

EASTER 3 - April 10, 2016
The Rev. Carenda Baker
Text: Acts 9:1-20

“How many Episcopalians does it take to change a light bulb? Ten. One to actually change the light bulb, and nine to admire the old one.” This was one of the jokes told in worship last week at St. Mary’s Episcopal Church in Waynesboro, where they were celebrating “Holy Humor Sunday”. It seems there is a custom that goes back to the early centuries of the Christian Church of intently focusing on the joy and delight of Jesus’ resurrection, in the days following Easter. Several of the early church fathers – Augustine, Gregory of Nyssa, and John Chrysostom believed that God had played a practical joke on the devil by raising Jesus from the dead. They referred to it as “*Risus paschalis*” – the Easter laugh – because God had the last laugh over death. What developed over time from the joyous celebration of the Resurrection on Easter Sunday and was carried through all of Easter week is now called “Holy Humor Sunday”, in some places celebrated on the 2nd Sunday of the Easter season.

With all that glorious celebration of the Resurrection of the Lord on Easter Sunday, why does the joy and delight of Easter seem to fade so quickly for many of us? Aside from the “holy collapse of the clergy”, why is there such a dramatic dip in attendance the Sunday after Easter? It’s like the party is over for another year. But the truth is, the party is just getting started and Jesus is the Life of it. Jesus is alive! God’s redeeming work has been done. Suffering and tragedy are still present in the world, but sin, death, and evil no longer have complete power over us, and will not ever win. It’s almost as if we need a “booster shot” to keep strong and alive the radical confidence in God’s love that brings life out of death.

We need at least the 50 days of Easter to focus on Resurrection, to really practice recognizing and living into the undefeatable love and triumph of Easter. You see, there is an unmistakable lingering Resurrection effect that has been loosed in the world. And we need lots of time to practice recognizing it.

I wonder if maybe we often don’t recognize the Resurrection effect because it usually comes to us dressed as some form of change. The Christian life is all about change, because the Resurrection is always about change, about moving us toward the experience of deeper healing and wholeness, deeper experience of the light and love of God. Deeper incorporation into the body of our crucified and risen, living Lord.

Today’s reading from Acts offers us the invitation to look closely for the Resurrection effect in the life of two men. It is one of the most well known conversion stories in all of Scripture. To be more accurate, it is the story of Saul’s call from God. It is the beginning of the transforming life story in which Saul becomes the apostle Paul, one of the greatest missionaries of the Christian faith. Saul, breathing threats and murder is chasing down followers of “the Way”, hunting disciples of Jesus. He intends to have them arrested. Saul is a Jew of impeccable background and integrity. He has been well educated by the well-respected rabbi Gamaliel, one of the leading Jewish teachers of

his day. Saul is a Pharisee, a descendant of the tribe of Benjamin. Morally upstanding. Dedicated. Determined. Zealous about his tradition and the importance and primacy of his Jewish faith. His vision and mission are earnest, clear, and focused.

And his encounter with Jesus on the way to Damascus is dramatic: flashes of light that blind him; falling to the ground; hearing a voice from somewhere questioning his motivation and his actions. Jesus asking him, "Saul, why are you persecuting me?" And then left utterly helpless and dependent on those with him.

The story in Acts puts the central spotlight on Saul. But it isn't just about Saul. Conversion is never just about us individually. Conversion is not some private little arrangement between me and God. Did you notice how very matter-of-factly, we meet in this story the other man, Ananias? Humble, unassuming he is. A disciple living in Damascus, a follower of the Way, a man who is familiar with God's voice. He recognizes the voice that speaks his name, so he responds readily, "Here I am, Lord."

We all know people like Ananias. We live and worship with them. They are on intimate terms with God, and recognize when God is calling them. This scene is important, because what happens next for Ananias and Saul is part of setting the stage for the spread of the Jesus movement. It is extremely significant.

In all his post-Easter appearances, Jesus shows up and gives his disciples something to do. They don't get to just sit back, say, "Whew, that was close", and settle in to admire Jesus. It happens here to Ananias. God has a job for him to do. "Go to Straight Street. Find the house of Judas and ask for the man Saul, from Tarsus. He is blind, and will be waiting for you to come and lay hands on him so that his sight will be restored."

