**Acts 9:1-22**

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 flashed 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.” **21** And all who heard him were amazed and said, “Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of those who called upon this name? And has he not come here for this purpose, to bring them bound before the chief priests?” **22** But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ.

**“Enemies Turned Friends?”**

Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed! Alleluia! “To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!” (Rev 5:13). Amen. Going to a school reunion can always be a bit shocking from the last time you saw everybody. Likewise, it is the same for someone you know who was rough and tough, but upon marriage trades in the motorcycle to buy a mini-van. These things give more reason for a smirk than to do anything else.

On the other hand, with those more threatening changes in life, we tend to be more calculating. So if you want to make sure taxes are right, who would give them to a child? If you seek to pass a test, why would you study with someone who flunked out of school? If you were to go on a trip, what benefit is there if you let a criminal watch your house? To do these things is beyond surprising, but goes against basic human reason.

Yet, when the Lord works in terms of salvation, it is not to get smirks or to justify His ways to us. The reading from Acts today reveals such a wonder none saw coming. An enemy of Christians literally turns into an apostle and servant of the Church. Paul’s conversion is a miracle that only the triumph of a risen Jesus can explain. What comfort there is to know that whether it be with disciples out fishing or a diehard persecutor of the church. When Christ greets us, we never leave the same way we came for His light shines into our darkness.

Plenty of dangers came upon Christians in the earliest times, but Saul of Tarsus would have been on the top of the list. He was present to support the stoning and death of the first Christian Stephen. Let alone, his mission in life and every act was to be against what had risen up in Jerusalem. The greatest delight for him would have been to push that “red button” to exterminate every Christian. Such darkness was never going to be isolated in Jerusalem. It would overflow to other places like Damascus with Saul administering the same cure for the infection.

Of course, this warrior of death was to run head on into “The Warrior” of life. Just when Saul had Damascus in his sights, Jesus met him in a flash of blinding light. However, it was His word that would cut to the heart saying, “‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’ And he said, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ And he said, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.’” Like Goliath hit with a stone by David, Christ hit Saul right between the eyes with the Law. All his actions and good intent meant the wages of his sin was death. Yet, Christ never vanquishes His enemies without also extending life in His Name. “But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.”

As direct and personal it was with the Lord to Saul, he was to receive the Gospel from more ordinary hands. Saul was to go to Ananias in Damascus one whom he certainly would have had arrested. Christ in a vision to Ananias revealed His plan that no one had planned on seeing. Matter a fact, to face Saul was more than this servant of the church could handle because all he saw was fear. Yet, Christ’s Word directed Ananias to see the more promising truth, “Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel.” God’s grace is good enough to reconcile any by the Lamb that was slain.

When Ananias met Saul in his blindness, he preached the Word, laid hands upon him, and finally baptized Saul in the Name of Jesus. Receiving back physical sight was not as glorious as the gift of new life and washing away of sin worked by the Holy Spirit. This gracious love of God toward sinners is what Paul later explained saying, “He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Colossians 1:13-14). The forgiven forgive and that is exactly what Saul did. Through an unknown minister like Ananias, Christ sent out Saul, also known as Paul, as a servant none would miss. Whatever the number of Christians he murdered, God used Paul to bring forth a thousand times more to believe in Christ.

The story of Saul’s flashy conversion might tempt us to want the same experience. Maybe we hope such a life changing thing would happen to someone we love who denies Christ. Yet, signs, miracles, and wonders never gave saving faith to anyone. That comes from a greater promise God does not hide for Jesus says, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away” (Luke 21:33). This Word of grace saved the life of Paul and he used it to confound the Jews in Damascus, “proving that Jesus was the Christ.” Instead of looking for glory by our demands, Jesus tells us like Paul, “Go into the city” or better “Go to the church.” Christ greets you in His servants who administer Him by the Word and Sacraments. Luther warns about demanding what God neither promises anyone and what none can control. He sates, “Those who seek for some special revelation get what they deserve, namely, the devil” (Postils 7:272).

The light that shined upon Paul is the same light of baptism by our Lord that did not want to see any of us lost. How Christ rescued us from our sinful darkness is glorious for Paul says, “And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God” (1 Cor 6:11). There is one baptism for the remission of sins, but that is not the same as conversion. Christ continues to do this all our days, since as saint and sinner we still harbor pride, despair, and face many temptations. The call to repent and believe in Christ is how God by His Word greets us again, again, and again to drive us back to the victory in baptism. St. Paul is always open to show this need from the living Word stating, “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Romans 7:24-25)

And so as Christ cared for Paul, He gives us a sure refuge in His Word and what He comes to serve at His Supper. This victory is the song of Easter that we sing with the church in heaven over the Lamb that was slain. None has earned this celebration by some status, right, or demand, but God freely gives it as a gift in His Son. St. Paul explains how the tables have turned stating, “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Eph 2:8-9).

So God shocks us not merely by an empty tomb, but in the way of the crucified Savior who saves the least. God does the opposite of what we think entrusting His mission to a man who once murdered Christians. God chooses the unworthy like Saul and any of us who fall short of His glory and deny Him to be of worth to His Son. When Christ greets us, we never leave the same way we came for His light shines into our darkness. Amen. Christ is Risen! He is risen, indeed! Alleluia! In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.