



## *“And the World Changed”*

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

Rev. Dr. David C. Fisher

**April 18, 2010**

Second Sunday after Easter

All the biblical stories are consequential. Each of them and all of them together are, in significant ways, the story of the Christian church and our story, too. If we let them, they shape our lives and our souls.

The two lessons you just heard read are extraordinarily consequential. They change the trajectory of world history. More importantly, they bear creative power capable of transforming us – both individuals and our congregation.

Our stories are “post-Easter” stories worth hearing and worth inviting into our lives. They bear witness to the creative force of Easter that formed Jesus’ bedraggled disciples into a powerful Christian movement. The New Testament and the Christian Church are, in part, consequences of these stories.

With the other Easter stories they form the foundation and center of the Christian faith. Easter created Christianity and we are its heirs. Without Easter, there would be no Christianity – then or now.

Something beyond mystery happened Easter morning. As a consequence, Jesus’ disciples experienced his presence. First Mary Magdalene and the women from Galilee saw him and talked with him. They were last at the cross and first at the tomb. Then Jesus appeared to the rest of the disciples, usually when they were together. The experience transformed them all and rocked the world.

The subjects of today’s texts are Peter and Paul, the two most formative figures in the beginnings of early Christianity. Both Paul and Peter are towering figures in all Christian history, and their lives and ministry bent the arc of human history. These stories are worth hearing.

Last summer we visited Italy with our son and his family. One of my favorite pictures of the trip is in the ancient Roman Forum. It’s a picture of our granddaughter standing in front of the ruins of an ancient church named the Church of Saints Peter and Paul in Chains. The church was built over the ruins of the Mamertine Prison, where according to tradition, both Peter and Paul were prisoners before their executions. The stories of Peter and Paul are worth knowing. They were unlikely prospects for world impact. An impetuous, impulsive small town fisherman and an obscure Jewish rabbi managed to leverage history, creating a movement that frightened Caesar into killing its primary leaders.

In the Gospel Lesson, Peter and the other disciples, who were about to become Apostles, were somewhat adrift after Easter. There was no Christian movement and Jesus' followers had no certain sense of direction. They didn't know yet what to do with their lives or the miracle of Easter.

Peter suggested to six of them that in the meantime, they go back to fishing. As they'd done for years before they met Jesus, they headed out to sea and fished all night. They had no luck, and as a new day dawned, they headed to shore.

Jesus, the Risen One, stood on the shore waiting for them. We know it's him, but the disciples don't. It's the first irony in a story of deep and multiple delightful ironies. (By the way, in the Easter stories, people seldom recognize Jesus at first. Something was mysteriously different about him.)

"Children," Jesus shouted, "how's fishing. Did you have any luck?"

They shouted back, "No, not a one. Bad night."

"Try casting your nets on the other side of the boat," Jesus suggested.

They shrugged their shoulders and did so. It couldn't hurt to try.

Their nets captured a large school of fish, 153 of them! (somebody counted). The nets strained to hold them all.

Then the light dawned. John recognized him first. "It's the Lord," he yelled. Peter recognized him and, impetuous as always, adds a comic touch to the story. He'd been fishing naked and in an act of respect for Jesus and impulsive joy, he put on his clothes and dove into the water and swam for shore. It's odd. Most of us take our clothes off when we go swimming.

When they reached shore, Jesus asked them for some fish and cooked them breakfast. It is an act of embodied grace. They'd all abandoned him, and Peter denied him the night before he died. He cooked breakfast for seven moral and spiritual failures.

He'd built a charcoal fire for cooking. Just a few chapters earlier in John during Jesus' trial, Peter stood before a charcoal fire warming his hands and denying he'd ever met Jesus. What went through his mind as he warmed and dried himself before this fire?

Jesus engaged his forgiven and blessed disciples in a conversation that sums up the last third of John's gospel. In several long chapters, Jesus prepared his disciples for life in his absence. His point was simple: when he was gone, they would have his words and each other. He instructed them to be a community of disciples that embodies love, grace and the character of God. "Love one another – as I have loved you," he said. "That's how people will know you are my disciples. Live in unity like the union between me and my Father. That's how your neighbors will know God sent me."

Now he puts it another way. "Peter," he said, "do you love me?"

"Yes, Lord, you know I love you," Peter replied.

"Then feed my sheep, Peter."

Three times Jesus asked Peter, “Do you love me.” Three times Peter answered, “You know I love you.” Three times Jesus said, “Then tend my lambs, care for my flock, feed my sheep.”

I don't suppose it's an accident that Jesus asked the question three times. After all, Peter denied him three times that awful night. All that was forgiven and forgotten. All that counted was love, love for Jesus and love for God's people. It all boils down to that. That's all. Love Jesus and love each other. It makes all the difference in the world.

Humbled by failure, yet restored and commissioned by grace, Peter became a powerful, seasoned leader of a movement that changed the world. Jesus' commission to Peter is also a word for the entire church. The heart of the Christian community rests in Jesus' last words to Peter. “Love me, love each other, tend my lambs, feed my sheep.” Love God. Love one another. Take care of the community. That's all.

