

PAUL AND THE RISEN CHRIST

I was going to write all of you another little email note after our question-and-comment session last Wednesday. But then I realized we needed a whole class session instead of a little note. Not all of you need to hear this, and maybe I'm the only one who does. But we don't have to be in a hurry.

Mostly I want to talk about three things:

- 1.) The transition between following Jesus of Nazareth and following Jesus the Resurrected Christ. They are not different beings, but it often feels like it to us.
- 2.) I need to remind you about some dimensions to Paul. This was troubling some of you. Paul is the first one to experience and encounter the real connection between the Carpenter of Nazareth and the Christ of Resurrection.
- 3.) Along the way, I want to comment about "distractions."

Many do not realize that, in one way or another, they resent Easter. Once Jesus is Resurrected, He becomes quite unmanageable. I mean, in every way: in concept, identity, purpose, authority. So lots of people "solve" the problem by simply not going there – not going to the dimensions and implications of the Resurrection. And naturally, lots of people find Easter just too much or too difficult to believe. It is evidence of too many dimensions beyond the one we are used to.

Beyond that, we have people wandering all over the place saying really stupid, silly things, like "all religions are the same." Or at least "one is as good as another." That may be true, from an ultimate perspective. But it is not true from an earthly perspective. People who equate the world's religions are not paying serious attention to *any* of them. They especially are not believing the Resurrection. They have moved it into the category of metaphor or symbolism or some type of cosmic optimism, in order to keep it from blinding them so much. There are a lot of resuscitation stories in our world, and quite a few stories based on the metaphor of the sun coming back to life after winter's dark and cold. But Jesus is the Risen One. Nobody has to believe that, but there is

little reason to be insulting or disrespectful toward those who obviously did and do believe it, enough to lay their whole lives on the line for Him. Ecumenical hopes and the desire for more peace and understanding between religions do not rest on homogenization. They depend on our learning more respect for each other. The truth is, if we cannot tell the difference between religions, that is hugely disrespectful.

When we come to the importance of Paul, this will doubtless require us to remember his Damascus Road encounter. After that, if there's time, we will want to mention again the connection between what Paul taught and what Jesus taught. Paul, as we all know, was not a disciple of the earthly Jesus. But do we imagine that Paul had no interest in Jesus' story once he was converted, or that he didn't learn all he could from Jesus' disciples whenever he got the chance? Who was Paul's best friend in his early ministry? A fellow named Barnabas, a prominent member of the Jerusalem church. And Barnabas had a nephew. What was his name? John – John Mark, the guy who wrote the first Gospel of Jesus' life. Why was Paul so eager to take Mark on the first missionary journey, and why was he so upset when Mark deserted them early on? Because Mark knew the stories and the teachings that surrounded Jesus' life, and Paul knew that if they made any converts, people would be more than eager to learn everything they could about Jesus. Don't we wish the converts of today – at least the church members – were just as eager? I would like to suggest that Paul was also eager, and that he liked to talk with Mark and paid attention to what Mark could tell him.

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So we have our agenda before us. Let's start off with an axiom I consider to be bedrock reality for Christians. At first it sounds discouraging. At least I crashed on this bedrock many times when I was young; still do, when I get careless. Ready? Here is the axiom:

We cannot follow Jesus by knowing the stories of Jesus' life on earth. We can only follow Jesus by knowing the Holy Spirit of Jesus.

That is because the only way we can have a real and current relationship with Jesus – the only way we can get *daily* strength, inspiration, guidance, healing, forgiveness, and reassurance from Jesus – is if we have a relationship with the Holy Spirit of Jesus.

Now, I know you have all let this sink in pure and deep long ago. But I don't mind reminding you, because I so often need reminding. So let me talk about it for a little longer. I do still know many people who try to live on the assumption that if they study "the life of Jesus" long enough and well enough, they will be able to become good and faithful followers of Jesus. Please remember: I am a person who studies the life of Jesus all the time. I think this is a mandate for all serious Christians. The more we know about the earthly Jesus, the more we are likely to track and trust and recognize His Holy Spirit when we encounter the Risen One. So I am not in any way pooh-poohing or trying to minimize either the delight or the importance of studying the life of Jesus. It is essential for us.

