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**Acts 9:1–19**, English Standard Version, *abbreviated*.

*9 Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest <sup>2</sup> and asked him for letters, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. <sup>3</sup> Now as he approached Damascus, a light from heaven shone around him. <sup>4</sup> Falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me. I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.” They brought him into Damascus. <sup>9</sup> For three days he was without sight. <sup>10</sup> There was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, “Ananias, rise and look for a man of Tarsus named Saul, for behold, he is praying, <sup>12</sup> and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.” <sup>13</sup> But Ananias answered, “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem.” <sup>15</sup> But the Lord said to him, “Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. So, laying his hands on him Ananias said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” <sup>18</sup> Immediately he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized.*

**Galatians 1:14:16**, English Standard Version.

*I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers. <sup>15</sup> But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, <sup>16</sup> was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles.*

**Galatians 1:14:16**, New International Version.

*<sup>14</sup> I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers. <sup>15</sup> But when God, who set me apart from my mother’s womb and called me by his grace, was pleased <sup>16</sup> to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles.*

## **Jesus Christ is free.**

Easter is all about the risen Christ. We tend to focus on two things when we think about Jesus' resurrection. The first is the resurrection itself, the discovery of the empty tomb, the fact that Jesus could not be contained even by death. Jesus proves with finality that he is indeed God by leaving the tomb. The other thing we tend to think about is one of the primary things Jesus did just after rising from the dead. Jesus appears before the Apostles (minus Judas) and performs the Great Commission whereby he tells them what they are to do next and promises to always be with them: <sup>19</sup>*"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup>teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."* With that, the church was destined to grow from a small number of Jews who saw Jesus as their Messiah to a massive movement that would sweep across the entire known world. But there is a curious issue with this picture. We don't hear much about the activities of the Apostles after the Jesus delivers the Great Commission. We know from Acts that they do actively evangelize in the area in and around Jerusalem, and there is evidence in both the Bible and elsewhere that they ventured further than this. But we have very strong documentation within the Bible that much of the development of the

Christian Church is due, not to the Apostles, but to Paul the Great Evangelist. He did indeed call himself an Apostle, but he was not part of the Great Commission. It is through Paul that Jesus ensures that his teachings are spread far and wide after he rises from the dead.

We're all familiar with the story of Paul on the Road to Damascus. As Saul, he is headed for Damascus to capture followers of Christ and bring them back to Jerusalem for imprisonment or execution. Saul is struck blind, and he hears the voice of the risen Jesus Christ. Jesus says to him: *"Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me. I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting."* Jesus tells a believer named *Ananias* to go to Damascus and then lay hands on Saul, thereby healing him. Saul regains his vision and immediately has himself baptized. Most of us take this story as literal, as Jesus truly speaking to Saul. We know that thereafter, Saul is referred to as Paul; he becomes the Great Evangelist to the Gentiles. But it isn't stated anywhere in the Bible that he changes his name because of his conversion. In fact, Paul is simply the Greek version of his Hebrew name Saul; he may have started using the name Paul simply because it would be more familiar to non-Jews, i.e., Gentiles – since he would be evangelizing them. Here is something intriguing. Over the centuries, many have suggested that Jesus came to Saul in a metaphysical fashion, that Saul had a mental vision that was

generated by the guilt he felt over tormenting the followers of Christ. Saul had been an extraordinarily zealous Pharisee. He prayed frequently, for long periods of time, and fervently. He was deeply spiritual and mystical. Some have suggested that Jesus spoke to him through the presence of the Holy Spirit, which was already acting within Saul to bring him closer to Jesus Christ. I'll get back to this distinction of just how Jesus appeared to Paul, whether it was literal or not.

But certainly, Jesus did something very important after rising from the dead: either literally or metaphysically, he spoke to Saul on the road to Damascus. It is Paul who became the Great Evangelist to then Gentiles, to non-Jews – to us. There is no question that Paul's missionary efforts, the many churches he founded over a vast area, combined with the extraordinarily influential letters he wrote, is largely responsible for the what the Christian church became in the centuries after the earthly life of Jesus. Appearing to Saul on the road to Damascus is one of the most critical things that Jesus did after death, at least with respect to the life of the Christian Church. Perhaps if Jesus had not decided to appear before Saul, we wouldn't be meeting in this church today. Let's look carefully at this passage from Acts: *Now as he approached Damascus, a light from heaven shone around him. <sup>4</sup>Falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me. I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting."*

Jesus is identifying himself with the Church, which is in its very infancy. Since Paul had not yet started his evangelical efforts, Jesus' followers are mostly Jews who do not see themselves as having converted to a new religion. They simply see Jesus as their long-awaited Jewish Messiah. They differ on how literally they think Jesus will establish a new kingdom: will he destroy the Romans, or will he introduce a Spiritual Kingdom? Jesus tells Paul that he is persecuting Jesus personally. For us today, since we live in a time when having faith is often mocked, we can appreciate the fact that Jesus identifies personally with those who are persecuted, that he sees himself as the victim of anti-religious bigotry.