This story about Peter is a story about us that bears transforming power. One of our friends in a former church is a force of nature tamed by faith. Ginny gave her life to Christ in college, and everything changed. When we knew her, she'd just started her own company. In her spare time, she and her husband, a physician, started small groups in our church. Over the years they started nearly 100 groups. Ginny also started what she called Marketplace Ministry designed to help people integrate their life, faith and vocation. Faith bent the arc of a life in a unique direction. I suppose at the center of it all lies Ginny's capacity to distinguish between success and significance.

The story of St. Paul in the book of Acts is a different version of the same spiritual power unleashed at Easter. While Peter was a rough-edged small town fisherman, Paul was urbane, sophisticated, educated, bicultural, and connected to influence by family ties.

He was known as Saul in his early life. He grew up in Tarsus, a Hellenistic city where his contemporary was the Roman philosopher Seneca. In his letters, Paul quotes Greek and Roman writers as well as the Jewish Scripture. Part of his education was in Jerusalem where he was the student of the influential rabbi, Gamaliel. One of his sisters lived in Jerusalem, and she used her influence in high places to help Paul when he was in legal difficulty.

Saul loathed the Christian movement. He set out to destroy it. He was on his way to Damascus to find, arrest and bring Christians back to Jerusalem in chains. He had an experience on the road to Damascus that changed him and the world. In fact, the phrase “Damascus Road Experience” is a common way of describing radical change, dramatic conversion, or suddenly seeing the light.

Such experiences are rare, but real. When Colleen was a teenager, her stepfather sexually abused her. She ran away and lived on the streets of Chicago and Seattle for several years. It was a degrading and destructive experience.

To understand Colleen's story, you need to know she had never been to a church in her life. Yet, one day she was rooting through the garbage looking for food when, as she put it, Jesus appeared to her. She told me it was as real as talking to

me that moment. Jesus told her he loved her and accepted her as his own. Colleen's life turned around that very moment.

She returned home – her stepdad was long gone – tried to make things right with her Mom, and on her first Sunday in town, showed up at our church. Barefoot and in threadbare clothes, she looked around, smiled, and said, "Wow!"

Our church adopted her as our own. Her boyfriend showed up a few weeks later, and we took him in too. We helped him get a job and find a place to stay. They were married in a mountain meadow. She wore daisy chains in her hair and around her neck. Damascus Road Experiences do happen.

Saul headed down the road to Damascus breathing out threats and death, the lesson says. Suddenly, he saw a bright light and heard a voice. "Saul, why do you persecute me?" the voice said.

"Who are you?" Saul answered.

"I am Jesus whom you persecute," the voice answered.

And the world changed. God needed someone just like Saul to help take the Christian movement beyond its ethnic and national boundaries to become the international, universal movement God intended it to be. Who better than a multi-lingual, multi-cultural mission-minded man like Saul?

Saul became Paul, a visionary leader who took the good news from Jerusalem west to Rome in half a lifetime. He proclaimed that God was creating one new people of God, a people who would live free of the walls of division that haunt human history. This new community would change the world.

At his best Paul wrote words like, "In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave or free, male or female, but everyone is one in Christ." The book of Acts ends with Paul waiting for a hearing before Caesar Nero. Wouldn't you like to have heard that encounter?

God used the unique background and talents of a man reshaped by a new vision, and a powerful new movement took a more powerful surge forward.

As always, this story reaches beyond itself to touch our lives. There are few Damascus Road Experiences and few of us are called to heroic action like Bonhoeffer, Dr. King, Bishop Tutu, or Mother Teresa.

In fact, such heroes and heroines are created by thousands of days of faithful obedience, kindness and growing conviction. Our spiritual formation is the same. Many small steps of faith create large lives.

Parents know — or should know — that children become adults by a long journey of small steps. Regular exposure to values, norms, parental care, and loads of love make a child ready for the large challenges and hardships of adolescence and adulthood.

And along the way, perhaps more importantly, children observe our faithfulness, compassion, spirituality and goodness over the long haul. It makes all the difference in the world.

I was fortunate to have parents who were people of deep faithfulness, mercy, good works, and thousands of kindnesses. They were good people, who led good lives, and were committed to all that is good in this world and the next.

I guess I grew up expecting to become that way some day. I didn't want to be a minister like my dad, but I wanted to be the kind of man he was.

My mom overcame many hardships to become the woman she was. Her mother died when she was thirteen. Her sister died two years later. Her father died when she was 26 and a young mother. Some large, assorted hard times were scattered across her life.

Like many sons, I didn't appreciate my mother until I was an adult. One of my favorite memories is this: at her church, Mom was the teacher of the "Ladies Class" for many years. It was a class of 30 to 50 women. She was younger than most of the women, and most of them became widows during her tenure.

I remember she told me that widows have no one to hug them. In a ritual repeated each Sunday year around, Mom gave all the women a hug after class. I can see them standing in line waiting.

That is the consequence of years of a faithful journey in a particular direction, namely Christian discipleship.

When she was 90, recently widowed, and confined to a wheelchair as the result of years of heart disease, Mom said, "David, I'm very happy."

Large lives are the consequence of thousands of days of small service and steady faithfulness.

One more thing: our spirituality doesn't depend so much on changing the practices of our lives. Rather, it is the consequence of doing for God's sake what we commonly do for our own sakes.

Jesus said, "Love me, and take care of my flock." That's all.

Amen.