God seems so often to do that – to ask hard things of faithful ones, especially quiet unassuming ones who are not looking for big, tough jobs to do, not looking for attention, not secretly hoping somehow to be noticed.

Can you imagine a bit of the dialogue between Ananias and God? "But Lord! Are you serious? I've heard about this man Saul. Everybody's talking about the terrible things he's done. He's reeking evil and terror on your people in Jerusalem, and has come here looking to do the same. I mean really! Do you expect a leopard to change its spots? I really don't have a death wish, Lord."

"Go," says God. "Saul is my chosen instrument to spread my name in the world. I have chosen him to do this. I need you to go to him."

There is no fanfare, and no further pep-talk. God has called Ananias to do this unappealing, unexpected, unasked for task. And it is as scary as anything Ananias has ever faced. He must face into and move toward the worst thing he can imagine, his worst fear. He must actually go to meet the enemy, this powerful man who could do him great harm. He has been called to go meet Saul face to face.

Have you ever been in that place like Ananias? Having to do something very difficult and scary, not quite being able to imagine anything positive in the future beyond your scary thoughts? Logically, naturally, you feel reluctance, resistance. And yet you know God has called you, given you a job to do. You want to be faithful. You want to trust. And it's very hard. "Here I am, Lord. Couldn't you find somebody else?"

Who knows how many fervent prayers Ananias might have said, or who he asks to go with him, but he does go to Straight Street as God directed, to find Saul. He enters the house, reaches out and lays his hands on this stranger, and says to him, "Brother Saul". "The Lord Jesus who appeared to you has sent me here that you might regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." And that's it. Simple. Direct. No fancy introductions or warm-up chit chat. Ananias greets Saul with kindness, calling Saul of all things, "brother" – essentially blessing this man whom he has up to this very moment feared, dreaded meeting. But as Ananias turns to face his greatest fear, speaks with kindness, and reaches out to touch and bless Saul in Jesus' name - Ananias in those simple actions, offers to Saul the healing, transformative power of the risen Jesus. Saul has been three days' blind, and now the scales fall away from his eyes. His sight is restored, and he is then baptized. Saul becomes a disciple of the Way, the risen Jesus.

Now who in this story do you think experiences the Resurrection effect? Just who receives new vision and experiences conversion? I don't think it is only Saul. Both Saul and Ananias experience conversion and each of them is enabled to see things in a new light. For Saul, who is the brand new convert, and for Ananias, the spiritually mature, faithful and obedient disciple – for both of them, their thinking, seeing, and acting changes in this holy encounter. This is what conversion is about: listening and responding in ever deeper, more faithful ways to the mind and spirit of Christ.

Now for some of us, conversion might mean being transformed like Saul was, from self-confident independence to humility, through no choice finding himself vulnerable and dependent on others for support and guidance. Like Saul, we may need our eyes to be opened, our perspectives stretched so we can see there is much more for us to learn about the ways of God, who is steadily at work in unimaginable ways, beyond our own flawed and narrow vision, to bring new life.

For others of us, conversion will mean stepping out in courage with the strength of the risen Christ to do the hard thing, to turn toward and embrace our greatest fear and walk on where God is calling us to go, doing what God is calling us to do, with whomever God directs us to do it, no matter who it is.

Recognizing the Resurrection effect in the world means we are invited to learn to accept that the winds of change are constantly blowing through life. And when we face any change, the power of God will be there to help us trust that God is already working to produce something richer, fuller, more life-giving for us and the world: new direction, deepened relationships, visible & vital spiritual power, enlivened hope, fresh mission opportunities.

What all this means is that we are going to have to find some new jokes to tell! We'll have to toss out the one about Episcopalians and change, because there will no longer be 9 Episcopalians admiring that old light bulb! There will be 10 Episcopalians loose in the world, shining the light and love of the risen Christ, reaching out to bring healing and hope, transformation and new life to others. Now THERE will be cause for joy and amazement! In the deep gladness of Resurrection life, please know dear friends, that we are called to partake fully in the glee of the risen Lord Christ, the mirth of God, and the laughter of the Holy Spirit. There is just no denying the power of the lingering, life-bringing Resurrection effect. Thanks be to God, and may you know the Resurrection Force is with you!