

Acts 9:1-19a. Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest ² and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. ³ As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" ⁵ "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. ⁶ "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." ⁷ The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. ⁸ Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. ⁹ For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything. ¹⁰ In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!" "Yes, Lord," he answered. ¹¹ The Lord told him, "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. ¹² In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight." ¹³ "Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem. ¹⁴ And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name." ¹⁵ But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. ¹⁶ I will show him how much he must suffer for my name." ¹⁷ Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." ¹⁸ Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, ¹⁹ and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

See the difference that the Risen Lord makes!

- 1. He changes hearts and lives.**
- 2. He reenergizes us for work in his kingdom.**

It's a challenge that more than a few companies use in their advertizing strategy. Make the switch and you will see the difference. *"Jump into a Ford Truck and you will see the difference in fuel efficiency, horsepower, and torque. Come on down to your local dealership and see the difference for yourself."* At least that's the claim. Or maybe it's not a car commercial but another company saying, *"Use this dishwashing detergent instead of Cascade, join the Finish revolution, and you will see the difference. Your dishes will be cleaner. Your glasses will sparkle. The difference will be clear."* Many companies are

known to make these types of claims as they try to convince you to put your trust in their product and if you do you will see the difference and you will like it.

Today our risen Lord Jesus shows us the difference that his gospel brings to our lives. But this is much more than just an advertizing ploy. This is much more than a choice we make to suddenly switch to Jesus and change our lives. No this is the word of God. This is the power of the crucified and risen Lord to reach into our lives and he transform us. The risen Lord comes to us through Word and Sacrament and he gives us new life. This is the power that Jesus has for unbeliever and believer alike. For the unbeliever he brings spiritual life to those dead in sin. He converts and regenerates those who do not believe in him - even those who vociferously hate him like Saul did - he has the power to save with his powerful word. For the believer our Lord also renews and reinvigorates those who currently serve him. Our Lord has the power, this wonderful power, to change our hearts and lives. He does this wonderful work daily. See the difference the Risen Lord makes!

Just look at Saul who became Paul and see the difference the Risen Lord makes. The account of Saul is a case study of sorts for the difference that God can make in a person's life. The man we know as one of the greatest epistle writers and missionaries was first enemy number # 1 of the early Christian Church. Before he was Paul he was Saul. Saul hated Christianity. The Scriptures tell us that Saul held such a hatred for Christianity in his heart that he was constantly ***breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples***. Not only was Saul constantly verbalizing his hatred he was acting out on it. He even went through the trouble of getting written letters, from the high priest himself to round up and to imprison Christians as they gathered in the synagogues. He hated Christianity so much that if he found any who belonged to the Way - whether they were men or women it didn't matter - he would take anyone associated with Jesus as a prisoner to Jerusalem. This is the kind of hatred that Saul held in his heart and yet the risen Lord Jesus changed all of that. See the difference that Risen Lord makes!

As Saul was on this mission of hatred he headed toward Damascus and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, ***"Saul, Saul, who do you persecute me?"***

As Christians living in this country we do not have to fear such blatant persecution. Thanks be to God! But there are those that we know (they might even be in our own family) who continually vocalize their displeasure or even their hatred for Christianity. As those who belong to the Way, as those who belong to Jesus, we take heart for two reasons. First the Risen Lord has our back. Notice when he calls out to Saul he doesn't say, why do you persecute my disciples, but rather he says, ***"Why do you persecute me?"*** We are the body of Christ and Jesus is concerned about those who cause us grief and suffering. Anyone who picks on us picks on him. Secondly the Risen Lord has the power to change the heart of anyone - even the worst enemy that the Church has. So we pray even for those who persecute us or give us a hard time for our faith. We pray that the Lord might change their heart. Who knows the Lord may even use you to share the message of the gospel with them. God enables his people to be his instruments of grace.

Remember how Saul was brought to faith. Saul's heart was not changed by a sudden flash of light. It was not changed because he hit his head when he fell off his horse or when he lost his sight. His heart was not changed because sight was regained. His heart was changed when God reached into his life with Word and Sacrament. The Risen Christ Jesus spoke to him and then the LORD sent his humble disciple Ananias to Saul. Ananias was sent by God and he spoke the Word of God to him. Ananias then baptized Saul. The Lord would change Saul's heart and then he would change this man's life. This man, Saul, who had done and said such awful things, God would use him to be his mouthpiece and his instrument of grace to bring the gospel to so many people. See the difference the Risen Lord makes!

