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SERMON

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The Director of Our Lives

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On Easter morning the risen Christ passes the baton for us to create resurrection stories in our lives. The spirit that moved through Jesus' ministry is the same spirit that enlivens each of us, moves us forward, knocks us down and picks us up, and pushes us into scary people and places.

The story of the resurrection depends upon our willingness to participate. We can fight it. Ignore it. But God, Jesus, the spirit, however you recognize the divine power, will win. During this season of Eastertide, the period between Easter and Pentecost, we will linger in Acts. Since most of the books in our New Testament are named for a person or a people within a place, it would be easy to presume Acts is a person. Yes?

Acts is the shorthand name for the Acts of the Apostles.

Written as a sequel to the Gospel of Luke by the same writer and in the same style, it carries the same plot of the spirit bringing Mary and Elizabeth, Peter, James and John to say "yes" to God with their lives.

The stories from the Acts of the Apostles chronicle how God engages ordinary people to witness the mystery of the resurrection and then to carry the story of salvation from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth.

This book teaches us how Jesus' followers *acted* so we can do the same.

It asks: why would anyone devote their life to a failed messiah? The rulers in Rome felt the Jews were low-life and the Jewish elite looked down their noses at that country hick, Jesus. Surely hanging on the cross among criminals contradicted his claim of divine origin?

In a matter of days, Jesus' followers proclaimed nonsense about a resurrection. When the Roman and religious elites drove them out of Jerusalem, their tactic backfired. Rather than silence them, as the people fled they carried the good news of Jesus Christ with them.

And now, his believers were doing the same kind of subversive work as he had done – caring for the poor and outcast, feeding the hungry, and baptizing people in his name with the spirit.

Their numbers grew. They began to organize and expand throughout the region.

A man named Saul enters the story. Educated as a Pharisee, he knows Hebrew scriptures and excels in writing and speaking. He's furious that some of the Jews who used to listen to his sermons in the synagogue have drifted away to worship in small groups.

They no longer abide rituals, laws, and authority, and can be found eating together, retelling Jesus' sermons, and singing unfamiliar songs. No wonder Saul looks on with approval when one of those newer apostles, Stephen, is stoned by a crowd. The size of the angry mob and Stephen's death embolden him.

Dear God,

These stories of the faithful being persecuted trouble us. At times faith feels fragile in the face of violence. Settle us. Send your spirit among these words that in hearing we learn to listen for your voice to direct our lives in this time and place. Amen.

Acts 9:1-20 (abridged from *The Message*)

All this time Saul was breathing threats and murder to the disciples. He went to the chief priest and got arrest warrants to take to the meeting places in Damascus so that if he found anyone there belonging to the Way, whether men or women, he could arrest them and bring them to Jerusalem.

He set off. When he got to the outskirts of Damascus, he was suddenly dazed by a blinding flash of light. As he fell to the ground, he heard a voice: “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?”

He said, “Who are you, Lord?” “I am Jesus, the one you’re hunting down. I want you to get up and enter the city. In the city you’ll be told what to do next.”

His companions stood there dumbstruck—they could hear the sound, but couldn’t see anyone—while Saul, picking himself up off the ground, found himself stone-blind. His companions had to take him by the hand and lead him into Damascus. He continued blind for three days. He ate nothing, drank nothing.

In Damascus there was a disciple by the name of Ananias. He heard a voice say: “Get up. Ask for a man from Tarsus. His

name is Saul. He's there praying. He has just had a dream in which he saw a man named Ananias enter the house and lay hands on him so he could see again."

Ananias protested, "You can't be serious. Everybody's talking about this man and the terrible things he's been doing, his reign of terror against the followers in Jerusalem. And now he's shown up here with papers from the chief priest that give him license to do the same to us."

The voice said, "Don't argue. Go. I have picked him to Gentiles, kings, and Jews."

So Ananias went and found the house, placed his hands on blind Saul, and said, "Brother Saul, the same Jesus you saw on your way here sent me so you could see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit."

No sooner were the words out of Ananias' mouth than something like scales fell from Saul's eyes—he could see again. He got to his feet, was baptized, and sat down with them to a meal.

