

Sixth Sunday After Easter

Boone UMC; Jason Byassee

ABC and BUTrail mish moment; Aldersgate day; intro Ryan LaRock

God Struck Me Deadⁱ

Philippians 3:4b-14

Sometimes it is alleged that there was no rationale to which books were included in the bible. The winners of history just put the books they liked, and other books, like the Gospel of Thomas or the Gospel of Peter, were not included. This is false. The early church had a simple criterion for what books we included in the New Testament. The resurrection of Jesus. So if a book was linked to a witness to the resurrection, it was in. Matthew and John knew the resurrected Lord. Mark was a disciple of St. Peter, another witness to the resurrection. The so-called gospels we left out were ones that denied the bodily goodness of life, including the bodily resurrection of Jesus. If a book pointed to the resurrection and had a first-hand witness to the resurrection, it was included in the bible.

But what about St. Paul? He never saw the resurrected Christ, did he? Good question. One, Paul argued relentlessly that Jesus' resurrection *is* bodily. Two, Paul *did* meet the resurrected Jesus. On the road to Damascus, in the story I'm about to read to you. Unlike most of us, Jesus did not stop appearing to people after he died. Jesus kept on appearing to people. But wait, there I go again, past tense, you can never speak of Jesus in past tense. Jesus *is* resurrected. He *keeps on* appearing to people. Including to Saul in this story. This Sunday is part of our series on encounters with the resurrected Jesus. And if you're like me, when you hear this story, you're not sure if you want to meet *this* resurrected Lord. It might be too dangerous. So stand and listen to him. If you dare.

Acts 9:1-22

Saul was still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord. He went to the high priest, 2 and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. 3 Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. 4 He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" 5 He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. 6 But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. 8 Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. 9 For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank. 10 Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." He answered, "Here I am, Lord." 11 The Lord said to him, "Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment 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 in Jerusalem; 14 and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name." 15 But the Lord said to him,

“Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; 16 I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.” 17 So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, 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 his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength. For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, 20 and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, and saying, “He is the Son of God.” 21 All who heard him were amazed and said, “Is this not the man who made havoc in Jerusalem among those who invoked this name? And has he not come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests?” 22 Saul became increasingly more powerful and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Messiah.

This is the word of God, it belongs to you, the Easter people of God, **thanks be to God.**

I had a hallmate in college who played basketball for Davidson. He was tall, but not very athletic. His highlight came in a game against Clemson when a future first round draft pick taunted him, he pump faked, took two dribbles, and dunked. He was on SportsCenter that night, but y’all never saw him get off the bench here against App. He liked grunge music, praised Kurt Cobain, and barely knew who he was. Years later I saw him at a conference on *religion* of all things. He was a different man. Put together, considerate, attentive. I asked what changed. He’d become a Buddhist, and a professor of Buddhism. He didn’t want to talk about Sportscenter or Kurt Cobain, he wanted to talk about enlightenment and undoing desire. He was a born again Buddhist. Now this is weird—Buddhists don’t do born again, they don’t evangelize, they don’t believe in god in the same way western religions do. But he was completely different inside and out. Born-again Buddhist the way only a former Southern Baptist could be.

And he made me wonder. Do we Christians take conversion as seriously as this converted Buddhist?

Here are two ways to think about conversion. A liberal view of conversion would say “Who needs it?” All we need is to be baptized, go to church, be good, join some good civic organizations put on by leading citizens and vote correctly. But conversion? Billy Graham and “Just As I Am” and all that? Nah. A conservative view of conversion would say something like this. Yeah I got saved *once*. Long time ago, I can tell you the day and the hour. Been right with Jesus ever since. Barely need to go to church I’m so right with Jesus. *I was saved*, don’t need that again.

Do you see what these two views of conversion share? They both assume conversion is *not* for them. For liberals it never was. For conservatives that’s past and done.

The Methodist movement says something different. We say conversion needs to happen *throughout* our lives. We don’t just get born again once. We get born again, and again, and again, and again. Who of us is close enough to Jesus? None of us! We all need more of him now, I know I do. Life with Jesus is like a marriage. Sure you chose it years ago. But you better choose it again *today*, or the other person can tell.

Our story today is about St. Paul's encounter with resurrection. He shows the point of our series: resurrection isn't just something that happens to Jesus, it's something that happens *in* each one of us. *And not just once*. This is one of the most famous stories in the bible—folks who never go to church know what a “Damascus Road experience” is.¹ There's the road to Damascus today, in a rare moment of peace in Syria. When you hear someone talk about scales falling from their eyes they're paying homage to this story. But how much do we *really* know about this story? Most think when Saul is converted his name is changed to Paul. Not so. Saul is the Jewish form of the Greek name Paul. Folks figure Saul was knocked off a horse.² Here's Caravaggio's famous painting of Saul struck down. Flannery O'Connor, my favorite author, once wrote about Saul's conversion,³ “I reckon the Lord knew that the only way to make a Christian out of that one was to knock him off his horse.” But did you notice while I read? No horse, no knocking off. I wonder if there is more to this conversion business than we tend to think.

