

“I Am Jesus” Changes Everything

4th Sun. of Easter – 05/04/25 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: Acts 9:1-22 Pastor Keith Besel

vv.5-6, **“And [Saul] said, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ And He said, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.’”**

Introduction

✧ Christ is risen. *He is risen indeed. Alleluia!*

✧ I’d like all of you to remember a time in your life where you experienced a very significant change. All of us – young and old alike have had, and will have these events or stages take place. Perhaps it’s a change from one school to another; one home to another; a career change, a new relationship, a different major in college, a death of someone close to you, a tragedy, or an amazing celebration. Something happens that alters the trajectory; the direction or the purpose of your life.

➔ For me, it could be when I first decided to quit school and enter into business management, or when I first met Mary Beth and promptly cut away all other dating options I had or the birth of our first child, Brittnie and I became a dad. Those are all major, life-altering milestones in my life.

✧ But perhaps the most significant change in direction and definition for my life occurred – and many of you have heard this before, was when I was all geared up in the business world to become the manager of “my own” store for the Marshalls Department Store company, when our Regional Manager pulled me aside in the middle of a “big-wig walk-through” and said, “Keith, if you are going to be that honest, then you don’t have a place in this company.”

➔ Well, as a Christian, that sparked an intense time of soul-searching, passionate prayer, and conversations with anybody and everybody that was significant in my life, to help me figure out, how God wanted me to serve Him in this life. It even meant I had to revisit an earlier conversation with one of the vicars at our church, who asked me, “Hey Keith, have you ever thought about being a pastor?” To which I quickly replied, “Mark, there are three things I will never do: 1) I will never go back to school, 2) I will never leave Colorado, 3) and I will never become a pastor.”

✧ And now, as I look back, more than 35 years after that fateful moment in the middle of the women’s section in the Boulder Marshalls Department Store, drawing ever-closer to my retirement as a pastor now for 28 years, it’s truly amazing to see how the whole trajectory of my life changed on that one day. Who I was to become and what I would do flowed out of that one statement from my regional manager.

➔ What’s your a big event, or maybe it was a series of smaller things put together, where you see that your entire life changed? A defining moment for your identity; your purpose in life?

I. Saul meets Jesus, and everything changes.

✧ The man most of us know by the name Paul, who went by his Hebrew name of Saul when we see him here in our First Reading today, certainly had that kind of defining moment in his life.

➔ He was, by his own account in Philippians 3, “a Hebrew of Hebrews.” His goal; his life’s ambition at the time was to eradicate the church of any and all of those people that the Jews, in their estimation, believed were the “harmful and heretical followers of Jesus”; the guy they claimed had risen recently from the dead.

- Saul is bound and determined to find every last Christian and have them either thrown into jail or murdered. When one of those claiming to follow “the Way” of Jesus, Stephen, publically proclaimed that the entire Old Testament was fulfilled in Jesus and His resurrection, Saul listened, with hatred in his heart. And then as stones rained down upon Stephen, making him the first martyr of the church, Saul nodded his head in agreement and gladly watched over the garments of those carrying out Stephen’s gruesome death.
- ✘ It’s only one chapter later, in today’s reading, that Saul’s defining moment in his life comes. He’s traveling to Damascus, papers in hand, allowing him to arrest anyone who claims Jesus as Lord and Savior.
- And suddenly the blinding light flashes, and Saul comes face to face with Jesus: “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?” (v.4) At this point Saul is dumbfounded, “Who are you, lord?” (v.5) The term translated as “lord” in the Greek is “κύριος” (kurios) which in this instance is simply a generic title of respect; like when we today might say, “sir”. “Who are you, sir?”
- ✘ But then Saul hears the words that change him forever. “I am Jesus.” Try to imagine how those words must have stung when Saul heard Him. Almost like a slap in the face. “I am Jesus,” the very one, “whom you are persecuting. But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.” (v.6)
- God highlights the fact that this “sir” was someone much greater than just some honorable man; making it so that Saul immediately cannot see. “His eyes were opened” but “he saw nothing” (v.8). Saul is quickly finding out that this was now the one worthy of the second meaning of the word “κύριος” (kurios), which is “master” as a reference to God Himself.
- ✘ Paul has to be led into Damascus. And for three days, he waits. For three days, he fasts. For three days, he remembers all that he has done to ravage God’s church. For three days the words, “I am Jesus” penetrates every thought and feeling and bone in his body. This will now be the defining moment in all of Saul’s life.
- Now the entire Old Testament comes alive for Saul as he realizes that Stephen’s testimony was true; that yes, all of the prophecies have indeed been fulfilled in Jesus. This changes everything, but Saul didn’t know exactly how, just yet.
- ✘ Three long days later, a man named Ananias shows up and lays his hands upon Saul, as he has been directed to do by Jesus, “the Lord” (v.10). Things are changing fast and furiously now. Saul’s eyesight is restored (v.18). He’s “filled with the Holy Spirit” (v. 17). And he is baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus, the Christ (v.18).
- Everything is changed now. This man, Ananias, actually welcomes Saul, calling him a “brother” (v.17). This is one of those people who feared Saul; one whom Saul had hated and wanted to see dead. But Ananias considers Saul now to be a fellow follower of Jesus; a member now of “the way” of Christ.
- ✘ Just think of it; that’s not even all that has changed here: From writing letters to arrest believers to writing letters that convey God’s revealed truths to His church from that day until the Day of Jesus’ return. From one who brought suffering to the church, to one who now suffers himself for Jesus’ name. From one who arrested believers, to one that will now be arrested over and again. From one who zealously sought to eliminate the church, to one that started churches in city after city. From one who was hated and feared, to an apostle of Christ that is now welcomed with open arms. From one who depended solely upon his own works and his family background to be right with God, to one that now depends only upon Christ for His righteousness in the sight of God.