Let's look at this issue of how Jesus appears to Saul. Is it literal or is it Saul's guilty conscious, combined with God's active grace within him, causing him to have a spiritual revelation? The letter from Paul to the Galatians is widely believed to be authentic: Paul did indeed write this letter. As some background, Galatia was in Asia Minor, now in Turkey. But Galatia was not a city and so there is some debate about the identity of the recipients of this letter. Galatia was a district occupied in the 3rd century B.C. by Celtic tribes. These Celts were called Galatians by writers of the time. Galatia later became a Roman protectorate around 85 B.C. It's believed, although it isn't certain, that Paul did not write this letter to ethnic Galatians, but to people who lived in the southern part of this

district, people who were often referred to as Galatians even though they were not ethnic descendants of the true Celts. The purpose of the letter is clear. The Galatians are under brutal pressure from their surrounding society to drop their new-found faith. Paul, who previously evangelized these people himself, is worried that the Galatians are being taught a perversion of the faith, one that superficially emphasizes Jewish practices and not the truths taught by Jesus.

Our second and third readings today are the same passage from Galatians, from two different translations. The first is from the English Standard Version:

*I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers. <sup>15</sup> But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, <sup>16</sup> was pleased to reveal his Son **to me**, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles.* Paul is stating his qualifications as a teacher of the faith by telling the Galatians that Jesus spoke to him after Jesus' resurrection. Note that he says that God "*was pleased to reveal his Son **to me***". Our second translation is from the New International Version. It says that God "*was pleased <sup>16</sup> to reveal his Son **in me***." There is a subtle difference between the two translations. One says "*in me*" and one says "*to me*". Based on a debate over the correct way to translate this one word, people have wondered if Paul is saying that his experience was metaphysical, not literal. In truth, the original

Greek does say “in me”, not “to me”. But Paul could easily have written it this way simply to reinforce how personal the experience was for him, and not to say that Jesus’ appearance was not literal. There is more, however. In 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians, which we are also certain Paul personally wrote, he says: **12** *I must go on boasting. Though there is nothing to be gained by it, I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord.* <sup>2</sup> *I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows.* <sup>3</sup> *And I know that this man was caught up into paradise—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows—* <sup>4</sup> *and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter.* Paul is making a point here about the dangers of becoming prideful by pointing out that he himself could easily fall into the trap of boasting about Christ appearing to him. Notice he talks about “*visions and revelations*” of Jesus, and about being “*caught up to the third heaven – whether in the body or out of the body I do not know.*” Paul is perhaps making a powerful point here. He seems to be saying that it was the spiritual, the mystical, the internal experience of “seeing” Jesus that mattered, and not that the visit was literal.

Here’s what I think, for what it’s worth. Paul is certainly claiming to have experienced Jesus on the road to Damascus. Paul is a man who has had a very powerful reaction to the knowledge that Jesus is truly the son of God, the Messiah,

the person who walked among us to give us all a path to joy here on Earth and for all of eternity. Paul teaches forgiveness, empathy, and compassion. He knows that faith is meaningless if it does not change the way we see the world and the way we see each other. When we think about the resurrection of Jesus Christ, we should think about the fundamental change that our faith has on who we are as people and how we treat other people. God appeared to Paul and God lived within Paul. The same can be true of each of us. Most likely, none of you have ever been struck blind on Interstate 25 while flying along at 80 miles an hour, and had to pull over, only to have Jesus start talking to us. But I do hope that you feel God's presence every day, that you know that the Holy Spirit is always within you, giving you the confidence to know that God is as present for you as God was for Paul.

Here's something intriguing about Jesus' appearance to Saul. It occurred long after the resurrection, probably four or five years, or possibly more, after Jesus rose from the dead and left the tomb. Jesus didn't just come to Earth, grow to an adult, live a short adulthood founding a Spiritual Kingdom, get crucified, rise from the dead, and then check in quickly with a few people, like the Apostles, to get them started in the right direction - and then go away forever. Jesus, our God, remained very active. The risen God does live among us, does visit us, and does come to us when we find ourselves confronting loss, pain, sickness, fear, or death. I'd like to

read a couple of verses from the third chapter of Ephesians. It's in the middle of what is widely considered one of the most beautiful passages in the Bible. This part of Ephesians talks about the incredible gift of having the Holy Spirit within us every day of our lives, and how enlivened we are by God's love, and the joy that we feel when we embrace the presence of God. Here it is: *Christ dwells in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love,<sup>18</sup> may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ.* Christ dwells in our hearts through faith.

Remember that Christ didn't rise from the dead and then go on a two-thousand-year cruise through the South Pacific. Whatever is going on in your life right now that is making you anxious or causing you to suffer, remember that our God remains here among us. All you need is faith. Open your heart, and then let Jesus appear before you. You won't see him. You won't hear his physical voice. The man Jesus, during the three years of his active ministry, never left a tiny area surrounding Jerusalem. He did all his travelling on foot. But the Christ is risen now. Jesus Christ is free. He is free to travel everywhere and everywhere at once. We can all experience Christ, just as Paul did. Let Jesus Christ give you comfort, teach you how to love all people, treat all people with dignity, forgive all those who have done you wrong, and free you from whatever keeps you from living in joy. Amen.