William Martin of Rice University wrote a great biography of Billy Graham. I know this church and community participated in a Franklin Graham festival once, Piper and Vern Collins met working on that festival. Martin studied folks who came forward at Billy Graham rallies and found something interesting. The majority were *not* non-Christians becoming Christian. They were Christians *recommitting* their lives to Christ. The world might laugh. But we in the church know there's nothing wrong with that. To get close to Jesus we *have* to keep *recommitting* ourselves, again and again and again. Conversion is not just in the past, it *lives*.

Saul starts our story out on the move. He is the church's public enemy number one. He is on his way to Syria to kill Christians. He's protecting the state and his religion by purifying them of undesirables. Until there's this . . . light. This voice. Jesus says “Saul why are you persecuting *me*?” Wait, I thought I was persecuting Christians. Yes, God says, that means you are persecuting *me*. When the light is gone Saul can't see. He is helpless. He can't eat or drink or walk. He has to be led by the hand. The conquering hero arrives in Damascus a totally dependent child.

A friend of a friend had it all. Lawyer, a big deal in the community, church leader.⁴ Till he spun his beamer out at 100 miles per hour, publically disgraced, in AA on court orders. He said it was like getting born all over again. Little Christian phrases suddenly made sense for the first time. Like “carry your cross.” “The first will be last, and the last first.” “You must be born again.” My friend asked him what changed. He said it was his view of Jesus. He'd always thought Jesus was a “friend.” That's another little catch phrase. But now he said he sees Jesus as a⁵ “tough, relentless, devastating friend, who won't have us until we are down on our knees, whimpering like a baby, so weak, stupid, and helpless that I don't know whether I've just been born or if I've died.” Are we sure we want a friend like that?

¹ http://4.bp.blogspot.com/_cwMk-a4yvvY/SBfeylPmsnl/AAAAAAAAAew/F1t1zsFp6s/s400/damascusroad.jpg

² http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/67/Conversion_on_the_Way_to_Damascus-Caravaggio_%28c.1600-1%29.jpg

³ Quote on screen now plz

⁴ This is Will Willimon's story from *Preaching to the Unbaptized*.

⁵ Quote on screen plz

Now this is interesting. God presumably could have told Saul all he needed to know. Didn't do that. Instead God appears to one Ananias, a man about whom we know nothing. Ananias appears in this story and nowhere else in the bible. Isn't it good news that God can give us a *little* part to play in the kingdom, like Ananias? God says Ananias, go find Saul, I need him. He tells him to go the street called Straight. I love that we have a street called Straight here in Boone, makes me think of Saul and Ananias and God every time I see it.⁶ Here's the street called Straight in Damascus, before recent fighting. God doesn't just beam knowledge into Saul's head. God sends *someone*. Ananias. Someone who doesn't want to go.⁷ "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem." Imagine if God asked us to go to Saddam Hussein, Jeffrey Dahmer, the Boston marathon bomber. You might object too. God says "shut up. Go. Need you. No time for talking." And Ananias goes.

Now think about this with me for a minute. Think of the person you like least in your world. Go ahead, you don't have to say their name, they might be sitting near you. Got it? Good. Now imagine God has a special mission for you for their good. Maybe someone you'd prefer you dead. Maybe someone who'd prefer you dead. When Ananias goes, he could murder Saul, cut his throat and people would celebrate. Instead he goes this way,⁸ "He laid his hands on Saul and said, 'Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.'" Ananias lays his hands on him, gently, for healing, names him "brother," baptizes him, serves him communion. Family breaks out in the midst of murderous enemies. Isn't the gospel weirder than you thought?

But we already thought conversion was weird, right? I remember a man approaching me at a gas station, "hey brother, are you saved, S-A-V-E-D saved?" Thanks for spelling it out. I nodded and he went on. And I wondered how effective he was as an evangelist. Or how effective I am. Here's a secular go at conversion among enemies—remember the movie *Crash* from a decade ago? An African-American couple are stopped by a racist cop and abused, especially the wife. A short time later she's in an accident, the car is upside down, there's a fire, and gas is pooling. And who's the cop who turns up? Same guy. She screams in panic more at him than the fire. He coaches her, talks her down, lifts her out, and saves her life.⁹ I love this picture—he looks just as confused as she is. Could we stand to be saved by our worst enemy, someone who has hurt us? Not me man, just being honest. Acts pushes farther than that. It says to go to your worst enemy at God's request and go with blessing, healing, grace, call her sister or brother. Hey it's conversion, it's costly. It's Jesus, it cost him everything, won't it cost us something? Here's the point. *We're never born again alone*. Never. We're only born again with and for other people. Human beings are the only animal that can't give birth alone. How much less when we're getting born again? Ananias goes to Paul and ratifies his conversion, baptizes him, serves him communion. We can't baptize ourselves or serve ourselves communion. *Conversion needs a church and a church needs conversion*. Some people make conversion sound like an achievement, something you do all by yourself, on August 17 1999 I gave my life to the Lord, or whatever. Good for you. Now did you serve in church this week? Love your

