

Easter 3 – Year C
April 18, 2010
Faith Lutheran, Radcliff, KY
Acts
9:1-19a
Pastor Paul
Horn

Marvel at the Irony of God
I. God threatens to punish sinners...
II. And yet, he shows grace to sinners

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.

irony: an incongruity between what actually happens and what might be expected to happen, especially when this disparity seems absurd or laughable. Simply put, something humorous based on contradiction

I was listening to a podcast last week entitled *This American Life*. This particular story reported that there are 2.3 billion sq/ft of storage space in the United States. That's enough rental storage units so that every man, woman and child in America could stand in a 7.4 sq/ft space at the same time. This particular podcast focused on abandoned storage unit auctions and the people who bid on them. At these auctions prospective bidders are not allowed to go in and rummage through the abandoned belongings. They can only stand there and guess as to the contents. They often fork over hundreds of dollars, hoping to find treasure. At one of the auctions, a storage unit was opened and the crowd cheered. The boxes were not beat up and neatly arranged (which was an optimistic sign) and the word "crystal" was written on several boxes. What was ironic was that the man with highest bid soon discovered as he opened the boxes that there was not one piece of crystal, but that the individual who had rented the unit was named Crystal. (*This American Life* #399 "Contents Unknown" 1/25/2010)

There was plenty of irony on that first Easter Sunday morning. Not so much the humorous kind, but the kind of irony where people find the exact opposite of what they expected to be true. The women expected to find a sealed storage unit, occupied by a dead corpse. Instead they found a wide open grave, no body, nothing! Except folded burial cloths and two angels, who said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He's not here! He's risen, just as he said!" The great paradox that the women finally realized was that Jesus had won the victory over his enemies by dying and his empty tomb was proof of that victory.

Our lesson this morning from Acts 9 is filled with irony. It involves our resurrected Lord and Savior and two men, one named Saul of Tarsus and the other, Ananias...

Our story begins with Saul of Tarsus. Tarsus was the city of his birth. Now he lived in Jerusalem. Among Jews, Saul sat on the highest rung of the social ladder. He could trace his ancestry to the tribe of Benjamin. He was a member of the Pharisees; the Jewish religious ruling class. Pharisees were very zealous for God's laws and ceremonies, so much so that they invented new laws and went over and above God's laws, and obeyed these laws so strictly to show the rest of the people how much more righteous they were.

And so Saul saw a contradiction between the laws of God and this new teaching about Jesus of Nazareth. First of all these Jews were teaching that the ceremonies of Moses no longer needed to be observed! Secondly, these Jews believed that this Jesus was supposedly the Messiah. But he had been put to death by the Romans! He was not the powerful king the Jews were expecting. Saul felt that these Jews who believed their Messiah had come, must be stopped, they would not stop worshipping him until it became clear that they and their fellow Jews were no longer welcome there. He obtained authority from the Sadducees, Jewish rulers, to travel to Damascus, 150 miles north of Jerusalem, to search the synagogues where these Jews were worshipping, arrest them, drag them back to Jerusalem to be put on trial for violating the laws of Moses.

The great irony is that Saul thought he was traveling the right road, doing the right thing for God, in fact he was doing just the opposite. And isn't it also ironic that Saul had traveled to the city, knowing exactly where he would be going, but yet he had taken by the hand and led into the city, and was told where to go and what to do?

I can't imagine what must have gone through the mind of Saul... it was enough to make him ill for the next three days, not eating or drinking. He must have thought to himself how wrong he had been, how foolish, how... blind.... and now he was. But there was irony in his handicap. The Lord Jesus blinded Saul physically so that He could make Saul see again spiritually, and make him his chosen instrument, one of his apostles; a man called by Christ himself to share the good news which he had so passionately opposed.

And so it is easy to understand why Ananias did not quite grasp the Lord's logic, "We've heard reports about all this man has done to harm your people, now he's come here to Damascus to do the same." Here again is a paradox, that the Lord Jesus would choose someone who hated him, and hated his people and hated everything he stood for and instead of destroying him, Jesus lovingly turned Saul around and made Saul a member of the Way and a great preacher of Jesus as the Messiah.

