



Alleluia, Christ is Risen

Christ is risen indeed, Alleluia.

We are still in the season of Easter,

which lasts for 50 days from Easter Sunday to Pentecost Sunday

Today we read a story which includes two Easter encounters with God;
a story in which two men, Saul and Ananias,

have an experience of conversion –
change of heart, and change of action.



First is the story of Saul.

And remember, Saul is the same person as the apostle Paul –

Saul is his Hebrew name, and Paul the gentile name,
which he uses regularly in his travel and mission among the gentiles.

Saul is a man of some status –

He is a Roman citizen, which carries privileges and protections.

He is also a Bible scholar and leader, who expresses his pride in his Jewish lineage
in his letter to the Philippians:

“Circumcised on the eighth day, of the race of Israel,
of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrew parentage,
in observance of the law a Pharisee.”

He is a man on a mission to defend the purity of his faith

by silencing the heretics who believe that Jesus is the messiah.

Saul brings zeal and energy to his task –

Luke says he is “breathing threats and murder” against the followers of Jesus

He is traveling to Damascus when something wholly unexpected happens.

God shows up, and everything changes.



Saul is stunned by a bright light, so that he falls to the ground.

He hears a voice saying, “Why are you persecuting me?”

Saul knows something extraordinary is happening – but he doesn’t understand it.

The man with a mission, filled with certainty and zeal,

becomes a man with a question:

Who are you, Lord?

This moment reminds us of some of the gospel stories where God shows up to reveal something new.

When Jesus is baptized, and a dove descends from heaven,
and a voice says, “This is my beloved son.”

When Jesus is transfigured on the mountain,
shining with supernatural light,
and again there is a voice – “This is my Son – listen to him.”

Here again, Saul and his companions hear a voice, and it says to them:
“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”

And in that moment, Saul sees that Jesus is alive.

Saul recognized Jesus as the Lord God, whom he has always loved and served.

Jesus gives Saul instructions for what will happen next.

Saul has been blinded by his vision of Jesus –
his physical blindness mirroring the spiritual blindness he has lived in,
denying Jesus and pursuing a path of violence.

The proud and mighty Saul must be escorted into the city,
taken to the home of a man called Judas,
and there he must wait for three days.

He neither eats nor drinks for those three days,
as he waits and prepares to see what God has in store for him.



In the meantime, there is another man living in Damascus,
whose name is Ananias.

He is a follower of Jesus, who lives in prayer and service to God.

God comes to Ananias in a vision,
and tells him to go to a certain house,
where he will find a certain man named Saul.

Ananias is to lay hands on Saul so that he may regain his sight.

In the tradition of the Hebrew prophets, Ananias resists God’s instructions.

Sorry, God, but do you know who that is you are sending me to?

He’s dangerous!

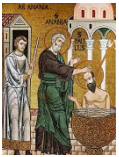
He’s an enemy!

Why would I go anywhere near him, let alone heal him?

His words and attitude may remind us of Jonah, who refuses at first
to go speak God’s word of salvation to *Those People* in Ninevah.

Ananias has good reason to argue, good reason to fear.
But he doesn't know the whole story.
God tells him – Saul has had a vision, and he is expecting you.
I have work for Saul to do.
Unlike so many places where God's says, Do not be afraid, I will be with you,
God offers no such reassurance to Ananias.
God simply says, Go.
What God is asking of Ananias is not only a physical risk,
but requires of Ananias that he be willing to forgive a great wrong
and care for an enemy.
But Ananias knows the stories – of Moses, of Isaiah, of Samuel,
who are assured of God's presence as they follow God's instruction.

So Ananias goes to Saul, and lays his hands on him,
and proclaims that God wants him to be filled with the Holy Spirit.
Then Ananias baptizes Saul -
which in the book of Acts often goes hand in hand with receiving the Holy Spirit.



That is all we hear of Ananias in Scripture,
except in chapter 22 of Acts when Paul mentions Ananias as a man of God
who has had a part in Paul's own mission.
In the Orthodox church, Ananias is remembered as a saint,
the bishop of Damascus, who proclaimed the gospel and was killed for it.
There is an icon of Ananias baptizing Jesus,
and what strikes me in this image is Saul, stripped of his cloak and shirt,
stripped of his pride and certainty and status.
Simply a man welcome into the Body of Christ by another man.

Scripture doesn't tell us that Jesus tells Saul what to do next.
But God chose well when God chose Saul.
Saul stays in Damascus, and goes immediately to the synagogue,
where he tells of his encounter with Jesus.
Jesus is alive! I saw him!
He truly is the Messiah, the Son of God!



I wonder how many of us have dramatic conversion or call stories like that of Saul, or have seen visions like Ananias?

It's not a part of everyone's faith story,

these dramatic calls and visions –

and it is not necessary for vibrant, living faith.

But I think it's more common than we know.

I've known a number of people who will quietly, privately tell me a story

of a life-changing encounter with God –

of seeing a vision or hearing God's voice.

But they don't talk about it because they worry people will think they are crazy.

Or, in good midwestern fashion, they don't want to draw attention to themselves

or be seen as bragging.

I have had experiences I would call visions from God,

moments which changed my life simply by deepening my trust in God's presence.

I used to wish for just one big, dramatic call –

just one burning bush, so I would know I was following God's will.

But eventually I realized that what God asks in those dramatic encounters

is usually really difficult and risky.

Go back to Egypt, Moses, and challenge Pharaoh.

Go across the sea, Jonah, and preach my word in an enemy land.

Go lay hands on a violent man who threatens your community, Ananias.

But here's the thing.

When we try to follow Jesus –

when we pray, and study the Bible, and come to worship,

and spend time in Christian community –

we do hear God's voice.

We do hear a call to love and serve God, in our hearts and our actions.

We hear the call to serve God by serving our neighbor –

as we will do today when we write letters to Congress asking for support

for people in our nation and our world who are hungry.

For both Saul and Ananias, the most important thing is loving and serving God,
in their hearts and their actions.

And that can be true for us as well,

whether we are zealous and full of energy,

or quietly and prayerfully faithful,

God has called each of us to love and to service.

And God accompanies us on the road, wherever it takes us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.