But what if we forget the blunder – the satanic trap – of that second part: the assumption that studying the life of Jesus will allow us to become His good and faithful followers? If we go at it that way, who is in charge? Oops, right back to the same old pride: *we* will study, *we* will learn, *we* will make up our minds to be faithful, and then *we* will be able to follow Him. How many times I have tried it that way! It always takes me back deep into "the Law," and deep into judgment and scorn for all those who are not trying as hard as I am. And pretty soon I cannot see or find love or compassion or mercy for even myself, never mind for others.

But that is never clear at the beginning of this path. It is the "fool's gold" of Christianity, and it always glitters so prettily and appealingly at the beginning of our good intentions: we will follow Jesus because we will have acquired all wisdom and insight and understanding; we will have studied His patterns until we know them by heart and can do them ourselves, duplicating His Ways.

Several things are subtle yet powerful about Jesus' WAY. Foremost: studying Jesus leads us straight into His WAY of prayer. Most beginners miss this part at first. Our understanding of Jesus can easily fuzz on us at this point. Jesus was praying to God for daily, if not hourly, instructions. His obedience to His connection with God was off the charts, at least in comparison to what we know of most humans, and in comparison to most of our own experiences. So Jesus prayed to God, and we do too. But we do this with far better results if we include in our awareness our faith (trust) that Jesus was sent (or called) to reconcile us to God. Obedience is not fully possible without trust. Our trust in God goes many dimensions beyond what it was before we ran into Jesus, but

only if we have gone with Him to the Cross, to the Resurrection, and to Pentecost. Our desire to stay in charge, no matter how subtle, reveals a lack of trust. We will study His life until we understand, and then we'll follow Him – but *our* way? The big choice – to follow Him – is wonderful, *per se*, but underneath we are still going to keep all the little choices in our own hands? That is not going to work.

This “Pharisee pattern” seems so close, on the outside. And it’s so religious, so sincere, and so commendable, who could possibly fault it? But while we are studying Jesus’ life, we might notice that Jesus did not join the Pharisee movement. And with a few noticeable exceptions, the Pharisees were His greatest antagonists. How is that possible?

But I am trying to put into words what probably can only come clear with experience. Many of us have to try it. We have to try to follow Jesus by our own determination and understanding, maybe even several times, until we realize – by where we end up, by where this leads us – that this is not the WAY. Some of us call it “the grace of point zero.”

In any case, life is tougher and deeper and more difficult than the easy formulas of most popular Christianity allow for or make clear. We need a living relationship with our Lord, so that we can constantly and continually receive actual and current instructions and inspiration and strength. People sometimes say to me, “Why are we studying Paul? Why don’t we study Jesus?” And the answer is: “Because we cannot know Jesus just by studying His life.” It is two thousand years later, if we haven’t noticed. If we want to know Jesus, we have to know not only the Jesus that Peter knew, but also the Jesus that Paul knew.

Shall we try that again? To be authentic and faithful followers of Jesus, we must be obedient followers in the real situations we are confronting in real time, right now, on a daily basis. In other words, if our faith does not transcend past Good Friday, into Easter, and then deeply into Pentecost – that is, until *we also* are in the presence of the Holy Spirit of our Risen Lord – then we cannot be followers. We can only paint by the numbers. We will constantly fall back to our own resources, and to our own level of morality, love, and goodness. And that is right back to the “way of the world” before Jesus came.

Okay, so some people want to “love Jesus” and “forget Paul.” Yet Paul is inescapably mixed in with the transition between the earthly Jesus and the Resurrected One. Paul is the one who makes it clearest,

who tells it first, who tells us the most about it. Paul is the one who tried it first and most sincerely, because of his own experience with the Resurrected One. He is the one who realized most clearly that the old way of following the Law – the codes, our own efforts – simply could never lead into a living relationship with the real Jesus. And Paul spends the rest of his own life demonstrating, however imperfectly, what it really means to be a follower of Jesus.