⁶ http://ferrelljenkins.files.wordpress.com/2008/09/straight-street_fj2002.jpg

⁷ Acts 9:13

⁸ Acts 9:17 on screen

⁹ <http://reporter.blogs.com/a/6a00d83451d69069e20133f4c2e1cb970b-pi>

enemy yesterday? Act like Jesus in your family and at work? No? Well, time to get converted all over again.

There are harmful ways to talk about conversion. One of you told me you grew up in a church that had you convinced you were going to hell your whole life. Nothing about grace, God's love, Jesus' goodness, just hell, that's it. No wonder you quit, I would have too. A buddy of mine remembers going up to kids at a basketball court and asking to play pickup. They asked him, well are you saved? And he said, uh, what's the right answer to get to play basketball? Here salvation gets reduced to asking are you like me? Or can I be rude to you? For Jesus we're *all* bad people and we all need saving *again*, maybe today, especially today. There are *wrong* ways to talk about conversion.

And there are right ways. Our own Jennifer Ritter is doing well in her struggle with cancer, and when her hair grew back it wasn't the long curly locks, it was soft, straight, like a newborn baby, life new made. Those who have had a terrible illness can have a gladness about them that says hey, I know now every day is a gift. Do you know that? We're not owed today, we should cherish it. One of you is recently back from a stint in rehab. The bottle became such a cruel lord it was either that or your family and your life, and you went to rehab, bless you. And now you're different. Joyful. Glad to be alive and you know it. We can all tell a change in you and we're so grateful. It's like you're born all over again, but like every alcoholic knows you're only born again just till your next meeting, just for today, and only with help from others. One of you is so energized for mission you can hardly contain it. You want to go on every trip we got, study every book, turn up for every church service, I don't even do that and y'all pay me. I'm not sure you should take this stuff this seriously, it's a little scary! But someone has gotten hold of you, and all you want, is more of Jesus. That's conversion, and it's beautiful, it's everything.

Paul doesn't stay with Ananias. He goes out and starts preaching immediately. No seminary, no committee approval, no nothing, he just heads back to the very people who asked him to kill Christians and says, hey, uh, this is sort of embarrassing, but they're right, we're wrong, let's all join them now please. No wonder they want to kill him too.¹⁰ Jesus says "I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." Getting born the first time isn't easy. Why would we think getting born a second time would be easy? Think of that enemy who lives to make your life miserable. Do you want good for them? To give them Jesus, who makes your life worth living? Nah, you'd rather know who you are by hating em, right? I know I would. It would feel like death to give that up. Life with Jesus isn't easy, far from it, it gets Paul stoned, exiled, beat up, put in jail, and eventually beheaded by Rome. And you know what? I bet Paul wouldn't give it back for the world, not for one second, not even to get his head back. Jesus is worth it all.

Today is a significant day in the life of Methodism. It's Aldersgate Sunday. Wait, you don't have big plans to celebrate it? Here's what it is. John Wesley was always convinced Christianity was true. But he didn't feel it in his heart. So he became a missionary to Georgia, then a colony of England, and was the worst missionary in the world. Excommunicated a girl who jilted him. Unfortunately for him her dad was sheriff, and Wesley had to flee from Georgia in secret. On the

¹⁰ Acts 9:16 on screen plz.

way home he met some Moravians—they sang during a terrible storm and he asked how they could be so fearless. “Because Jesus is our savior. Is he your savior?” I know he’s the savior of the world, Wesley replied. *Not* the question Jack. Is he yours? Back home in London a total failure Wesley went to a Methodist meeting—the very group he’d started! It was on Aldersgate Street. Undoubtedly raining. At about 8:45 in the evening, May 24, 1738. Someone was reading from Martin Luther’s commentary on the Romans—scintillating sermon right? And Wesley said he felt his heart *strangely warmed*.¹¹ His words

I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death

Wesley felt Christ had died for *his* sins, John Wesley’s. And his life, and the world, were never the same.

Well what about you sister, brother, are you saved? *SAVED?* Not just once. But today? Amen.

ⁱ Title comes from the famous collection of former slaves’ conversion narratives, ed by Alberteau.

¹¹ On screen plz