

In today's gospel reading, when Jesus appears again at the Sea of Galilee to his fishermen friends, there is a sense of familiarity and comfort. We are back where we began and just in case you missed it, the story ends as it began, with a call: "come and follow me." Easter marks a new beginning, as the disciples begin to realize that in the death of our Lord "life is changed, not ended"—and ultimately that has ramifications for the way we face our own dying, and the deaths of those whom we love. Their Easter experience over breakfast, on the shores of the Lake with so many memories, is an extension of what they experienced of Jesus when he was still alive. Even when they aren't certain who they are seeing, the sound of his voice, the touch of his hand, the smell of a charcoal fire and the taste of broiled fish all convince them that the Lord has risen indeed.

And this seems to be true beyond the core group of disciples as well. Think about all of the ways that Jesus seemed to be revealing God in the breaking the bread when he was alive: in the feeding of the five thousand, at table fellowship every time he sat down to eat with sinners and tax collectors, as well as in the homes of Pharisees and right up to the last night of his life when in that Upper Room he took the bread and cup from the Seder table and said, "do this to remember me."

Given that context, it's not surprising that the trigger that allows the eyes of the disciples on the road to Emmaus to be opened is when the Stranger in their midst takes the bread and blesses it and breaks it and gives it. For them, too, this is an extension of their experience of Jesus, their friend. The fact that they have come to know that he is alive gives them courage and faith to continue the work he began. The Emmaus story that shapes this day's opening collect may be the most accessible one for disciples of every generation, for even when we cannot peer into the empty tomb or touch the wounds in his side or sit by a charcoal fire by the Sea of Galilee, we can still experience the risen Christ in the breaking of the bread.

But Saul's Easter story is different. Saul never met the historical Jesus. The Damascus Road experience represents discontinuity and a change of heart. I suspect that most of us gathered here today have heard at least some version of this Damascus Road story before today. The scholars debate whether it's a *call narrative* or a *conversion experience*. It's a call narrative in the same way that the call of Moses or Isaiah is a call: Saul (soon to become Paul) is given a vision and a mission. While many see this as a conversion experience, the complication is that Christianity wasn't really yet separate from Judaism—especially before Paul's ministry. So Paul isn't really *converting* from being a Jew to becoming a Christian; but rather, from being a Jew who is absolutely convinced that Messiah has not come to being a Jew who is absolutely convinced that Messiah has come and that his name is Jesus and that he has been raised from the dead. So it is most definitely a change of heart, a repentance story, even if it is not a conversion experience.

We don't get a lot of details in the Bible about why exactly Saul persecuted the Church but I think we probably know the type. Something about those first disciples really got under Saul's skin. Don't forget that Saul was not an atheist. Atheists do not ever pose the greatest threat to religion. The greatest threat to faith communities always comes from within. Saul was a devoted person of faith who saw the earliest Christians as dangerous heretics; his religious certitude combined with his access to political power proved to be a very deadly combination. That is true to this day; whether someone calls himself a Hindu or Jew or Muslim or Buddhist or Christian,

religious certitude and power usually prove to be a lethal combination. Saul persecuted the early Church and he did so with absolute conviction; think “Javert” in *Les Miserables*.

What we heard about today, his encounter with Christ on the Damascus Road, represents a dramatic reversal, however. He has an encounter with a man he never met, a man who everyone knows was crucified by the Romans. “*Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?*” And then he is blinded, at least temporarily, until he can see for real.

And it’s just that one piece of the story that I want to focus on today, as a big part of what I think these fifty days of Easter is all about. Whether we call it a call or conversion, the fact remains: *Saul has a life-changing encounter with Christ on that road that rocks his world*. It changes everything. At the end of the narrative, we hear that “something like scales fell from his eyes...” Saul was blind, but now Paul sees. And his world, his reality, is different because of what he can now see.

