

5.4.2025 Easter 3

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Acts 9:1-20; Psalm 30; Revelation 5:11-14; John 21:1-19

“Follow me”

*Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Today’s readings about Paul and Peter make me wonder whether Christianity would have developed at all if Jesus had not continued to seek them out in daily life. With Jesus, millions around the world continue to share the same faith as Paul and Peter. We are diverse people, yet again and again, Jesus comes to us through others who offer us insight, forgiveness, and hope.

These thoughts were on my mind as I sat at traffic light the other day when at least five or six cars scrambled out of a parking lot in rapid succession. I don’t remember the cars, but the drivers couldn’t have been more different from one another. A thirty-something guy in a suit led the way, then a woman with two small children, all joyfully singing at the top of their lungs; then a silver-haired woman in a hurry sped close behind; then a burly bearded guy in a sleeveless t-shirt and tattoos... I mean, I started to chuckle, wondering what we look like leaving our church parking lot! All different, some with a song on their lips and others in a hurry to get to lunch!

We are so used to treating the stories of Paul, Peter, Mary Magdalene, and the disciples with great holiness that we often fail to see them in light of our own humanity. Paul was persecuting Jesus and the church, and Peter had all but abandoned Jesus again, going back to work as fisherman. Peter seems to have completely forgotten about Jesus’ breathing the Holy Spirit upon him and sending him out as an apostle. If Jesus had not continued to seek out the disciples, would there even be a church today? The same might be said of us. We think the church will always be here, yet it is we who are the church. We are the living stones of the church. Without our response to Jesus, there would be no church. Jesus continues to come to us in the quiet of prayer, in service to others, in shared meals – even in strangers as we busily rush about in a big city. Across two millennia, Jesus continues to seek us out, love us when we are unlovable, and forgive us again and again.

Paul’s story is well-known. He was an orthodox Jew and a Roman citizen. Paul was probably educated at the university in Tarsus, and later at the Jewish rabbinical school in Jerusalem. He was certainly bilingual, fluent in both Hebrew and Greek. Paul was proud to be both Jewish and Roman, which gave him great freedom and opportunity. From childhood, he possessed two names, his Jewish name, Saul, and because his father was a Roman citizen, his Roman given name, Paul.

Like many of us, Paul was proud of his ethnic and national identities. Yet Paul’s prideful ambitions were also dangerous. He not only disagreed with Jesus and his followers; he sought to expel people from their cities and synagogues; arresting them for trial in Jerusalem. Paul was driven by a legalistic orthodoxy and a religious nationalism that fueled his persecution of Jesus and the

members of what was called “the Way.”

While traveling to Damascus to arrest Christians for trial, Saul was encountered by the risen Jesus. As light flashed around him, he fell to the ground and heard a voice say, “*Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?*” He asked, “*Who are you, Lord?*” The reply came, “*I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.*” This experience changed Saul, causing him to reassess his religious nationalism and his persecution of Christians. Saul was blind to the violence he was doing to others, yet this experience caused him to see himself in a new light.

Ananias was sent to Saul to help him regain his sight and see himself anew. Though Ananias was afraid of Saul, God told Ananias that Saul was God’s “chosen vessel” who would carry the good news beyond Israel. Like Ananias, God continues to send people into our lives who often help us see ourselves anew. Perhaps you have had such an experience.

One day at a meeting, a blind man named Mr. Ando told me something that helped me see myself in a new way. Mr. Ando said, “Don’t you see? You are a foreigner, a stranger. You have a disability. You cannot speak Japanese like us, yet God is speaking through you. I can hear him.” Those words changed the way I saw myself. At the time, I was in my mid-thirties, serving as an ELCA missionary, a pastor of two churches, the board director of a foundation in Tokyo, president of the missionary association, with a self-image that came from privilege and the confidence of youth. Yet Mr. Ando’s words helped me to see my utter dependance upon God for all that I am, have, and do. God was speaking to me through Mr. Ando – my Ananias. What I am struggling to say is we are each chosen vessels in whom God is at work, yet we do not see ourselves as others do. Mr. Ando helped me see something I could not have seen without him. Has someone like Ananias ever come into your life offering you a new view of yourself?

What is important to see is that Jesus simply didn’t discard Paul, Jesus forgave Paul, giving him a new identity and work as a messenger of God’s love and forgiveness to all people and nations. Paul’s religious nationalism was overcome by God’s love for the world, its nations and peoples. Without Paul’s mission to all people, Christianity would not have spread across the ancient world. Yet like Paul, have you ever resisted God? How is God filling the vessel that is you? Has someone like Ananias ever helped you to see yourself anew?

In contrast to Paul, Peter was a fisherman. Peter did not have the same background or education as Paul. However, Peter knew Jesus; he had left everything to follow him in ministry. Yet Peter denied and abandoned his rabbi, teacher, and friend to suffer death on the cross.

Peter and the disciples had also already met the risen Jesus, yet it seems that weeks and perhaps even longer had passed without again seeing Jesus. We don’t know the exact timing and flow of events because the gospel is silent on them. Perhaps to make ends meet, Peter and the

disciples were back at it, casting nets and fishing. Perhaps God was giving Peter time to struggle and think about his experience of Jesus risen and alive.

In any event, they caught nothing. In the haze of daybreak, a stranger stood on the shore saying, “*Have you caught no fish? Cast the net to the right side of the boat...*” The beloved disciple’s words, “*It is the Lord,*” sent Peter into the water to Jesus. On the seashore, Jesus offered words of healing to a disciple who had three times denied him. Like a shepherd, Jesus said: “*Feed my lambs; Tend my sheep; Feed my sheep.*” Jesus was giving the total ministry of the small Christian flock to Peter – the care and nourishment of young and old.

Like a shepherd, Jesus searched out Paul and Peter, who were lost. Paul was lost in religious violence, and Peter struggling to understand the risen Jesus. Have you ever been encountered by a stranger who called out to you, shepherding you a new view of yourself? Has Jesus met you along your busy way in someone who helped you to see yourself, your work, or your gifts, in a new light?

I clearly remember one such encounter. It was a sunny day in downtown Tokyo, as I climbed the stairs of the subway exit two by two in a hurry to get to a meeting. No sooner had I turned the corner, when a foreigner stopped me to ask directions. She spoke in German, then when I didn’t reply in German, she asked in English. I gave her the directions she needed. Then unbidden, she said, “I’m sorry; I thought you might have been German.” It was a brief but profound moment in which I saw myself in a new way. I had lived many years in Japan and was simply going about my work. Yet I was seen in a way that caused me to see myself as someone who is not only American, but as someone, who through Jesus, belongs to all nations and peoples – this world God so loves.

Jesus finds us where we are, calling us to love the world and to follow him. Rarely do we see ourselves in such a transcendent way. Jesus stops us with new insights, saying, “*Follow me.*” When has someone helped you to see yourself or your neighbor in a new way? When has someone given you a new insight into yourself?

The risen Jesus comes to you again and again, saying, “*Follow me.*” He opens you to yourself, to him, and to others – so you might see with his eyes and speak with his voice.

This is what it means to belong to the Way, to belong to Jesus.

He is the Way. Follow him.

Amen.