesus instead.

It's a story about how anyone can be changed, really. Anyone can be. It sounds like one of those "My life was in ruins and I was on such a destructive path and Jesus met me on the road and everything changed" stories. The most violent people can be turned to ways of peace, the most cruel of the powerful can be turned to ways that give life and hope, and the ones nobody else thinks can be brought to their senses or brought to see life in a new way can be changed.

Like Saul. Right there at the roots of our story of faith is someone who was changed when Jesus met them at the side of the road. Everything changed for him; it was as though he died and he was given a new life. Changed so much that soon enough even his name would change, and Saul would become Paul. Years later he would even write that that's what happens in baptism: we die and rise to new life. With Christ, who died and rose to new life. There's this whole Easter thing going on for Saul who would become Paul.

Some of you might hear something of your own story in that story. Maybe your life changed that dramatically. Or maybe it hasn't changed and you seem stuck, but something in this story says that the risen Jesus makes new life. Even now.

I kind of know another Paul whose own story of conversion isn't like that one at all. Here's what happened to me: when I was 64 days old my mom and dad took me to Calvary Lutheran Church in Edmonton to be baptized, and I've just kind of always been Christian ever since then. I never lost that faith, and I have no dramatic stories of a life of crime or cruelty or wild living or anything interesting like that. In so many ways it's kind of a dull story. I stayed out of trouble, tried to be good, and if I ever did try to persecute or pick on anyone I just would have felt guilty and stopped. There's my conversion story. For me, and maybe for you too, that whole story of Saul being knocked down and turned around it's pretty far away. Nothing like that happened to me.

There's another conversion story that we might have missed though, even though we heard it at the same time. There was another man named Ananias, and he was one of those early followers of Jesus who could very easily be arrested by someone like Saul and hauled off to court and told to keep quiet, or dragged out of the city to be beaten or killed. The same Jesus who met Saul on the road meets Ananias in a dream and says, "Ananias, go and find Saul and pray for him. I've got plans that include him." Ananias as much as says, "No way. He has people like me arrested and killed. I can't go near someone like that." But the same Jesus who turned Saul around on the road insists that Ananias go and pray for Saul. So Ananias, after some urging from Jesus, turns around on his own road goes to find Saul. You can imagine that he's a little afraid and a little unsure and maybe even not too sure that he can trust this Saul or maybe even trust what Jesus says about him. But he goes.

Do you see what happened to Ananias? He was changed. He had been afraid but now even if he's afraid his fear isn't paralyzing him. He couldn't trust someone like Saul but now his suspicion is slowly giving way and he is learning to trust Jesus. He thought that there would be no way that he and Saul could be in the same room safely, but now Ananias is being changed, and he goes to the house where Saul is staying and he prays for Saul, and Ananias is turned around. He's converted every bit as much as Saul. He's turned from a path of suspicion and fear to a way of trust and care and hospitality. He too dies and rises to a new life where he has learned to see differently. There's this whole Easter thing going on for Ananias.

If you have a Bible that adds titles to all the sections of the story, it probably calls this story we heard “The Conversion of Saul.” But it could also be titled “The Conversion of Ananias.”

This is a conversion story that makes more sense for me. Because I have been suspicious, and I have sometimes convinced myself that that person or that one over there can't be trusted, or isn't worth my time, or is only to be feared. And since that day when I was sixty four days old I've had to be converted again and again and again, to be turned around on the road and made to see that God's love and God's life runs deep in every person I meet. Maybe it's been like that for you too. We all need that dying and rising to new life...that Easter thing that keeps on going on, and keeps calling us up to new life where we learn to trust, and to care, and to welcome, and to live.

People can change. God's not giving up on anyone. It's that whole Easter thing going on.

But there's something more important going on here. This whole story isn't really just about the conversion of Saul or the conversion of Ananias, or the conversion of me or someone more dramatic. This is a story of the conversion of community. Saul was convinced that the community had no room for heretics like Ananias and those Christians. Ananias and those Christians knew that the community had no room for someone like Saul, who could always and only be a danger and a threat. But Jesus knew that he could make a community out of people like that. This story is really about how God is making a new community, always making a new community of us that opens up and makes room for the

ones we thought could never belong. The ones we thought were wrong. The ones we feared. The ones who were divided by hate. The story is a story about the Holy Spirit, who makes a new community out of people who might otherwise never have come together. That's the promise and that's the kind of life being given to a broken and divided and beloved world.

The world can change, you know. It is...God is making it new. Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! And on the road to Damascus, the road to Kiev, the road to Moscow...the road to Jerusalem and Addis Ababa and the road to Mecca; Highway 75 and roads covered in water, the road to Epiphany and the road back home... The risen Jesus meets us on the road and on the way, wherever that way might be. And the risen Jesus is making a new community of us. And who knows? Maybe even a new community of all. AMEN.