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The National Presbyterian Church

Resurrection Life: Becoming a Christian

Acts 9:1-19

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In Romans 10:9-10, the Apostle Paul, about 20 years after he had experienced a blinding, life-changing light, through which the risen Christ spoke to him and called him into his service (a story described in our reading in Acts 9), writes these words to the Roman Christians. He says, *“If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified”* [DR: to be “justified” is to be put right with God, in a relationship with God that nothing can ever sever] *“and one confesses with the mouth, and so is saved.”* Paul does not say that if you have an experience like mine you will be saved; or that if you have an experience like mine you will be put into a right relationship with God. He says *“if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead you will be saved for one believe with the heart and so is put right with God and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved.”*

For at least the past 25 years in the various congregations I’ve served I’ve conducted an officer training class in which I have asked all those participating – elders or deacons, those being newly installed or reinstalled – to share their faith, to share the story of how God has been at work in their lives from their earliest memories until the present moment. I ask them to address a number of questions, and one of the questions that I ask them to address is this: ***at what point in your life, at what moment in your life, did God or Jesus or God and Jesus become more than a word for you?*** At what moment in your life did you realize that God or Jesus the son of God was more than a word? More than an idea, more than a picture in a book, more than a figure in history but someone alive and real, a real person in your life?

For example before I first came to this country, to the United States, the words “the United States” were just words or pictures in a book, or scenes in a movie; or related to tourists I might have seen or met in my home town of Edinburgh. But when my plane flew over Long Island and towards Kennedy airport, and I looked down over the expressway the image changed, and became “real”: cars that looked like ants became, well, cars! And when I got off the plane, images of places and people became concrete, filled with life. Everything changed. What was static began to move and talk. Real. *At what point in your life did this happen with God, with Jesus?*

I’ve asked this question now to some three to four hundred elders and deacons, and the answers, of course, have been all over the map. When did God first become real to you and me? Some people maybe a little vague in answering the question, not quite knowing when such a

moment occurred, or not sure that there was ever such a moment. Others though, can answer quite quickly, saying, “Oh, yes, I know exactly when that was.” That is, there are some people who would immediately turn to the passage of scripture that we have had read, Acts Chapter 9, speaking of the apostle Paul’s conversion and say something like this:

“Well, my moment was somewhat similar to Paul’s. Maybe I didn’t see a blinding flashing light, but there was a moment of clarity, a moment of truth, and I know exactly when that was when my life changed. Paul was going in one direction and turned in another direction; I was going in one direction and I turned in another direction. Paul previously thought of Jesus as a blasphemer, not raised from the dead, so that those people who claimed he was alive were mistaken. And then he changed: from that moment on for him Jesus was inescapably alive. And I can tell you when that happened for me.”

John Wesley. And people throughout history have had experiences just like that. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Church, had an experience just like that. He had been a minister for quite some time. Jesus was not unimportant to him. I suppose intellectually he might have believed that Jesus was alive; he’s been a minister for quite some time. But one moment in particular changed his life radically, and his ministry thereafter.

The year was 1738. The day was May the 24th and in his diary he says that it was just about a quarter before nine: 8:45 p.m.! He knows exactly when this was. He was in a place called Aldersgate, at a religious meeting that he didn’t want to go to, and there was a person who was reading from Martin Luther’s preface to Paul’s letter (in the Bible) to the Romans. And as he read this preface, John Wesley says in his diary that at “*about a quarter before nine, while this man was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation and assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins even mine and saved me from the law of sin and death.*”

It was all so real. And his ministry was changed – became powerful and life-transforming – from that moment on.

