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Abington Presbyterian Church

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Psalm 30

Acts 9:1-20

## THE WAY

We are Christians – that is typically how we think of our identity as people of faith, as those who believe in and seek to adhere to the teachings of the person called Jesus Christ. Would you be surprised to know that the word ‘Christian’ only appears three times in the bible? Terminology that was used more often early on to describe those who believed in Jesus referred to them/us as those who belonged to ‘the Way.’ It is used five times in the Book of Acts alone. To be clear, the most frequent term for Jesus followers in the New Testament is what gets translated into English as the ‘church.’ In the original Greek language of the New Testament, that term for church is literally those who are ‘called out.’ They were, we are those who are called out by God to move in a new direction, even when we aren’t sure where that might take us.

We just heard from the Book of Acts a part of the story of a man named Saul who was on his way from Jerusalem to the city of Damascus in order to arrest men and women who belonged to the movement called the Way. Saul was someone who had extensively studied the Hebrew law as a Pharisee. He believed he had been called to guard the Jewish faith from what he understood to be a twisted version of it by those who followed the way of Jesus. In Jerusalem, he had participated in putting to death one of the early deacons of the church, a man named Stephen.

As Saul was on his way to Damascus to continue his efforts against those he viewed as enemies of God, he suddenly saw a bright light and fell to the ground. He heard a voice asking him: “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” When Saul asked who was speaking to him, he was told it was Jesus himself, even though this was after Jesus’ ascension. The voice instructed him to go on into the city and he would be told what to do. The question that came to Saul was not: “Why do you persecute my followers?” Rather Jesus asks, “Why do you persecute me?” There is such a close association that Jesus has with his followers, that what happens to them, he also considers to be happening to him. It sounds a bit like Matthew 25 when Jesus

says, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” Others who had been traveling with Saul had heard the voice, but had not seen anyone. Saul was blinded by the encounter, so this powerful man suddenly has to rely upon his companions to lead him on into Damascus.

Some of you are like me in that you grew up as part of the church, and your faith has been developing over a long period of time. But others of you may have had a dramatic conversion experience. You may refer to your story as a Damascus Road experience. But let us note that as Saul enters the city, even after his encounter with the risen Christ, he literally and figuratively can’t see what lies in front of him, and he is confused about what this all means. It is only after he has an encounter with someone who was part of the Way, who comes to him seeking his wellbeing, that his conversion takes place.

That happened three days later, when the Lord called upon a man named Ananias to follow the way of Christ by showing love for someone who had acted as an enemy toward him and other followers. He was told to go pray with Saul that he might be healed from his blindness. Ananias knew of Saul’s reputation and that he had come to Damascus to arrest followers of Jesus. He questioned the Lord about the directive telling him to go to Saul. He probably thought that God could use Saul’s blindness as an impediment to finding and prosecuting Jesus followers. It did not seem to be in his own interest to be involved in the restoration of that man’s sight, much less to be there when it would be restored, but he followed the way shown to him by Jesus Christ.

Ananias, on his own, could not imagine what God would do through this man named Saul once he was healed and transformed. Can you imagine the conversation Ananias has with himself as he is walking to the house to which the Lord had directed him? Would he in his heart want his prayer for healing to be answered? What would he call this man whose actions made it where he could legitimately be called a terrorist? He knew he was a murderer. He understood him to be an intolerant religious bigot. There was no way Ananias liked anything about Saul’s purpose or actions. Rationally, it made sense to harbor ill-will toward this one who was coming after him and his friends as enemies. Yet, whereas Ananias

saw only a murderer, God saw an apostle. Whereas Saul saw the early Christians as deviants to be silenced, Christ saw them as members of his own body. Whereas Ananias saw a clear and present threat, Christ perceived a beloved child of God. So as someone who belonged to the Way, when Ananias entered the house, what did he call him? Brother Saul!

A story like this makes clear that in far too many cases, we do not see one another as Christ sees us. As a result, we cower when we are called to embrace; we dismiss when we are called to listen; and we cancel when we are called to engage. The possibilities that God opens go beyond what we can imagine. That is part of what it means to be those who belong to the Way. We definitely have not arrived at full understanding of what God intends, but by God's grace, we are on the Way. 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.

As those who belong to the Way, we have a Risen Lord who is taking us from where we were to a new place we could not have gone without his call and his leading. How we see things will be transformed as we get directed in how to live out our zeal for God in ways that build up instead of ways that tear down. We may even be called 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 a sister.

I was reminded this week of a quote from Edward Teller, who said, "When you get to the end of all the light you know and it's time to step into the darkness of the unknown, faith is knowing that one of two things shall happen: either you will be given something solid to stand on, or you will be taught how to fly."<sup>1</sup> The risen Lord came to Saul and Ananias, and in a way to which they could respond, he said to each of them, "Arise." We too are those who belong to the Way, who also will

be called to arise to the challenging and fulfilling way of Jesus Christ. Thanks be to the God who calls us and enables us to arise.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/69423-when-you-come-to-the-end-of-all-the-light>