Saul would claim that he just wants to put the world right again – someone needs to stand up for God and keep others from falling away. Theologian Willie James Jennings bluntly describes Saul for what he is – a killer. He turned from God the minute he turned against another human.

He cemented this perspective within a like-minded group. In a like-minded group, no one disputes what they think is right. Stoning Stephen and the subsequent unchecked persecutions of Jesus' followers only reinforce the appropriateness of their authority. Together they justify their beliefs and encourage him to acquire legal permission to kill in the name of righteousness.

In order for violence to be smooth, elegant, and seemingly natural, it needs people who close themselves off to everyone else, most of all to God. This is how a pious pharisee like Saul, a lover of God, turns into a killer.

The writer Flannery O'Connor once said, "I reckon the Lord knew that the only way to make a Christian out of that one was to knock him off his horse."

Few stories in the Acts of the Apostles are more misunderstood. In the many versions of this story retold within the New Testament, Saul never rides a horse.

The one thing that shines clear in each story of his conversion from Saul into the prolific preacher and man who wrote half of the New Testament as the Apostle Paul, is the presence of Jesus.

His conversions story gives us the oft quoted phrase a “Damasus Road” to describe someone’s dramatic and violent turnabout. This is an original *come-to-Jesus experience*. Just when you think to tuck away the resurrected Jesus as a once-and-done-event, he appears with a life altering mystery that turns death into life.

A bright light shines, blinding Saul so that the man of great bravado finds himself knocked sideways, cowering in confusion. In this moment, Saul is broken open. He becomes crippled. Lying there in the middle of the dirt road, he learns that everything he thought was righteous was wrong and his version of justice was unjust. Saul failed.

In that state of dazed blindness – for three long days – he discovers that terrorizing the followers of Jesus turns out to be damaging the desires of the very God he thought he was protecting. The once powerful actor becomes unable to direct his own life and now relies upon others. There he waits.

While he waits, Jesus enters another scene of anger, sadness, powerlessness and fear. Only this time, when Jesus speaks, Ananias welcomes him as a familiar friend, until he hears: “Ananias! Go to Saul, touch him, heal him with my power.”

In his *come-to-Jesus moment*, Ananias trusts the power that raised Jesus from the dead is the same power that will turn a killer into someone whom God will use in new and equally powerful ways. Ananias lets go of his judgements about Saul to become an instrument of healing and grace.

This story, like every story of people going through a gut-wrenching turn from one path, being humbled, even humiliated, before turning to faith, and embracing Jesus, is entirely unique. All of the stories reveal the extent to which Jesus changes hearts and minds of outsiders and insiders so his gospel spreads.

No matter how far we've strayed from loving others and loving God, no matter how much we've failed, God intervenes to heal.

Failure is the proving-ground of most of the great ancestors of our faith – Abraham. Moses. David. Then we have Peter who denies Jesus and the other disciples who are consistently confused by Jesus and desert him.

If we are honest about the past and today's world, the pattern of failure is remarkably unchanged. All these stories prove that in God's eyes, failure isn't the worst thing that can happen to us.

Failing will break us. Hopefully break us open to realize how much we depend upon one another and God. If like Saul or Paul, we realize how much we need another to pick us up, wash us off, give us a bite to eat, and set us back into a community. If we are like, Ananias, we find God needs us to let go of our grudges and let Jesus use us to make peace.

The Easter story did not repair the old world on that one morning – it simply revealed God's power to bring out

something new from the worst we could do to God's own son. When we humans failed Jesus. We humans failed to recognize him as God's son. Thankfully, God doesn't let our failure define us.

Jesus refused to stay buried. The resurrection began something utterly new—and it began in wounded bodies, in broken places, among people who weren't ready but who chose to live anyway.

Maybe that's what's being asked of us now—

not to deny that we are watching our world fall apart
to ask for Jesus' power when we feel too weak or too
broken

to join with that other person we'd rather reject.

Maybe the failure of the old way or our own efforts is not the end. Maybe it's an invitation to see differently. To move differently. To belong differently. To honor a new field of becoming.



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