I do assume that Peter, and some of the other disciples (not only the remaining eleven), were catching on too. We do get glimmers. They were also having encounters with the Risen One. But we don't hear very much about it from them. A little, but not much. We hear about it from Paul.

Let me say it again: It is hard to imagine how much we would know about the earthly Jesus and His purpose and ministry if we knew nothing of Peter or any of the other disciples. It is just as difficult to imagine how much we would know about following the Resurrected Jesus if we knew nothing of Paul. Sad, perhaps, that we are so limited, but without any illustrations or role models, it is very difficult for us to have any clear notion about how to get into the New Life ourselves. Stop resenting Paul! See and learn as much as you can from him. Then move beyond him and do it better than he did, if you want to.

Paul does not lead us away from Jesus. Paul leads us beyond the earthly Jesus to the Resurrected Jesus. And it is not because Paul is so great. It is because Jesus is so great. If you don't think Paul is saying this – constantly and continually – you are not paying much attention to what he is telling us.

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I do hope that what follows will not distract you from what we were just talking about. But I think that the way Paul came into the Christian Faith, though quite familiar to most Christians, at least on the surface, is at the same time easily passed over or even dismissed by many. So I am eager for us to review it and renew it in our understanding of the larger picture.

Paul did not pick Jesus or the Holy Spirit or Christianity. The Spirit picked Paul. And Paul was probably the last person the eleven disciples would have chosen to be an apostle. He had never “walked

with Jesus.” He was not even in the movement. In fact, he was busy disparaging the Christian movement and message. By the time the Spirit worked out some way to reach him, he was busy arresting Christians, dragging them before councils, and getting them tried, condemned, and, if possible, executed. At the time of his encounter on the Damascus Road, Saul of Tarsus was clearly an enemy of Jesus, and nobody anywhere could have believed that Paul would do anything but mischief and murder to the cause of Jesus the Christ.

For that reason, Paul’s whole life from that time onward seems like a fantasy. If we forget about this encounter on the road to Damascus, it is completely impossible to comprehend what he was doing, thinking, or saying. Paul’s worst detractors could say that they didn’t believe what happened to him on that road. But there is no doubt whatsoever that Paul believed it. That experience would light and guide his life from that moment onward, no matter where he went or what he was facing. To be sure, Paul had many additional experiences of the Spirit. But this first one set the scene and established the pattern for all that was to follow.

Be careful – this does not imply that anything was easy or automatic for Paul. It would be ten to thirteen years before Paul went on his first missionary journey. He would be a seasoned veteran of the Christian Life and Way before the Spirit sent him out to do any of the work we associate with his name. And despite his horrible reputation in his early days as a Christian, by the end of the third missionary journey there would be very few Jews or Christians who did not know his name – and all of them would love him or hate him with a passion. Like his Master, Jesus, Paul did not call forth neutral opinions or responses.

So for just a few minutes, I want to talk about how the story of the Damascus Road is foundational to Christian precepts and principles. Mostly I want you to remember or realize, as the case may be, that Paul’s encounter on the Damascus Road is what moved the concept of Resurrection from a story about what happened to a few “others” on Easter morning – something we would all know about only from hearsay or somebody else’s experience – to an encounter with the Risen Lord that all of us are part of, and that all of us can experience in our own lives. Nobody truly and deeply believes in the Resurrection until they themselves encounter the Risen Jesus. (And admit it.)

Most of us come to the Christian WAY or journey because of some experience that shook us out of whatever tree we were living in. Life hands us a “hit” – a disease, a loss, a challenge of some kind that we were not expecting and in no way were prepared for. Sometimes the trauma of such an experience causes us to drop our guard, our self-sufficiency, our pretense of thinking we are in control and can handle everything on our own. In such a vulnerable place, many, many humans have discovered the presence of a BEING they had only heard stories about before – a Being who cares about them and is trying to help them. That is never the end of any faith journey, but it is often the beginning.