One thing that might be overlooked in all of this is how God also brought noticeable change to Ananias' life. Let's look at the difference God made for his disciple. Through the word of the LORD Ananias was renewed and reenergized for service to the Lord. When the Lord called to Ananias in a vision to go and visit Saul Ananias was frightened. He knew Saul's horrible reputation, he wanted to skip this difficult assignment and so he said, ***"Lord, I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem. ¹⁴ And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name."*** Ananias knew Saul had come to Damascus for the very purpose to arrest him and his fellow believers, and yet through his powerful Word God strengthened Ananias and gave him the courage to reach out even to this enemy of the church.

By God's grace and power Ananias was able to muster up the courage to go to that house on the Straight Street, stand before this man with such a horrible reputation, and by God's grace alone he was able to call this persecutor of Christians "Brother". Only by the forgiving power of the gospel that had first touched his heart was Ananias able to put aside all the awful things that he must have thought about Saul and bring him the very Words of God. By the power of God's grace Ananias was able to talk to Saul, instruct Saul in God's Word, and pour out the blessings of the Savior on this man he baptized Saul. What significant change in the lives of both of these men! See the difference the Risen Lord Jesus makes!

The Lord has done the same for us. The Lord has miraculously saved you and me. No, we weren't knocked over by a bright light like Saul was, but our hearts and lives have been changed by the risen Lord Jesus. We confess with Paul that by nature we were the chief of sinners. We were lost and condemned creatures, blind and dead in sinfulness, our hearts and minds were hostile to God and his ways. Like Saul we were headed in the complete opposite direction that Christ Jesus wanted us to go. Yet God in his undeserved love turned us around, made us alive, and forever changed our lives. He gave us the Holy Spirit through word and sacrament. He brought us to faith in Jesus. He has saved us. Look in awe at the difference the Risen Lord Jesus makes!

There is a part of us, however, that becomes so comfortable in our faith that we take this for granted. This is a part of us that doesn't think that God needs to and can change us anymore. We have been baptized. We are saved. We are taken care of. We're good. So

we neglect his word, we fail to listen to and follow his commands. We might even disregard church, bible study, or the sacraments. We become content to ignore his call and we are content to sort of coast through life. You might say that we become unimpressed by the power of Jesus and his gospel.

As a result when there are challenges in our life we don't bring them to God because we think he can't help us. *"He can't change me."* Maybe there is a problem, a sinful habit, perhaps even an addiction that we are fighting but we won't turn to God because we think that he doesn't have the power to help us, or in our sinful arrogance we don't want his help. Or there is good that God wants you to do, good that he will empower you to do, and still you don't want to do it. You look for every way to get out of it. Maybe someone has wronged you and you just won't forgive. Maybe there is someone that you have opportunity to talk to about a sin or talk to about Jesus, but you don't, you won't. You make up excuses. You try to justify your lack of action and your unwillingness to change.

It is not only unbelievers who reject the light and power of Christ is it. In our sinfulness we do it as well. We don't think that God can help us or we don't accept that help. Now is the time to see the difference the Risen Lord can make! He has the power to change your life. He has changed your heart from unbelief to faith. His gospel has the power to renew you and reinvigorate you in service to your God and obedience to his commands. See the difference the Risen Lord makes!

Whether Jesus came into your life in a flash like he came into Paul's life, or he has been that a steady presence for you like he was in Ananias' life, our savior brings life and the power of new life. He brings noticeable change. Daily he renews and reinvigorates you and me. He wants to come to you and nourish you through his Word and Sacrament. He wants to come to you and change your life with his powerful Gospel.

And this is the good news with which we have been blessed. Your risen Lord Jesus came to this world to save sinners. He came to save the best of citizens and the worst of criminals. He came to save those who were lost and wandering and he came to save those who were charging forward in the wrong direction. He came to save Saul and Ananias. He came to save you and me. He came to give purpose and meaning to the lives of 1st century believers. He came to give purpose and meaning to the lives of 21st century believers. He lived and died and rose again for all of us. He lived and died and rose again so that we might be numbered with that great and heavenly chorus that will eternally sing the praises of the Lamb who was slain in the magnificent glory of heaven. God in his grace reaches into our lives with this good news which has the power to bring us to save us from hell and bring us to heaven. Our God reaches into our lives with his Word and Sacraments to change our lives here and now. See the difference the Risen Lord makes! Consider this, if this good news of Jesus had the power to change Saul's heart and his impact his life in such profound ways he certainly has the power to bring change and renewal to your life as well. See the difference the Risen Lord makes! Trust in him and praise his name. Amen.