David Suchet. If I were to bring this kind of exp[erience up to date there are many stories I could think about that I could share. Let me share just one. Some of you may know the PBS Agatha Christi series with her sleuth, Poirot, played by actor David Suchet. What many people do not know is that David Suchet is a Christian, and he knows exactly when he became a Christian! He describes it like this (“*David Suchet Reveals How He Found Faith*”, Daily Express, December 10, 2012):

It was 1986 and I was 40 years old. [DR: This was not as a child; it was not as a young person. He was 40 years old]. I was in the bath in a hotel room in Seattle thinking about my late grandfather with whom I had an extraordinarily close relationship before he died when I was 18. I always felt that he was with me as

my spiritual guide. I felt him sitting on my shoulder. Then I thought to myself why do I believe that? Why do I believe that he's really here sitting on my shoulder and not believe in life after death? That got me thinking about the most famous person who they say had a life after death: Jesus. [DR: Now he didn't quite believe that Jesus actually lived at this stage, let alone as his savior or Lord or somebody important. But he knew what people said about him and so he says this]. So I turned to the New Testament of the Bible and to the Apostle Paul, because I knew that in Paul's case he actually did live. I knew that he wrote letters and that they are there for everyone to see. I read Paul's letter to the Romans which speaks of salvation offered through faith in Jesus Christ. And by the end of the letter, certainly by the end of the book [DR: it sounds like he read the whole of the New Testament] I realized that I was reading about a way of being and a way of life that I had been looking for all those years.

A quite specific moment. Some people can point to something just as specific as that in their life: an experience that is crystal clear through which their lives were turned around.

Jean and Nicodemus. But not everybody can . . . In fact over the years I've known many wonderful Christians in the churches I've served who cannot answer my question clearly, who stutter and stumble when it comes to that question because they cannot exactly remember when that moment was, or if there was ever such a moment.

The person who comes to my mind most of all who found this difficult was a person in my first congregation whom I'll call Jean. Jean was a salt of the earth person, a person whose life was filled with integrity and with love. Her faith and life were seamless. There was no hypocrisy about her life at all. She was genuine the whole way through, and people knew it. This was a blue collar congregation, and Jean worked the checkout line at a local grocery store. She was the kind of person working the checkout line whom you wanted to go. Even if her line was a little longer than the others you might move in that direction because you knew that if you spent a moment with her she would cheer you up. She wouldn't fuss at you, nothing would go wrong there. She would help anybody and everybody. This was, in a sense, her ministry: even if everything else was wrong that day, her presence would leave you feeling refreshed.

So, one Sunday Jean came up to me after an evening worship service. We were standing outside the church on the church steps. It was bitterly cold, but she began to talk and opened up her heart to me. She wondered out loud to me about her faith, saying that she was not sure that she was a Christian. And I said to her that I was sure that she was. We began talking about her faith. We began talking about her trust in Jesus Christ and I expressed again that I was convinced that she was a Christian.

And then she blurted out these words: “But I’ve never had *that* experience!” (meaning, she’d never seen a Paul-type flashing light; never had a Wesley-like experience of her heart being strangely warmed) “that’s never happened to me.”

To which I responded by saying simply: “I’m not sure you have to. I don’t think it’s a requirement.”

And at that moment, she had an overwhelming experience, right there and then on the steps of the church! Her eyes lit up, filled with hope and joy, and with a little tear in her eye, her face began to glow, and she said “You mean I don’t have to have it?” (As if to say, What I’ve been waiting for all my life, I don’t have to have?”

I said “No. You don’t have to have it!” – (God works differently with different people; one size does not fit all!)

And I said that to her because of what I know about scripture: because in scripture we not only have the story of the apostle Paul (with this remarkable time-specific experience: this blinding flashing light when Jesus appears to him and his life is radically transformed), but we also have in scripture the story of a man called Nicodemus (who came to Jesus not on the fast track; not in a split second with a blinding flash of light, but, step by step. If Paul’s “enlightenment” came like the blinding light of the noonday sun; Nicodemus’ “enlightenment” was more like the growing light that comes with the dawning of a new day, over a period of time).