Skipping to the heart and core of it: I believe in the Resurrection. There is much involved in that core belief for me, including the crucifixion that led up to it, and the coming of the Holy Spirit that followed it (Good Friday and Pentecost). Nevertheless, for me the Resurrection is more “solid” than any fact. You cannot live by facts; they don’t mean anything. They are important information, of course, but they literally don’t mean anything. You have perhaps heard me comment before that “a million facts can never add up to a single truth.” The instant that I project meaning, significance, purpose, intention, or a decision of any kind onto a fact, or even onto a whole set of facts, I have ceased to be objective. I have become subjective. And that means I am introducing unprovable values and meanings into the equation. There may be a whole string of facts which let me know that without a certain medicine, my baby will die. But there is no fact anywhere in the world that can tell me my baby is valuable, has meaning, is precious to me, is precious to God. I have to know this from some other way of knowing. Facts cannot help us with meaning, purpose, love, values, caring. Relationships are not formed or sustained on any foundation that can be built with facts. But the truth is, there are many ways of knowing that have little to do with logic or reason or facts.

Now, there are a great many things I believe in, and they light my life. There is also nothing I believe in that I have not doubted “seventy ways from Sunday,” as my mother used to say. Just want to be clear: none of this is rote, automatic, or easy for me, nor do I believe because somebody else “said so.” And of all the things I believe in, the critical core is the Resurrection of Jesus. It doesn’t stop there, but the repercussions of the Resurrection are endless. Values, meaning, purpose, my worth, your worth, what we are living for – everything is changed and impacted by the Resurrection.

I constantly run into people who think this is strange. “How can you believe in such a thing? I mean, really? And you actually think there are realms of life beyond this one where we will know each other, and go on growing and learning and coming to be who we really are?” You bet I do! That’s the deal. But lots of people think religion is just superstition, or a head trip, or something we picked up from the surrounding culture into which we were born. For me, all real religion is based in experience. So I don’t know where you are in your pilgrimage right now, but I invite you to come track it with me for a bit.

There is endless confusion about the concept of resurrection itself. Christendom today has homogenized the Greek and Hebrew constructs, and most folk think that doesn’t matter. Phrases and concepts have been intermingled and mixed together from both Hellenism and Judaism. It is nearly impossible for us *not* to do this. But Christianity is always and ever relational – that is, it is about personal relationships: Jesus and God; us and God; us and Jesus; us and each other. The primary difference between Law and Gospel is relationship. God’s only answer to sin is covenant. But God means covenant based on love (his love first, then our love responding to his love, if in fact we do respond). We get interesting covenants based on other things (good works, etc.), but they lack the personal power and transforming dimensions of a covenant based on love. There are, of course, marriages based on law, but I wouldn’t want to be in one.

Under Greek concepts, everybody has eternal life (and it is essentially nonpersonal). Most Eastern constructs assume that the “dimensions beyond” simply exist, and that nobody escapes them. But the concept of resurrection comes out of Hebrew roots, and Jesus is a Jew bringing it all to apex. Resurrection is *never* automatic! Most Western liberal thought in our day makes God a bad guy if everybody doesn’t get saved. Most “New Age” constructs simply assume that we are all eternal spiritual beings. I don’t want to debate such issues right now, just remind you that this is all foreign to the idea of resurrection. If anyone gets resurrected, it is an act of God. That is, God personally *acts* – goes “out of his way” – to save us from death, from nonexistence. If you are resurrected, it is because you are loved, cared about. It is because you are wanted! There is nothing automatic, nonpersonal, or meaningless about resurrection. Huge numbers of Christians in our time do not know or remember this. They can therefore “believe” in the Resurrection of Jesus without receiving any benefit from it. The day after Easter is the same as the day

before. The personal love of God has not broken through all the shields of fear and despair – yet.

If you are resurrected, it is the ultimate proof that God personally loves you – that God wants to keep you. And of course, Jesus does try to reveal to us the very great surprise: God does love us – loves us *this much* (enough to resurrect us) – and not on the basis of any perfection on our part.

“Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead.” (I Corinthians 15:12-21) (Oh dear. I have resorted to quoting Paul.)

But I want to talk about Paul. Does this passage sound to you like Paul is mincing words or playing mind games? Why is he so convinced? Behind the affirmation is encounter/experience: the Damascus Road. We cannot understand anything of the Paul we know if we delete or forget his experience on the Damascus Road.

So what about the Damascus Road? We know it was the experience that changed Paul’s life – that converted him from a Jewish Pharisee to a Christian Apostle. Do you think Paul really did encounter the Risen Jesus? If not, he was surely one of the most deluded men in history. Smile, but don’t laugh; that is always a possibility. Nevertheless, it is difficult for me to imagine the rest of Paul’s life being inspired by a delusional episode that lasted with such patient and powerful consistency through all the trials, challenges, persecutions, and everyday struggles of the great apostle for so many years. You can call it that way if you like, but I cannot. That is, the delusional explanation makes no sense to me. It will not add up. Some of my friends try to group the virgin birth with

the Resurrection. If we doubt one, why not doubt the other? But that is comparing apples to oranges. The virgin birth is not in the same category: We cannot experience the virgin birth. Every honest study makes it clear that the records do not support it as an historical event. However, it is just the reverse with the Resurrection. Every honest examination says that there is no other serious explanation for the rise of the Christian church.

Again: It is completely impossible to comprehend Paul's life – or his faith – apart from the Damascus Road revelation. It changes his life forever. Suddenly Jesus outranks Moses. This is unheard of for a rabbinically trained Jew. Suddenly all of Paul's ambitions, relatives, friends, and status in the Jewish community – and all his former beliefs (assumptions, years of study, vast traditions) – do not mean as much to him as Jesus does. And until this encounter, this is the Jesus that Paul had assumed was a dead heretic, a blasphemer, an enemy of Judaism. There are no sufficient words. But after the Damascus Road, Paul *knows* (whether any of us think him mistaken or not) that Jesus is alive (resurrected) – he knows that Jesus is God's Messiah. And Paul also knows a thing unthinkable before this encounter had taken place: he knows that he himself is to be sent – that he is to spend the rest of his life as a Messenger of this Jesus, especially to the Gentiles.

Every time we get confused about what Paul is doing, how he is doing it, what he is writing, why he is so “focused” – or where he gets his “authority” – it all tends to clear up if we remember the Damascus Road. And it makes no sense at all *apart from* the Damascus Road. If the experience on the Damascus Road was made up, imagined, or in some way “not real,” then everything about Paul's life goes tilt.

The change in Paul is now familiar enough that some try to minimize or ignore it. Some people even try to minimize the chasm between Law and Gospel. But again, the story will not match. The opposition to Paul – the efforts to question his authority and his apostleship – is huge. The riot in Jerusalem at his last visit there makes it impossible to pretend that this is just a minor (or private) quirk or notion.

Now let me add what many miss or forget: the Damascus Road story is our oldest extant account of an experience that anyone had encountering the Risen Jesus personally. That may seem like a technical and unimportant detail to some. Surely Peter and others, even prior to Paul's conversion, were telling people that they had seen the Risen Jesus.

But the *accounts* of these experiences were written *after* Paul's letters – that is, well after Paul encountered the Risen Jesus himself. In other words, Paul is not being influenced by the written accounts in Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John. Luke, of course, is a convert of Paul's, not the other way around.

As an aside: It is possible that the account of Paul's experience (in Acts) may have been written after Paul's death. I happen to believe that Luke and Paul died together. They certainly spent several years together – from the tail end of the third missionary journey until the end of Paul's life in Rome. Luke goes suddenly and inexplicably silent at the same time that Paul is cut off. In any case, Luke is clearly one of Paul's closest friends, and he has heard Paul "tell his story," probably many times. And even though there is no reason for Paul to reiterate the story in his letters, where he addresses other issues, I do think he alludes to the experience a couple of times. (Galatians 1:15-16; II Corinthians 12:1-5)

Back to my point: Why am I fussing over such details? Because Paul's claim to apostleship rests on his encounter with the Risen Jesus on the Damascus Road – a "spiritual experience" that takes place a *year or two* after Easter, not a day or a week after Easter. Yet it still changes Paul's life and fuels his ministry more powerfully than any other Resurrection story we have. And because of its early place in our written tradition, it stands with at least as much authority as any of the Resurrection stories we have. Or, to get down to it: YOU don't have to stick your finger in Jesus' side or watch Him walk through walls to know that He is resurrected – to know that He is alive and present with us.

