



May 5, 2019

Third Sunday of Easter

Acts 9:1-20; John 21:1-19

Conversion: Wow! Huh? Yes.

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A fresh start. A new beginning. A new me. One door closes, another one opens with possibilities. I've seen the light. We've passed from darkness into light. Change. Metamorphosis. Phrases, words to express transition. I wonder how we may feel longing for such newness in life today. Jobs, relationships, new pills for treatment, recovery. Or maybe where we need it and don't know it. When we think and talk about such experiences of life, in relation to God, we call it *conversion*.

Think Paul on the road to Damascus. Disciples first getting to know Jesus; then seeing, hearing, meeting, recognizing, powerfully sensing the risen Christ among them. Conversion should be a positive word of our faith. But for a time, for me, conversion seemed a strange idea, a spooky thought, bearing more ominous connotation.

Years ago, my faith felt inadequate. Not good enough, real enough, true. You see, I had no experience like Paul, or Peter and others in the boat. No instant of sudden conversion. No blinding flash of light and audible voice. No moment of total foolishness like fishing while naked, then putting on clothes and jumping in the water. What in heaven is that about?! I felt judgment, as if Pauls or Paulines around me breathed threats and torment of hell, if I didn't have it. I was surprised, baffled. Conversion? From what to what? Am I such a bad dude—a sinner? Going to hell? Really? Ahh, what does that mean? Maybe I am, because I don't know. Fear.

In God's grace, it's no threat anymore. Quite the opposite. I celebrate that people have holy mystical experiences—maybe some of us. It's physiological. We see or hear everything differently. A moment grips our heart, mind, spirit, memory, lingering like it was yesterday. Or people have a “come to Jesus” moment, a desperate crisis, a crucial choice, a great turning point. Compelling. Inspiring. Mystical or miserable, they can be real blessings to empower living faith. Even while there remain plenty of us who may never know a grand spiritual Disney-fireworks moment, yet hold meaningful memories, insights, convictions of our own—with faith that is no less valuable and profound. Little moments of conversion in resurrection light that shine anew in daily routines. In the many ways conversion works, we'd all do well to continue seeking such newness. Having humility to ask how our lives may not be quite what God intends for love, grace, peace with all people and creation. Desires a bit selfish. Relationships ever imperfect. Priorities twisting a bit toward what we might gain, rather than give.

Friends, sometimes we grow in faith when we're just not getting very far in life. Stagnant, inert, stuck—maybe held back by fear or unresolved loss, indecision or apathy, hopeless, passionless—think Peter and disciples as lifeless as Jesus seemed to them. Sometimes we're going totally the wrong direction in life really against what God wants. Taking life from others and ourselves. Think again Paul on the road going to breathe more threats, murder, persecuting more people who were trying to follow Jesus, rather than uphold strict Jewish law. When we're not getting far or going the wrong direction, God gives us a new way to live. God speaks to us in Christ. Here's what that looks like in our stories from scripture today.

Wow! That's what the disciples must have felt when Jesus appeared again. Of course, it's not the first time. Mary Magdalene at the garden tomb. Then with a blessing of peace, when doors were locked in fear. And again, to Thomas with peace, when he missed the fun a week before. As John tells the story, this is attempt

number three for Jesus to raise them from fear and lifelessness into action. Wow! There he is again on the beach. No, Jesus, caught nothing. Again, on the other side of the boat? Okay. If you say. Wow! A hundred times: Happy wow! Or maybe 153 ... nets so full, can't even if pull it in. And then when they do, Jesus even grills a barbecue for breakfast.

Wow! That's what I imagine Paul felt bracing himself on the ground, when a blinding light flashed and a holy voice echoed around and deep inside. The wow lingered days for him. Probably, in part, a fearful wow, an anxious wow, maybe a remorseful wow that made him lose his appetite for life. His wow-moment remained until Ananias arrived, with a bit of wow working on him, too. "Wow, really Lord? Saul of Tarsus? I've heard of that dude. Mean. Scary. Unbelievable ... you're really gonna change him? He'll do all that to spread your love, not hate? Well, okay if you say."

