

Warner Memorial Presbyterian Church

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Acts 9:1-20

John 21:1-19

ENCOUNTERS WITH THE RISEN LORD

It usually requires that there be some significant event or encounter for someone to quickly decide to completely change the direction his or her life is heading. Something impactful happens that changes virtually everything. In our scripture lessons today, we have two stories involving three people who have encounters with a person that totally change their lives.

Many of us are quite familiar with the story that gave us the expression, ‘a Damascus Road experience.’ A very devout man named Saul was so committed to protecting his religion from what he viewed as heresy that he was involved in persecuting those who were part of a new movement as followers of a man named Jesus. This Jesus had been put to death and Saul, as a matter of religious purity, was interested in eradicating the groups of people who had experienced God differently through encounters with this man. After giving approval for the stoning of one of this group’s first deacons, a man named Stephen, and after putting other followers of Jesus in jail, Saul was on his way to Damascus to continue what he saw as his religious duty.

Somewhere on the road approaching the city, he had an encounter with a bright light and someone speaking to him who identified himself as Jesus, who asked him why he was persecuting him. Saul, by his understanding had not persecuted him. He had not even met him before the renegade rabbi had died. By Saul’s understanding, he was simply exercising discipline against those who were trying to follow in Jesus’ ways. This was an encounter that Saul did not seek, but it was one that would initiate a major U-turn in his life, and one that he would eventually recognize as a great blessing. He thought he was seeing things so clearly while he was trying to capture the heretics he was after, but after this encounter, he couldn’t see anything at all. Those who were traveling with him led Saul on into Damascus, where he was instructed to go and wait for further instruction.

Then we hear of Ananias, who also had a life-changing encounter that could figuratively be called a Damascus Road experience. He was one of those Damascus Christians that Saul had been coming to town to arrest. This man was clearly an enemy to him and his friends. But Ananias had a vision where Jesus tells him to go find Saul so that he could pray for his sight to be restored. I can imagine Ananias’ response to the Lord’s directive: “Hold on now, Lord. You want the vision of the man who would arrest all of your followers here in town to be restored? Are you sure that’s a good idea? I sort of see his blindness as a blessing from God.” But the encounter with Jesus so changes Ananias that he not only takes the risk of reaching out to this man for whom God had important plans. He even calls him, “Brother Saul.” After Saul’s sight was restored, it was clear that both he and Ananias saw things differently. We’re told that Saul then spent several days with the disciples from Damascus. How do you think First Church Damascus reacted when Ananias came bringing Saul with him to meet them? Did their greeter at the front door resign on the spot and run out the back door? Saul of course would later be known as the Apostle Paul, without whom the Jesus movement might have never gone beyond just being a small sect of Judaism. The encounters that Saul and Ananias had with the risen Lord not only changed their lives, but the lives of many others as well.

The other encounter we look at this day takes place at a charcoal fire, that we could almost call a Damascus Beach experience. Jesus had appeared to his disciples after his resurrection, but we are not told of a post-resurrection conversation between Jesus and Simon Peter until this story. The only other time a charcoal fire had been mentioned in John’s Gospel was when Peter was standing by one in the courtyard of the high priest while Jesus was on trial the night before he would be crucified. He and others were seeking warmth by the charcoal

fire, but some of them recognized him as one of the followers of Jesus. Three times Peter denied it. Earlier that evening Jesus had predicted that he would do just that and Peter said it would never happen. In our reading today, there just happens to be another charcoal fire, over which Jesus was grilling fish. Peter, after he swims in from the fishing boat, sees Jesus by that charcoal fire and has to have the biggest lump in his throat possible. There was no way to undo the hurtful thing he had done to his Lord.

But Jesus offers him a way forward in relationship. He does not speak of Peter's great failure. He does not ask for an apology. He simply asks Peter if he loves him, opening the way for his disciple to express it. Then he asks him the same question. Peter again says that he does. Then Jesus asks a third time. Peter is exasperated that he keeps asking the same question. But then he realized that Jesus enabled him to say what he so needed to say, three times, not to undo, but to counter his earlier denials. Peter did not have to continue to live in shame. Rather he could live out his love of his Lord by feeding and tending to Jesus' flock of followers.

We've heard two stories of transformative encounters that three people had. Their lives were turned around so thoroughly that many others' lives were impacted as a result of these encounters. Some may think that is the only reason these two thousand year old stories need to be told – they had a momentous impact on the direction and vibrancy of the early church. They absolutely did. The church as we know it would not exist without these three encounters. And yet, there may be a greater reason that we tell and hold on to these stories. For they help us to know what an encounter with our risen Lord might be like for you and me. I don't mean it necessarily consists of bright lights and a voice from above or a very specific vision to go to a precise place to meet a particular person or a grilled fish breakfast on the beach. No, I think it is more likely to be an encounter where how we see things is transformed and we get directed in how to live out our zeal for God in ways that build up instead of ways that tear down. An encounter with the risen Lord may well call upon us to risk reaching out in a restorative way to someone we have considered to be a threat or an enemy, where we will end up considering that person a brother or sister. A resurrection encounter can take away any shame that has paralyzed our lives and enable us to live out our love for the Lord in ways that shows care for others. The risen Lord came to Saul, Ananias, and Simon Peter, and in a way to which they could respond, he said to each of them, "Arise."

You may think Easter is so two weeks ago or two millennia ago, but something about the three encounters we explored today – they all took the person by surprise and none of them happened on Easter day. May your encounter with the risen Lord go beyond an Easter day experience and may our risen Lord put as much life into you as he did into Saul, Ananias, and Peter. The Lord is risen! He is risen indeed! And he enables us to arise! Alleluia!