Some of you may know the name of **Nicodemus**, others may not (told in John 3). Nicodemus was a religious leader in the time of Jesus. He lived in Jerusalem and he first came to Jesus by night (almost certainly a reference both to night time and to the spiritual darkness that Nicodemus was experiencing). He came in his spiritual darkness and he came alone. In all likelihood he was afraid of what his intellectual friends might think if they found him talking to this person Jesus. He came with his questions. And Jesus makes time for him, speaks to him and challenges him. But – and this is crucial to see – there is no sense when Nicodemus leaves Jesus that night that there has been any flash of spiritual light, and that the light of faith has suddenly been turned on. In fact, as the story of Jesus moves on, so too does the story of Nicodemus.

When we come to John Chapter 7 Nicodemus has still not joined the group of Jesus’ disciples. He is not in Jesus’ inner circle. He is with his friends and his friends are among the people who despise Jesus and who want to put Jesus to death; and they want to do so without a fair trial. And in this second incident in which we meet Nicodemus we find that something has changed in his life, but not everything. When his friends want to treat Jesus unfairly (the context of John 7) Nicodemus blurts out “our Law does not allow that.” And it’s almost as if there is spiritual turmoil in his life, he’s on a spiritual journey, and there’s now a gap, a distance between himself and those who have been his friends, the influencers of his life until that point. Things are moving, things are bubbling, things are changing.

And then we come to the very end of the gospel or close to the end, in John Chapter 19 where we meet Nicodemus again. In this chapter, Jesus is hanging on the Cross, and almost all of the men who know Jesus, for whom Jesus is more than a word, very much more than a word are afraid. They have fled. One of the men, known as the beloved disciple, is still there, but the other men have fled, leaving the women still there. The women have the courage to be with Jesus when he is put to death . . . and so too, we unexpectedly discover, does Nicodemus: he has the courage to remain with Jesus as well. He is not afraid of anybody's opinion any more. He stands there in front of the cross. He is there when Jesus dies. And he is there along with another Jewish religious leader, a man called Joseph of Arimathea, to take Jesus' body down from the cross and to place his body in the tomb.

By now, his life has been transformed, changed. But not "just like that"! Not just in a powerful moment, but over time . . . the whole story, the sweep of John's gospel tells us it happened over time.

In Nicodemus' case, John's gospel implies, it's not *how* or *when* it happens that matters; it's *that* it happens . . . that, in some way, in God's timing, Jesus becomes more than a word to us, that Jesus becomes a real live figure to us, one whom we love profoundly, as did Nicodemus. That's what matters.

In my own life I can look to a particular point where I gave my life to Christ and believed he had given his life to me. It was a signal moment in my life. It was at Summer Camp in 1965 and I was 13 years of age. And I know it. But the more I think about it, the more I also know that things were going on in the period *before* that moment, in the previous 6 months especially, but perhaps before, in which God was at work as well. And after, too. So there was both a "dawning" and a "moment."

Not "How" or "when" but "that": But, does it matter? Surely not! Surely the speed, the intensity, the ability to define the moment doesn't ultimately matter at all. But what does matter is this: that, at some time in some way the Jesus of history becomes the Jesus who is very much alive, not merely in the "doctrine of Easter," the "doctrine of Resurrection," but in our lives – that the God who is the Creator becomes very much alive not just "out there" but "in here" where we are. That is what matters, however it happens . . . that Jesus becomes far more than a word, far more than a name, far more than an idea, far more than a picture, but real, intimately real and living, just as things were when I got off that plane at Kennedy airport. That's how Jesus wants to be for us, how God wants to be for us.