Wow, didn't expect it. Don't quite understand it. Uncertain, yet willing to listen. You know what I mean? Let's see where it leads.

After wow, after God gets our attention, we move through Huh?—questions and conversation. "Peter, do you love me?" "Why are you asking, Lord? You know, I do." Or at least, I want to, I try to ... he thought as he regretted denying knowing Jesus three times around another charcoal fire in a courtyard just outside where Jesus faced his own interrogation before crucifixion. And imagine what filled Saul-becoming-Paul's heart and mind when he didn't see or eat or drink, rather fed on his guilt or regret. "What have I done? Why am I doing it? Who are you really, Jesus? What is faith about? Where does it lead? I try to live as God wants. Aren't our rules and rituals good? If we give them up, what will happen, what will we lose? Is there another way?"

Friends, in questions and conversation we share, a voice of the Holy Love often surprises echoing around us, through us—the Word of God among us and deep within us. Like she noted about Thursday morning Bible Study this week: “I love how we gather together to open the mind and reflect and get out of ourselves for a while.” It’s how perspectives on life and passions of faith can change. If we have ears to hear and eyes of the heart willing to see in new ways. To imagine, to look with compassion, to move toward action.

Yes. “Yes, Lord, you know I love you,” Simon Peter answers. “Feed my sheep,” Christ urges. “Tend my sheep. Feed my lambs.” Ananias arrives, bringing Sacred Love and a blessing of the risen Christ. As he talks with Saul, Saul begins to see again, as God wants him to perceive other people, and envision society together. Then he agrees—yes—to be baptized. And through most of the rest of Acts, Luke continues telling the story of how Paul lived into that yes. Feeding. Tending. Spreading the good news of Sacred Grace and mercy, Divine Love and forgiveness, Holy Peace and power to serve others in the new life he received.

You see, friends, these are resurrection experiences for the disciples and Paul and Ananias, as much as Jesus. Saul sees the light so to speak. His eyes are open, but he cannot really begin to see until he surrenders his way, to be led by others home in a street called straight. He waits, famished for three days—as long as Jesus in the tomb. Ananias answers God’s call, overcomes anxious fear and prejudice, and brings the presence of Christ to Saul. Through the trust and grace of Ananias, persecutor Saul becomes Saint Paul. Then scales on his eyes fall away, Luke says. Like cloth wrapping on Lazarus. Like huge empty vats at a wedding party filled with water turned into wine. Like a woman accepted at the well and another healed by touching the fringe of Jesus cloak. Like a paralyzed man who got up and walked. Like a woman saved from a crowd ready to hurl stones of condemnation. Like the stone in front of Jesus’ tomb rolled away.

And can we recognize resurrection on the road to conversion in our own lives? Can we hope for healing and wholeness? Can we imagine possibilities? Can we notice when Wow! God gets our attention, then process Huh? living through questions in conversation with others, until Yes we renew commitment to trust God's sovereign love and serve Christ in our daily, holy, joyful lives?

I hope that's what I experience on sabbatical. Today is my last Sunday. So I should probably end with a few thoughts. I'm grateful for your generous, supportive Spirit. I'm mindful not everyone gets to do this, though we all probably should. I realize at times I'm a bit anxious about it all. Hopeful. Yet wonderingly uneasy. No major crises, great stresses, or deep existential angst. Life is pretty good really. And in the Bible, that's often when God speaks, when Jesus calls. Or maybe when we listen enough to hear what God has to say. Friends, the only real literal flashes of light I hope to see are the *fleches*—the yellow arrows on the Camino pointing the pilgrim way. Yet, I want to be settled enough in my heart to hear when God speaks.