*Something like scales fell from his eyes*. If you follow Paul’s writings from this point on, you realize that his personality isn’t radically different from this moment on. He gets a name change but he is who he is. He is who God created him to be. But before that experience on the road, he had some serious blinders on. It’s important that we grasp that he isn’t out there living a decadent life only to find Jesus and turn it all around. Saul was a religious zealot, a devout religious person absolutely convinced that he is right. And then something happens that makes him see what a fool he has been. He had been absolutely certain that his motivations were pure and holy, and that these other Jews who believe Messiah has come are impure and at best misguided, and at worst evil. He has great clarity about who is right and who is wrong. Only it turns out it isn’t clarity at all. It turns out that what he thought he could see wasn’t right at all. So he is temporarily blinded, in order that he might finally see. Something like scales fell from his eyes.

This event suggests to me that we are not called to certitude but to faith. And there is a difference. We’re not called to have all the answers, but to ask better questions. We aren’t called to believe it all, but to ask God to help us with our unbelief. We’re never called to persecute heretics, but to be instruments of God’s peace. We’re not called to make sure we (and everyone else) is pure; rather, we are called to follow Jesus, who sat and ate and talked with those whom the world considered impure, those whom the world even despised.

It’s very hard to demonize people with whom you have shared a meal or a cup of tea. You may disagree on same-sex marriage, abortion, what happens at the Eucharist, the Trinity, or healthcare—and you may disagree passionately. But instead of wanting that person stoned, you begin to see in the face of that other person a sister or a brother.

I think that what happened on the Damascus Road is that kind of moment for Saul. He had been defining his life in terms of who he was not, as what he was against, as that which he hated. The fact is that those early disciples of Jesus had already taken residence in Saul’s head before he encounters Christ and his sole purpose in life was to try to get rid of them. And yet, in that moment when something like scales fall from his eyes, he begins to see that there is another way;

that they are not the enemy but that they have at least some of the truth he seeks, the truth that has been right before his very eyes. But he either could not, or would not, see.

I take that to mean quite literally and specifically for Paul that after he has this experience on the Damascus Road—this Easter encounter with Jesus—that he sees both himself and the followers of Jesus through a new set of lenses. Before he could only see a threat to all that he believed. Now he sees sisters and brothers who are fellow travelers on the Way.

Now if Paul Harvey were preaching this sermon, he'd have to be sure to remind us of the rest of the story. By all accounts, what unfolds from here is not easy. Paul and Peter didn't ever seem to like each other much. They learned to get along and to stay out of each other's way for the most part, but at least on one occasion Paul tells us he got right in Peter's face—at least that is how he tells the story. For a while, and maybe for a long while, some of those who knew Jesus when he'd been alive—the core disciples—suspected Paul's motivations. Maybe he was a spy? Can a leopard really change his spots? Once a persecutor always a persecutor, right? We do well to remember that the Road to Damascus doesn't make the road ahead an easy one for Paul or for the other disciples.

But something like scales fell from his eyes that day and at some point from the eyes of the other disciples too, I imagine. It does matter what lens we view people through. Once we begin down the road of scape-goating or demonizing someone or some group, it becomes harder and harder to find anything good in them. When we question not only people's actions, but their motivations, we are on a very dangerous and slippery slope that often leads to a kind of tunnel vision. Pretty soon we can only see what we want to see, and it gets really dangerous when we mistake what we can see for reality.

As the man himself would later say, perhaps remembering this very day, even on our very best days, we only see through a glass darkly. We must never mistake what we can see for reality. This requires a deep commitment to humility for people of faith, and open arms. As I've said before, that doesn't mean we won't have strong convictions. But once our strong convictions define the other as a threat, rather than as a gift who can help us to see what we don't yet see, we are in big trouble.

Whether it happens for us in an instant, on our own Damascus Road, or after the careful cultivation of the practices of faith over many years and even decades, Easter faith is about seeing what we see and an awareness of the fact that always our periphery is limited. Easter is about vision and revision, and it therefore requires community and trust, because in listening to what others see we are invited to take another look.

And every now and again, the scales fall from our own eyes. Those are, I think, Easter moments: when we glimpse as God sees and can see ourselves or someone else in a new light, and ultimately through the eyes of love. It is truly an amazing grace when that happens.