

# "There's Always Hope"

Acts 9:1-22

April 14, 2013

3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Easter

Celebrating the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead the past couple of weeks has been a pure joy. We've enjoyed the Easter hymns, the Easter message, and the Easter promise of a new and eternal joy. What could possibly ruin that joy? If the presence of so many people here in church on Easter can increase our joy, the absence of so many people here in church on Sundays other than Easter can decrease our joy. As I look out, I know this affects many of you personally. I know there are those of you who have adult children who grew up in the church and were confirmed in the church but who have fallen away from church and quite possibly the faith. I know there are those of you who have spouses who have fallen away from the church and the faith or never shared your faith in the first place. Such sad situations can certainly temper our celebration, not only at this time of year but every Sunday when we worship without these people who are dear to us.

As in all of our problems, sin is the cause and in is a powerful thing. It not only separates us from God and one another, but it keeps us separated. We who have faith in our living Lord Jesus Christ see sin at work in our lives. Each of us who takes God's Law seriously struggle to follow it. It is hard to do what is right instead of just giving in to the ways of this world and sinning. Each of us who has confessed belief in the Gospel struggles to trust in God's mercy. We may feel strong in our faith in a special festive season like Easter or when our lives are going well. But it is hard to trust in our Lord Jesus Christ when life is not going well or when our world is collapsing around us.

So, maybe we should not be so surprised then when our children fall away from the faith, when our spouse is not interested in sharing our faith, when members fall away from the faith, or when people in our world reject our faith. Sin often wins. It is much easier to live a life

contrary to the Word of God. It is much more acceptable to doubt or disbelieve in God in our world today. Should we really be surprised if our children, our spouses, our friends, and even some of our members choose this way?

Even though that's the natural and normal way, it is very hard for us to accept. We find ourselves excusing the sin and unbelief of people close to us by saying things like, "Well, he's really a good person," or "She's believes in God, but she's just not a church goer." Maybe we can talk ourselves into believing these things for awhile. But it's very easy to be overcome with despair. We begin to think there's no hope for these people and their eternal destinies.

Then we take a look at Saul whose story is told in our First Reading for today. If there ever was a hopeless cause for Christianity, it was him. Saul was not just an unbeliever who was apathetic to Christianity, but he was intoxicated with hatred for the Church. He fervently persecuted the Church. He murdered her members. He was present at the stoning of Stephen and likely was involved in the murder of other Christians.

If we think there are people today who are full of themselves and feel no need for a Savior, Saul was even worse. He was a Pharisee in Judaism. He put all of his hope and trust in himself and his good life. He didn't need mercy. He was doing just fine on his own.

Although he had the Old Testament Scriptures – the very Word of God – he was not a believer in Jesus as the Messiah. He was not interested in hearing the Gospel. He wanted to do everything within his power to stamp out the Gospel. In our text, Saul was on his way to Damascus to round up any disciples of Jesus Christ whom he might find there and bring them back in chains to Jerusalem.

But then Jesus changed everything. Jesus first dealt very harshly with Saul, knocking him off his horse with a bright light from heaven. Jesus didn't mince words, but confronted Saul with his sin, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" When Saul asked who it was, Jesus replied, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting." By persecuting Christians, Saul was

actually persecuting Christ. Jesus orders Saul to go into the city and wait for further instruction. When Saul got up, this Pharisee who thought he could see God's purposes clearly was now blind.

Jesus did not leave Saul in his sin. Jesus called one of His disciples in Damascus – a man named Ananias – to go and minister to Saul. Ananias wanted no part of this. He knew how opposed Saul was to Jesus and figured his efforts at sharing the Gospel would do no good. But the Lord had a purpose for Saul. The Lord would use Saul to bring His name to the Gentiles. Ananias trusted the Lord and went to Saul. He laid his hands on Saul and spoke the Word of God to him. And Saul came to faith. This was symbolized by something like scales falling from his eyes. The man who had been so blinded to Jesus Christ by sin could now see and believe. Ananias then baptized Saul. The Church which Saul had worked so hard to persecute now had him as a member.

What hope there is for us in the story of Saul! If Saul could be converted from sin to grace, from unbelief to faith, and from persecution of the Church to membership in the Church, then anyone can! Saul was one of the worst sinners, yet received forgiveness of sins through the blood of Jesus shed on the cross for him. Saul was one of the strongest unbelievers, yet came to trust in Jesus as His Savior and Lord through the Word of God. Saul was one of most ardent enemies of the Church, yet became one of the strongest members of the Church.

That gives encouragement for us as we think about ourselves. Jesus uses the same methods in bringing us to faith as He did in bringing Saul to faith: the Law and Gospel. The Law was not more powerful in Saul's case because Jesus Himself did the confronting. The Gospel was not weaker in Saul's case because Jesus sent Ananias to speak it. It was not HOW it was proclaimed or by WHOM it was proclaimed that changed Saul, but THAT it was proclaimed which changed him.

Jesus now sends men to speak that same Law to us. The Holy Spirit has used that Law to confront us with our sin and move us to repentance. And so we, who are as stubborn in our sin as anyone else, are able to confess our sin and ask for forgiveness in our Divine Service.

Jesus uses those same men to preach that same Gospel to us. The Holy Spirit has used that preaching and teaching of the Gospel to bring us into relationship with God through Jesus Christ. By His power, we trust in Him for forgiveness and new life. And that is what we receive by faith in the Holy Absolution and in the Holy Communion in our Divine Service.

And if it can work for Saul and if it has worked for us, it can work for our children, our spouses, our friends, and our inactive church members. But that can only happen when we speak the truth in love to these people. That means gently and lovingly confronting them with the Law of God so that they might see their sin and their need for a Savior. They might not like it at first (I'm sure Saul didn't) and they might be inclined to reject it. But stand firm, not in your own strength, but in the strength of God's Word as the Holy Spirit uses it.

When they come to that point where the Law has had its way with them to help them see their sin (and it might take a long time), then and only then can you joyfully proclaim the Good News of forgiveness, new life, and eternal salvation to them. They might have questions and hesitations, but that's okay. Few will have this whole thing play out in three days as it did for Saul. But again the strength is not in your eloquence and sincerity in telling the story of Jesus, but the power is in the story of Jesus which the Holy Spirit will use to bring them to faith or back to faith.

The effect which the Word of God can have on a life is tremendous and that gives us hope, too. Sinner Saul, who persecuted the Church of God became St. Paul who wrote half the New Testament and planted the Church of God throughout Europe and Asia.

While we might not think we measure up to his accomplishments, the fact that you are here today, trusting and believing in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins and that you serve

Him in church and in the world is a huge miracle in and of itself. Don't underestimate the value and importance of your conversion by the power of the Holy Spirit working through the Word of God. It is just as important as Saul's conversion.

Who knows what effect the Word of God will have on your children, your spouse, your friends, and other members here? We won't know until we faithfully and patiently proclaim it to them. It may take days, weeks, and even years. I've seen people who you never ever expected to believe in Jesus come to faith in Christ in there later years. I've seen people who you never ever thought you'd see in church again return to faith.

Whenever you feel despondent because of someone who is not here, remember the story of Saul and keep on speaking the Word of God. It may be hard. It may seem hopeless. But God says, "[My Word] shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it." (Isaiah 55:11) God's purpose is the salvation of sinners. God's Word – both the Law and the Gospel - is the power to accomplish that salvation. Where the Word of God is, there is forgiveness, life, and salvation for all. Having the Word of God with us, in us, and spoken through us, there is always hope for anyone and for everyone. Amen.