

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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Today's readings are quintessential Easter readings that offer us a vision of resurrected living. So, let's explore them. In the first reading, we heard of Saul who was literally torturing, threatening, and murdering those following "the Way." This phrase, "the Way" is how early followers of Jesus were described. Remember, Jesus's early supporters were Jewish, and they lived out their faith by following "the Way" of Jesus. It isn't until later that the followers of Jesus are first called "Christian." Initially, Jesus' followers were known not by a set of beliefs, but rather by their character or *the way* they operated in the world.<sup>1</sup>

So, it's sort of ironic that Saul was on *the way* to the synagogue in Damascus when his trajectory was changed. Remember, Saul was looking for people who were following the Way so that he could root them out of the Jewish faith. It's almost like Saul was conducting an early inquisition to purify the Jewish faith. After all, Saul had a deeply held belief that Christ would come in a very particular way, and Saul was certain that Jesus was not the manifestation of the Christ. Holding this deep-seated belief led to his hatred for the religious "other," and in his religious zeal and exclusivity, he failed to recognize God's presence in others.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/third-sunday-of-easter-3/commentary-on-acts-91-6-7-20>

So, when Saul was on his way, there was a huge flash of light and the voice of Jesus. In that moment, Saul could open his eyes but he could no longer see. The passage said, it was three days that he was without sight and that he neither ate nor drank. Now, in Bible speak, “three days” is a signal. Most of us might remember that Jesus was in the tomb for three days or that Jonah was in the belly of the whale for three days, but we might easily forget that “three days” was also found in the creation narrative, Abraham’s test, in relation to the Israelites at Sinai, and the list goes on. “Three days” is a literary cue that resurrection is close by.<sup>2</sup>

In that first reading, a disciple named Ananias initially resists coming to lay hands on Saul but eventually does. After Ananias lays hands on Saul, “immediately something like scales fell from [Saul’s] eyes, and his sight was restored” (Acts 9:18). And, as Professor Eric Barreto puts it, “Saul does not merely see again; rather his loss of sight and regaining it has the metaphorical significance of ceasing to see [Jesus’ followers] as he had gotten accustomed to—[that is,] as enemies—and learning to see them as people deserving of acceptance despite any theological and ideological differences.”<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps that’s where we find ourselves today. Could it be that we live in a world filled with Sauls. Think of all the religious extremists who fail to see God in the other. Think of the armed conflicts in Ukraine, Myanmar, and Yemen comprised of fighters who pillage, rape, and kill without regard of the shared humanity. But also think about how we demonize the other. Maybe we are Saul. Think about the way

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<sup>2</sup> <https://bibleproject.com/blog/why-did-jesus-rise-on-the-third-day/#:~:text=The%20Third%20Day%20Pattern%20in%20the%20Hebrew%20Bible&text=Keep%20Reading-...occurring%20on%20the%20third%20day.>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/third-sunday-of-easter-3/commentary-on-acts-91-6-7-20>

we fail to recognize God's presence in someone who looks, talks, thinks, or acts differently than us. Think about the ways that, like Saul, our beliefs get in the way of faith. After all, a "belief" is a conviction of certainty, while "faith" is complete trust in God. Belief clings, faith lets go. Beliefs require us to take our experience and understanding of God and force them to fit with our fixed worldview. On the other hand, faith asks us to trust, seek, and be open to God. You see, Saul had beliefs and that led him to do some incredibly ungodly acts. Yet, faith is what restored his sight. Faith is what allowed him to see God's gift. Faith is what birthed a resurrection.

That is the same gift found in the gospel reading. There, at the end of the gospel reading, we heard Jesus reframe what it meant to be a disciple. Recall that early in John's gospel being a disciple was about observing, watching, and literally following Jesus from place to place. Now, after Christ's resurrection, we heard that to love Jesus is to love your neighbor, to love Jesus is to feed one another, and to love Jesus is to tend to all people. It's a shift from following to loving. It's a shift from observing to enacting. It's a shift toward the Way that seeks love, faith, and resurrection.

As we begin this Sabbatical Summer together, this is the path before us. It's a time to be immersed in faith, a time to be open to the spirit, a time to let the scales fall off our eyes. Yet, like Saul, the scales don't fall off easily. It takes time, it takes relationship, and it takes an openness to naming that our beliefs might not be aligned with God's vision. It the movement from belief to faith. From certainty to trust. From death to life.

As a way to explore this movement, I invite you to join me in reading “Faith After Doubt” by Brian McLaren during this Sabbatical Summer. For those of you who feel like your beliefs aren’t working anymore, that they’re not aligned with the Way we see God’s action in the scriptures, this book is for you. If you’re feeling like you don’t understand the person who holds a different religious viewpoint, this book is for you. If you’re finding it harder and harder to love your neighbor, this book is for you. For in our reading and exploration, it might help us to reveal the scales on our eyes that we don’t even notice. It might help us to challenge the notion that faith and doubt cannot be held together. It might help us discover what God desires for us, that is a resurrected life of love.

With that my friends, my siblings in faith, I’m going to leave us here. Today’s readings have given us a gift. We heard how Saul’s rigidity and unquestioned beliefs were transformed into a resurrection. It was a death to certainty and a resurrection into trust and love. So too, Christ reminded us in today’s gospel that the sign of faith, the sign of new life, the sign of God is the embodiment of love. Today, we’re offered the opportunity to participate in these resurrection experiences—to embrace faith, to enact love, and to become the resurrected body of Christ. Thanks be to God. Amen.