

Glen Ridge Congregational Church
 April 18, 2010 (Easter 3 - C)
 John 21:1-19; Acts 9:1-20; "Follow Me"
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Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

The great festival of Easter – the defining moment of our Christian faith – is now two weeks behind us. Our celebration with special worship, guest musicians, flowers all around us, family gatherings, talk of new life, new hope – all that is a memory now though the joy of the day was really wonderful. We heard great words; hopeful words: death no longer has the final word. Christ is risen! It certainly was a high on our discipleship journey – but now what. How do we maintain that high – or can we. What do we do with that defining moment – in our routine, back to daily living with all the highs and low that come with that. And how do we continue our discipleship journey on the “normal” Sundays – for our Lenten series about discipleship is not just for a season of the church year but has implications for us every day – and I suspect we all realize that.

Today’s scripture lessons tell us more about the spread of the good news Jesus has brought and we see the circle expanding. From those original twelve to the next generation of disciples – from those who knew Jesus intimately to two men outside that original circle. Maybe there are some clues here as to what’s next for those of us who have been touched certainly by that wider circle. Such different people – such different lifestyles – but they were all called to discipleship. And so are we.

We meet again the original disciples in our gospel story. We can relate to their actions, their thoughts – after a change that rattles us to the core, we want to go back to our routine, go back to what we know. The disciples did it – and so do we.

But the Risen Christ is so very persistent. Especially if we think about the fact that the early church saw every Sabbath as a little Easter – we’re not meant to go back to life as it was before – Christ keeps coming back to those early disciples – Christ keeps coming to us!

The disciples have seen Jesus – they know he’s not dead, but instead of taking on his teaching and preaching, they have returned to what they know best, what was most comfortable for them. Maybe they were struggling with all that had happened and needed to work through some of their thoughts and questions by doing something they knew best – fishing. We can identify with their feelings - I know I can.

Well, the disciples work all night and don’t catch anything. After daybreak they hear someone call from the shore, “You have no fish, do you.” Strange comment – anybody can see their nets are empty. But then they hear, “Throw the net on the other side of the boat and you’ll find them.” They did just that and hauled in a boatload of fish. And it’s then that they recognize Jesus on the beach. This story is familiar, isn’t it. This has happened before – the disciples obeyed before and filled their boats to overflowing.

Jesus doesn’t quit – Jesus keeps calling. Another striking element to this story: we know Peter denied Jesus three times. Now Jesus asks him three times “Do you love me?” And each time Peter answers yes – and Jesus gives him instruction: feed my lambs, tend my sheep, feed my sheep. And the brief but profound command: follow me.

The circle expands in our next story: stories about 2 very different men – stories that again show God’s persistence – then and now – God’s constantly meeting us where we are. God’s persistence in opening the eyes of our faith, opening the hands and hearts of our discipleship as we respond to God’s call to share the message of the resurrection.

We know word must have been getting around about Jesus’ resurrection, about Jesus’ teachings – and we know the danger associated for those early disciples – not just from the Romans but from those who were worried about the future of Judaism. The story of Saul of Tarsus – one that we all may remember from Sunday School – he was going to study with the great rabbis and become a champion of the faith. He would stamp out that renegade Christian church that threatened to undermine the covenants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He was headed for Damascus to arrest any Christians he might find and bring them back to Jerusalem in chains. Saul was the most dangerous of enemies – absolutely committed to what he believed, filled with a passionate zeal to wipe out any who disagreed with his position.

Saul was an intense personality for sure – bound to give all his energy to whatever task he was assigned. And for God to capture Saul’s attention – well, it had to be dramatic. And dramatic it was. Blinded for 3 days, he arises on the 3rd day with new life in Christ as an ambassador of love and acceptance. Paul’s call is sudden and dramatic.

Let’s look at Paul’s conversion in our Acts story today – it’s quite a remarkable picture of before and after of a man who has had a personal encounter, a close up encounter with Christ. Think about the contrasts in his experience:

He left Jerusalem breathing threats and riding a horse. He entered Damascus being led by the hand.

He left Jerusalem under the authority of the high priest. He entered Damascus under the authority of the highest priest.

He left Jerusalem under the illusion that he was in control of his life. He entered Damascus under the control of Christ.

He left Jerusalem intending to persecute the followers of Christ. He entered Damascus on his way to proclaim the message of Christ.

And Paul spent the remainder of his life traveling, teaching, writing, doing all he could to bring people the message of Christ.

Now, the story of Paul’s conversion probably isn’t the norm – you and I may not experience, may not have experienced, anything like that. This story is certainly an extraordinary one – but we’ve all heard stories of people who have made that dramatic turnaround in their lives. It’s one model of a conversion, called life.

Embedded in this story, though, is another model of a converted life.