People have asked if I'm ready. Well, I've done lots of imagining, calculating, planning—how to get to Spain and where to sleep, Chautauqua, books to read, projects around home. But I'm not sure that's what people really mean. Or at least, not what God would mean. More a question of my heart. It feels like I've been running toward a cliff. And I won't realize it until I'm over the edge, floating down, hoping for one of those great eagles in the Lord of the Rings, or maybe Toothless from "How to Train Your Dragon" to swoop underneath and help me land gently.

When I thought about your question this week—getting ready—I realize, in part, I'm grieving. Being away from you. Your stories, questions and insights. Your inspiration, laughter we share. Your presence, and God's presence I know in moments we share. Yes, it's good to separate a bit hopefully fostering time and

space to reflect, to listen, to feel the Spirit rekindle a holy flame in my heart. Still, this is my life. You're my life. And I'll miss y'all. And you've made me feel a bit like Saul with Ananias and Angela. "What do I say?" he asked. "Not have a fun vacation. It's not that. May it be deeply meaningful... And don't get lost out there somewhere in the hills of Spain!" "We hope this time away will be restorative," she wrote, "and that God will shed light on what is most true and essential in life. We look forward to hearing about surprises that may pop up along the way. So long as they don't involve thoughts on early retirement, job transfers, etc."

Some of you have provided stories, concerns, questions to prompt my reflection and ongoing conversation with you. Like one person wrote in a card: "The love, the help I get at every turn, makes me more grateful, and yet bewildered when I try to think of meaning. ... Any struggles I will have ahead, I now know God loves me—I guess that's the meaning." Wow! Huh? Yes. Conversion. Like pilgrimage, suggests Brett Mitchell-Webb, it's a life-long process of growing and changing, unfolding, often punctuated with failures as we live into possibilities, always affirming we *are* Christians (followers of Jesus on God's Way), *becoming* more like Christ.ⁱ

Jesus asked Peter three times: "Do you love me?" Friends, best I can tell, whether on special pilgrimage or open to new conversions every day, that's the question ever pulsing at the heart of our faith. "Go feed and tend my sheep," Jesus said. Best I can trust, that's the task God calls us to in all we say and do, all the time.

One last story ... Years ago, our family was on vacation in Vermont. We just left the Vermont Country Store and wound our way a bit down the road through forested hills, and up a small mountain to the Weston Priory. You know, a place where monks hang out. I know ... strange places where ministers lead their families on vacation. Suzanne graciously went along with it. Kids were young enough they

didn't know any different—doesn't everyone do this on vacation?! We popped in just in time for worship. Scripture text for the day was from the gospel according to Matthew—where Jesus says: “Come to me all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me. For I gentle and humble in heart ... my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” Now, I don't remember all that was happening in life at the time. I was away with family. In Vermont! What could be better. Yet for some reason, I was moved deeply. In that moment, I had eyes of the heart to see, and ears to hear. A longing was touched. And I answered again sitting however silently ... Yes.

In weeks ahead, I'll be moving somewhere between yellow arrows, through a forest of reflection, sometimes in a blinding radiance of bright morning light. And you'll be with me, on journeys of your own. And the blessing I've received from you, I return in the holy reciprocity of grace. May your weeks ahead be meaningful. And don't get lost out there physically, emotionally, spiritually in the hills and valleys of life and faith. I, too, look forward to hearing about your surprises that pop up along the way. The help we get at every turn ... grateful ... know God loves us. Conversion. Keep looking for signs of Holy Love in the Risen Christ. Wow! Open your minds and hearts through Huh? filled questions and conversation. May you be ready to answer Jesus' invitation however we hear it anew:

Come to me all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens. ...

Take my yoke upon you and learn from me.

“Will you come and follow me?” Jesus asks. “Yes, Master, let me walk with thee.”

Thanks be to God. Amen.

ⁱ See Brett Webb-Mitchell, *School of the Pilgrim: An Alternative Path to Christian Growth* (Louisville, KY: Westminster Jon Knox Press, 2007), 90.