Do you see what that means? That means that an encounter with the Risen Jesus is available to all of us – to all followers. (Actually, this is what makes us followers.) Paul is not the only one "untimely born." (I Corinthians 15:8) Any of us may encounter the Risen Christ at any time, in any place, in any situation – all through time. Life in Christ Jesus (the Holy Spirit leading and guiding the church) is the dynamism that drives the Christian Life. This is the huge truth that makes it all not merely true "back then," but just as true today – for anyone who is willing to allow, to cooperate with, to open themselves to the presence of the Risen Jesus.

Now, a considerable number of people have been making claims to some kind of encounter down through all the years since. My own private opinion is that some of them are pretenders; their lives don't

show any evidence that such an encounter took place. But there are lots of others – people (witnesses) whose lives cannot be easily explained on any other basis: George Fox, John Wesley, John Huss, Origen, Augustine, John Bunyan, Martin Luther, John Wycliffe, Jonathan Edwards, to name only a few. And each of us could add the names of people we have known personally who will never be famous outside their own faith circles.

Why do I think the Damascus Road experience is more than a “biblical story”? Why do I *believe it* more than some folk who have the same information that I do but are not similarly moved? I don’t “believe it” because of logic or argument or any kind of intellectual prowess. I *believe it* because it matches my own experience. I believe it because I encountered the Risen Christ in a very “Damascus Road” kind of experience the summer of my sixth-grade year. I was young and had many mistakes yet to make. But my life was going down the tubes, far more than I realized at the time. This experience changed my life forever, and sent me into my own “calling” (vocatio). I have come to realize, despite many blind spots and errors and rebellious times, that the Holy Spirit has been trying to guide and support and stay with me ever since. Many have suggested to me over the years that this was just my imagination, or it was a mental trick of some kind, or it was wishful thinking, or I was too young, or whatever. But I was *there*, and they were not. What I was shown was far more real than anything in this world, and included dimensions beyond this world. So I don’t really have any need to argue with them. I know what I was shown. It certainly doesn’t make me proud. How I wish I could point to my life, look down my own back trail, and say that I have been as faithful to Jesus as Paul was. Wouldn’t that be wonderful! But it is not so. On the other hand, more than most people, I know what my life would have been like apart from this encounter, and apart from the ways the Spirit has tracked me and helped me in all the years since.

So I have done some good, and I have done some harm. The principle of alienation operates everywhere in our world, and I am often part of it, or caught in it. Though I am always stunned that some folk in the various churches I have served have such a small awareness of sin and separation, I have no problem understanding the issues and realities of guilt, shame, remorse, loneliness, and fear. But even this “proves” to me that the Resurrected Jesus is real. Some ONE – some very real Being – has helped me through such times again and again, and I cannot imagine getting through such times apart from Him. In any case,

my life has been very different since the time of my own “Damascus Road” encounter. So when I hear the story of Paul, I don’t think, “What an impossible story.” I think, “Oh, a friend and brother – someone else who knows the Resurrection is real!” The ONE whom Paul encountered on the Damascus Road is real. The place I was shown in the sixth grade is real. Where we are here is the shadow realm – the partial place – and we are all Pinocchios longing and trying to become real persons.

Well, I wanted to say something about distractions, and how as Christians it is not just important but essential for us to keep our eyes on Jesus – both before and after His Resurrection. And I wanted to make a couple of comments about how much Paul knew the story and teachings of the earthly Jesus. But we have run out of time. So maybe I can tack it on to a later class, if it still seems important in the morning.