Ananias was a convert to the faith – a person who lived close to God – his relationship with God was conversational. Unlike Saul, he had been growing in the knowledge of God over time and when God called him by name, he didn’t need to ask, “Who are you?” The voice was familiar and he responded as a child might when mom or dad call from another room – “Here I am.” Unlike Saul, he was not struck speechless, sightless. He talked back to God! Being in dialogue with God was normal for Ananias. So then his reaction to God’s direction is understandable – “But, God, I’ve heard about this man Saul – how much evil he’s done. Are you sure you want me to do this? Do you really know who this Saul is?”

God hears his resistance and says, “Go, for he is an instrument I have chosen.”
End of discussion – Ananias goes, in spite of his hesitation.

Ananias is maybe more like most of us: most of us were baptized in the faith, went to Sunday School, were raised in a faith tradition we were taught to love and respect. We’ve grown into our theological beliefs that inform our daily living. Every day our conversion continues as we are affected by people we meet and interact with, countless experiences that provide us new insights into the very nature of God – if we pay attention.

There are a couple of things to learn from disciple Ananias: maybe God’s call to him illustrates a challenge for us to risk more. Sometimes we’re reluctant to reach out, to go beyond the boundaries, to think “out of the box”, to move out of our comfort zones. I think we have probably all felt as Ananias did – we’ve had times in our lives when we’ve truly felt in our hearts what God wants, but our minds just don’t go along with it. Too many “what ifs, I can’t, the fears, the doubts” - all those things keep us from answering the call. I know my first call to ordained ministry came nearly 30 years before I actually took the chance and responded. God is so very patient. But Ananias responded in spite of all his distractions, in spite of his doubts, in spite of the risk – what risks are we willing to take? We certainly have mentors in the process in all of the early disciples – most of whom were put to death for their actions. Now, that’s not likely to be the cost for us – but at the same time, losing the life we know and are comfortable with is a scary thing. How do we, like them, step out in faith to take a risk.

Faith involves risk for sure. Biblical scholar Vera Dossier writes, “Faith always includes the possibility that we could at any given moment be wrong and that is why it requires courage. Realm of God thinking calls us to risk. We always see through a glass darkly and that is what faith is about. I will live by the best I can discern today. Tomorrow I may find out I was wrong. Since I do not live by being right, I am not destroyed by being wrong.”

Listen to that again: since I do not live by being right, I am not destroyed by being wrong. What a profound statement that is – and maybe that’s the description of our greatest fear – what if I’m wrong.

Anyway, Dossier continues: “The God revealed in Jesus whom I call Christ, is a God whose forgiveness goes ahead of me, and whose love sustains me and the whole created world.”

You see, it’s not so much what we choose to do with our lives that is important, but what God chooses to do with us that counts. What risks are in front of us holding us back?

The second thing: Ananias teaches us that we are all called, chosen by God, to be part of God’s conversion plan, to be co-creators with God. I wonder what would have happened if Ananias had refused to go. What will happen in the lives of those to whom God sends us if we stay in our comfort zone? We are co-creators with God – dare we risk it?

Those original disciples, Paul, Ananias – God called them in different ways – suddenly or dramatically or gradually as part of a life long process. But they were all chosen by God and they all had a powerful ministry and impact on the Christian world – the circle keeps expanding even today because it’s important for us to understand that we too are chosen by God, called by God. We may not suffer like Paul or those early

disciples. We may not have the same impact as Peter, Andrew, James and the rest of those first disciples, or as Paul or Ananias but we are chosen by God.

But at the same time, we should never, never underestimate the impact that we may have on another's life in Christ, on another's faith journey –by our words or actions – we may never see ourselves as co-creators but we are. We are all called, chosen by God to go forth and make disciples. How is God calling you? Because the same Risen Christ who met Paul on the road to Damascus meets us on our daily roads of living. It may be in some surprising ways, or it may be in response to our searching, but the fact is, Christ still meets us in the midst of our living.

In our own way, our stories of being brought to God, to Christ, are no less dramatic than any other – when we think about all the reasons we might not be here this morning, when we think about all the defenses against Christ that this world has, it makes our conversion no less important, no less miraculous than any other.

Back to the gospel story about the disciples: Jesus is always on the beaches of our lives. We may not realize it, we may not recognize him, and we may not hear him when he calls out to us. But count on it: he is there. And when we are ready – when we despair and are frustrated by catching nothing – though we have been fishing all night long - we will hear the instruction to cast our nets on the other side of the boat.

And our nets will be filled. Jesus will be there, ready to celebrate with us, feeding us, and sending us forth in new life.

May God grant us the strength and courage to be confronted, to respond to His call to discipleship, and to live out our commission to go therefore and make disciples. Amen.