

3rd Sunday of Easter
Confirmation Sunday
May 5, 2019
Lincoln Heights Lutheran Church
The Risen Lord Calls Us as Witnesses

Acts 9:1–19 (NIV84)

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. Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus.

Dear Friends in Christ,

The Apostle Paul is often considered the best missionary to walk this earth, with the exception of Jesus of course. The account of his conversion is told by Luke three times in the book of Acts. It must be important! As we look at Paul's conversion today, we especially see how he was called by the risen Lord as a witness. Although our conversion was probably not as dramatic and certainly not told three times in the Bible, the risen Lord has also called us as his witnesses. We see the several characteristics of a good witness for Christ in the conversion of Paul. A good witness is knocked down. A good witness is called by the risen Christ. A good witness tells what they have seen.

A Good Witness is Knocked Down

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.

Saul truly believed in his religious cause. He believed that Jesus was a false teacher and fraud. He believed that those who followed Jesus were ruining Judaism. And Saul was passionate about his religion to act on it. He would lead a group to Damascus, a city far from Jerusalem and outside of Judea, to bring back Jews who had fallen into the false belief that Jesus had risen from the dead. Saul was a true believer in his cause but he was truly wrong. So the Lord knocked him to the ground with a bright light and convicted Saul of his greatest sin. Saul had been persecuting the Son of God.

Saul was persecuting Jesus on purpose but he was persecuting the Son of God in ignorance. He did not know or believe that Jesus is the Son of God. But we know this. So what is our excuse for persecuting Jesus, or do you think that you don't persecute Jesus?

We Christians can go through life with the same attitude as Saul had as a Pharisee. We could think that obeying God's commands is our goal and that obeying God's commands is possible. We say that we fear, love and trust in God above all things, but then we ignore God during our day at school or work or with friends. How can we love God above all others when we won't even invite him into parts of our life? We try not to misuse God's name by using the name of Jesus as a curse word. However, are there days we don't use his name to pray, praise and give him thanks? How can we claim to be using God's name correctly if we don't use it at all? We remember the Sabbath Day and show up for church but is that the only time we hear God's Word? How can we say we are keeping the Third Commandment if we are not regularly and gladly hearing and learning God's Word? If we really take God's commands seriously, we are knocked down into the dust just like Saul. For we are persecuting the Son of God when we claim to be just a little sinful.

To be a good witness for Christ, we need to have a proper view of Jesus. He is not just a helper or life coach who guides us into a good and moral way of life. He does not simply help us overcome our weakness and some minor character faults. We need to look at Jesus as Saul saw him on the road to Damascus. The same Jesus who was crucified appeared to Saul and although Saul was physically blinded for a time he saw things clearly for the first time. Saul saw his sins clearly and the law of God convicts us of our sins. We deserve to suffer apart from the blessings of God forever in hell. We deserve eternal death. From this perspective, Jesus is the only Savior. He is the only Redeemer. He is the only one who can pull us from the fires of hell. Jesus is the only one who can take us to heaven.

While we are in this world we need to be continually knocked down by the law of God. That means we will be around God's Word often, in church, at home, at work and everywhere. For then we will not only see our sins, but we also see Jesus clearly as the one and only Savior. When we see Jesus clearly, we can be good witnesses to the world.

A Good Witness is Called

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. Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus.

Ananias could not figure out why the Lord would chose Saul to be his witness to the world. Saul hated believers. Saul arrested and had believers executed. Saul has cause much harm to the young Christian church. But the Lord called Saul to to be a witness for Christ to many people. The Lord called Saul directly to be his witness. We should not expect a direct call from the Lord like this but every Christian has been generally called to be a witness.

Before Paul could be a good witness, he first had to be a believer. Jesus accomplished this by appearing to Paul on the road to Damascus. The crucified one is alive again and this message of the gospel converts Paul. Next, Paul is recognized by the church as a believer. Ananias had to be convinced by God but when he finds Paul, Ananias called him by an amazing name. “Brother Saul!” Ananias recognizes that Saul is a believer and welcomes him into the family of believers through baptism. For when Paul is baptized, he received the gift of the Holy Spirit, was sealed in faith, and was cleansed of sin. Now he can be a witness for Jesus.

Our story is not all that different. You were baptized. In baptism, you were given faith, the Holy Spirit, adoption as children of God and the forgiveness of sins. You have been welcomed into the family of believers not only by the Lord but also by your church. Today, six of you will publicly confess this faith before the congregation and before Christ and be welcomed into communicant membership so that you can receive the blessings Jesus gives in Communion.

Peter, writing to all believers, says, “You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Peter 2:9). We have been called by the Holy Spirit to faith in Christ and our response is to be a witness.

A Good Witness Tells What They Have Seen

And what exactly is a witness? A witness tells what they have seen and heard. Paul would go on to tell his conversion story two times as he told people about the risen Lord Jesus. Our story is not as dramatic but the story is really not about us. As a witness, we tell about Jesus. He is our only Savior and we show that by living a life of repentance before God and others. He is our only Redeemer and we show it by

how we talk and how often we seek his forgiveness in Holy Communion. Christ is the only one who has rescued us from eternal death and we testify to this by using his name to pray, praise and thank him.

Perhaps one of these confirmands today will be a public minister and witness for Christ as a Lutheran teacher or pastor. But all of them and all of us are witnesses every day. As a child or parent, a brother or sister, a friend or coworker, we get to be a witness of all that Christ has done for us. Continue in God's Word so that your faith and witness grows stronger. For we want people to know what we know and treasure – Christ was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification. Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!