I've had discussions with folks over the years, maybe you've had these same discussions... when we discuss universal justification; the doctrine which says, "God so loved the world that he gave up his only Son to provide forgiveness of sins for all people, so that all who believe in him will not perish but have everlasting life." (John 3:16) After people think about this, a question I often get is, "What about pedophiles, rapists, those who commit genocide with not a feeling of a guilty conscience, corrupt politicians who have only their interests and their pocketbooks in mind... so you're saying that if they believe that Jesus is their Savior and are sorry for their sins, they will go to heaven? I can't comprehend that. They ought to burn in hell for what they've done!" The follow up question I usually ask is, "Are you any better?" "Why yes! I haven't committed those heinous crimes!" True. But what does God say? It's his heaven, is it not? Should we not listen to him about who deserves to pass through the pearly gates?

He says in his Word, "All who keep the commandments yet stumble at just one point are guilty of breaking them all. Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in God's Word." (James 2:10 & Galatians 3:10) It is true, we may not have committed rape, incest, murder, or pilfered tax payers' dollars, but are not our hearts filled with greed, eyes filled with lust, mouths spew gossip and hearts that refuse to forgive? What does God say to us? "Cursed are you, guilty are you!" Society and civil law may look upon murders and those who abuse children as worst of society. But God sees no difference between what they do and what you and I have done. He sees that all have sinned, all have failed, all do not deserve to walk the sacred golden streets of heaven.

The problem is that we don't think of ourselves as "all that bad" because we have all have been blinded to the truth of God's law since birth. By nature the desires of our own sinful heart and Satan's lies blind us to the light of God's Word. But God says, "It doesn't matter which commandments you broke, or how you broke them, because you sinned, you are cursed, you deserve to die, you deserve my wrath..."

My friends, now marvel at the irony of God. Instead of wrath, he demonstrates his **grace; love we don't deserve**. It's somewhat ironic that the name Ananias means *the Lord is gracious*. The Lord used Ananias to show Saul that the Lord is full of grace, that in spite of who Saul was, what

he had done, God loved him enough to stop him on the road to Damascus (and the road to hell). God loved Saul enough to shine his Light into Saul's heart, to create faith in his heart, to give him the gift of life, a new life, see clearly, that Jesus was his Savior.

The great paradox is that God does what he promised and threatened, but he doesn't take it out on us. In spite of who we are, and what we have done, God pours out his wrath on his Son. His Son Jesus willingly takes our sins in himself, as Saul would later write, "Made to be sin for us." (2Cor 5:21) The innocent one is made guilty in our place. He is made the curse instead of us. (Galatians 2:13) All the bad things we have done and will do, our greed, lust, gossip, unforgiving hearts, all the things pedophiles, rapists, murderers, cheats have done... Jesus took as if he had done those things, so that God could punish him. There on the cross God did just that, for all people, for you, for me, because of his grace.

As we ponder the darkness of Good Friday, we may feel sadness. We recognize the sober reality that it was the darkness of our sins that caused Jesus to suffer God's wrath and die. But yet, at the cross we are filled with gladness, because through that death, we now possess the Light of Life. Through faith in Jesus, we possess the Light that chases away the dark clouds of a guilty conscience. This Light reassures us that we are forgiven through Christ. This Light instills a confidence that eternal life in heaven is ours.

We have this sure confidence because of an abandoned storage unit, which some women expected to find occupied. But Jesus had told them beforehand, the tomb would not be his permanent place of residence, he was only going to be renting it for a while. In that abandoned storage unit we find true lasting treasure, Christ's victory over death is our victory over death.

As Ananias shared this good news with Saul, Saul's life changed forever. The Lord changed his name to Paul, who no longer was known as the great persecutor of the Way, but someone who pointed people to the Way, the Truth and the Life. This event changed Paul's whole perspective on life. Paul had lived life believing his good works, his persistence in going over and above God's requirements would gain God's good favor. Now that God had shone the light of truth in his heart, Paul saw clearly that only the works of Christ merited salvation.

You have had this same life changing event. It was not filled with the same drama and flashing brilliance of Jesus' appearance, but with the sprinkling of simple water and the simple Word of Christ at your baptism as an infant. Maybe it was later on in life for you, having lived life not knowing Christ, in a quiet conversation with someone like Ananias, who showed you through God's Word how gracious God has been to you through Jesus. That same Light gave you his death and resurrection, gave you faith to believe it.

You have a new life. With the Light of Christ in you, you will abandon your old ways and leave them there on the cross with all your other trash, the gossip, the lust, the unforgiving heart, the greed... and you will live as children of Light. You will forgive, you will be content, you will be pure and chaste. And unlike so many who walk around in darkness, wondering and searching, like those who bid on the unknown at abandoned storage auctions, you will live knowing exactly where you're going, and what is waiting for you, for you have inherited an abandoned storage unit that is full of treasure. For Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Amen!