And that's how God-made-known-in Jesus-Christ was ultimately for Paul and for Nicodemus. Although their paths were vastly different, they came to see Jesus as a living presence (even in his death!). *They came to see him as being intimately involved in their lives as Lord and as Savior; the one who would change the direction of their lives, and bring them into a relationship with God that they could not gain for themselves, by themselves.*

Believing in Jesus as the Living Savior and Lord. Remember those words that the apostle Paul writes to the Romans some 20 years after his signal experience? He doesn't tell the Romans that they have to have a marvelous experience as he had. He says to them, *"if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is put right with God (justified) and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved."*

Believing. We're to believe in our heart something about Jesus. *Belief in the heart* is more than *belief in the mind*. We're to believe more than intellectually that Jesus is important, that Jesus is alive. We're to believe in such a way that our lives are changed by what we believe – that something happens in the way we live our lives because of the foundational nature of what we believe. That's what it means to *believe with the heart*. It's to trust in someone or something, to depend on someone or something, as if our life depended on them or on it.

You, all of you are exercising this kind of faith, this kind of trust, this kind of belief in your heart right now, right now, with respect to the pew you are sitting on. As I look at you, you all look fairly comfortable, which means that you have a pretty solid faith in the pew that you are resting on. You have faith that your pew will hold you up. You are resting your life on it. Without thinking about it you are depending on the pew to keep you where you are, to keep you safe. This is faith! This is "belief in our hearts"! And we've all been called to have the same kind of faith, the same kind of belief with respect to Jesus. Belief that he's not only alive but that his resurrection means something to me deeply in every moment of my life:

"If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead – not just a doctrine but it's real for me – you will be saved for one believes with the heart and so is put right with God and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved."

Savior. If you're going to be "saved" you need a Savior – and we are called to believe that Jesus is the Savior that we need. We need a Savior when we cannot help ourselves. We need a Savior when we are out of our depth at the end of our own resources.

Long ago I used to go rafting on the New River in West Virginia with the youth groups in my congregation in Lexington, Kentucky. The New River is a wonderful river in a deep gorge, surrounded by spectacular scenery. Along the way I would fall out of the raft from time to time. Sometimes, as the minister, I'd be pushed out of the raft – which all thought was a great deal of fun; and it was . . . until we got a little close to the next series of rapids, in which case it wasn't any fun anymore! I had to get back in the raft quickly, but *knew very clearly that I had no ability whatsoever to get back in the raft by myself*. I simply didn't have the strength to climb on board by myself, even though there were ropes on the side of the raft so (theoretically!) you could pull yourself up and in. In my case, I needed somebody to save me, to reach their hand out and to pull me on board, to bring me to safety back on that raft, as it hurtled down that glorious river.

Well, each of us has been designed by God to live our lives, as it were, within God's raft going down the particular river of life that God has designed for us. And each of us has chosen to jump out of the raft at some point (some of us may feel that we've also been pushed out!!) and to go our own way, saying, "I know a better way of going down the river than the way that God has intended." But then the truth hits home: that it's only from within the raft that we can navigate the river (beautiful but dangerous) successfully – yet once out of God's raft, none of us can climb back in without help. The truth is that we need help; we need a Savior; we need saving; we're too weak to do climb back in in our own strength. The power of sin and the power of evil are way too strong. Even if we think that we are good people compared to others, the pernicious power of evil makes us too weak to save ourselves.

Alvin Plantinga is a Christian theologian and philosopher who has thought much about evil from the earliest days of his life. Indeed, he says he began thinking about these things when he was at the age of eight or nine. He writes this about the Calvinist doctrine of total depravity, the Calvinist doctrine of sin and evil. He says:

"I remember wondering in particular when I was around eight or nine about the doctrine of total depravity. I first began to think about it at that time and when I did I thought it meant that everyone was completely wicked, wholly bad, no better than a Hitler or a Judas. That seemed to me a bit confusing and hard to credit. Was my grandmother, who was in fact a very saintly woman really completely wicked? Was there nothing good about her at all? . . . "As I understand it now, this doctrine of total depravity does not mean this at all, but quite properly points out that every important area of our lives is distorted and compromised by sin. Not that everybody is thoroughly evil and bad and wicked, though in certain circumstances good people can become more wicked than we can even imagine, and this could happen to us. But that every important area of our lives is distorted and compromised by sin, and [*italics mine*] *our lives are weakened by this sin so that we cannot save ourselves.*" (Alvin Plantinga, "A Christian Life Partly Lived," from Kelly Clark ed. Philosophers Who Believe: The Spiritual Journeys of 11 Leading Thinkers.)

And what we are saying is this, that the God who is alive (who is more than a word) sends Jesus to us (who is also more than a word or an idea), to be our Savior, to bring us back into the boat, by bearing our sin and our guilt in his body on the tree:

When Jesus becomes alive like that, as our Savior, so too does his cross. What we see on the cross begins to change – becoming real and personal. What we see is not only the plaque placed there by the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate, which says "Jesus of Nazareth King of the Jews," but we see our name written on the plaque as well; and plastered all over the cross, the words, "debt paid," "debt cancelled," "paid in full," "justified by grace," "freely forgiven." By Jesus. For me.

Lord. None of this can we accomplish by ourselves. Only God can do this for us. As a gift of grace. So we are being called to place our trust, the whole weight of our wayward lives, on Jesus as our “Savior.” And more than that, to place the whole direction of our lives into his hands, as our “Lord” as well. The word “Lord” is a really important word in scripture: it speaks of overwhelming authority:

- In the Old Testament world it’s the name for God. It’s God’s name.
- In the Roman world it was the word given to the Emperor, to the king of the whole empire. “Caesar is Lord” was an affirmation of allegiance to and faith in the Roman emperor.

And this is the word that we are to give to Jesus. To be sure, he is our friend. He is, as it were, our buddy, but he is also our Savior and *our Lord*: the one who has the right to completely guide the direction of our lives . . . both the river and the raft!

Yet how easy it is for us to say to the God who comes to our rescue through Jesus the Savior. He hauls us back into his boat, that we still want to be in charge of our direction! We still want to say: “Now this is where I would like to steer the boat!” So God has to step in and say, “No, no, no! Don’t think for a moment that you’re still the captain of your ship. The one who saves you is also your Lord: there’s a new captain, and (for your own good and joy) this ship, this raft is only going where I say. Do you want to come with me? Let’s be clear: I’m not going with you; the question is: Do you want to come with me?” And it’s at that moment . . . or series of moments . . . when we realize that we are not in charge, we’re not captain of the ship, and that there’s a far better captain (a new “Lord”) that life really begins to change.

It should come as no surprise that when the gospel writers summarized the teaching of Jesus himself, they summarized it by saying “*Jesus taught saying, repent for the kingdom of Heaven is at hand.*” (Matt. 3:2)

Repent! – change the way you live! Give up the control of your life. Change the way you think, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near. The Kingdom of Heaven is not just an idea. It’s not just an abstract principle. It’s not just a picture in the book. In fact the Kingdom of Heaven exists wherever the King of Heaven – Jesus the Lord – is present. And when he is present he is always commanding us, saying, “Follow me”! We’re tempted to turn this around and say to him, “Actually I’d prefer it if you would follow me, and be with me wherever I want to go”! But he’s not Lord until we let go of our direction, “repent” and say . . . Oops, I got it wrong! I now believe that your way is best, let me follow you!

It really doesn’t matter *how* we get there. But *that* we get there is really important. We become a Christians in all kinds of different ways. The stories are infinite. But *that* we reach that point where we can say pretty clearly

- First, Jesus is not dead for me, but alive. I believe in the Resurrection. More than a doctrine. More than a word – a living presence, here, the one on whom I base my life.
- Second: I can’t save myself. He is my Savior. And

- Third: He is the one whose path I want to follow. He is my Lord.

. . . that we get to *that* point in some way or another is critical. Life is not the same unless we are there. Jesus said “I have come that they may have life and have it in abundance” (John 10:10). “My passion,” he says, “is that God’s joy may be in me and God’s joy be in you” (John 15:11).

May this be who he is for you. May God lead you and guide you on whatever path it takes, until you reach that point where you say, however it happens, “Here I am, with him, and I would be at no other place than this.”

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