➔ The list could go on. But those words, “I am Jesus”, changed everything for Saul. Saul meets the resurrected Jesus face to alive-and-glorified-face, and everything in Saul’s life, that day and forevermore, has changed! Christ is risen. *He is risen indeed. Alleluia!*

II. We meet Jesus, and everything changes.

✘ “If only,” you and I are tempted to think. “If only, we could see Jesus face to face, everything would change for us today,” right? Granted, none of us will have that same dramatic experience that Paul had. But friends, we are changed. And we are changed by the risen Jesus, there’s no doubt of that.

➔ Here’s how: Now going by Paul, as he chose to use his Roman name after his conversion ... Paul needed forgiveness. He needed to repent of his ways. He needed faith. In short, Paul needed Jesus. Yes, he needed all of this because of what he had done to Jesus and Christ’s church before his conversion.

✘ But after that visit by Ananias, we must make sure that we don’t put Paul up on a pedestal. We can’t make him some kind of perfect, pious saint. Even he, when he wrote his letter to the Romans many years later, confessed that the good he wanted to do, he still didn’t always do. The evil he wanted to avoid, sometimes he ended up doing anyway. He wanted to delight in God’s Law, but the law of sin still plagued him. So, in full repentance Paul said in Romans 7:24, “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?”

➔ Still, he knew Jesus had died for the sins of the whole world. So he answered his own question. “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Rom. 7:25). That’s “Lord” with a capital “L” – for the Son of God. Paul even confidently declares in the very next verse, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1).

➔ But he doesn’t stop there. He lays it out for us, even more of what the risen Jesus did for him and does for us too. Listen carefully: “If the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you” (Rom. 8:11). We are all just like Paul. We need to repent. We need faith. We need forgiveness. We need Jesus every day!

➔ Just as our liturgy leads us to do every Sunday, we need to confess “all [our] sins and iniquities” before our Lord and Master Jesus (*LSB*, p 184); “confessing before God and one another that we have sinned in thought, word, and deed” (*LSB*, p 203).

✘ Some of our worship orders include a short time of silence to reflect individually upon the sins we’ve committed. I don’t know about you, but I know I can always use more time than what we spend in that exercise; time to list all of the things I haven’t done that God expects of me and time to list all of things I have done that God says we should not. But honestly, there could never be enough time for us to include everything.

➔ And that’s why those words from Jesus are so important for each one of us to hear for ourselves. He says to you today, “I am Jesus. There is therefore now no condemnation for you because you are in Me.”

✘ Jesus’ resurrection, my dear Christians, conquered death once and for all; that is true. But in His victory, He simultaneously conquered all that causes death as well – that’s the sin of us all; the consequence and the guilt of each and every one of your sins and mine!

➔ Jesus forgave Paul, who’d tried to destroy the church. And He forgives you for all of the hurt and destruction you have brought against Him and His people as well. It’s here in His holy worship, that He has promised, “where two or three are gathered in My name, there am I among them” (Mt. 18:20). Yes, this is your face to glorious-face encounter with Jesus, my friends. It’s here that you and I hear Him say, “I am Jesus. Risen from the dead. I do not condemn you. You

are Mine forever.” That changes everything, because now, in His grace, we stand righteous in God’s eyes!

- ✘ That weekly truth and comfort, though is built and stands upon something even more physically substantial. You see, most, if not all of you have actually had a life-changing experience like Paul. No, it wasn’t a blinding light or audible words you could hear from Jesus. But you and I did meet Jesus, and He did speak to us in a way that changed the whole trajectory of our lives.

➔ At the moment of your baptism, whether you were a baby or an older child or an adult, you met Jesus. You felt His touch and you heard Him speak to you in the water running over you with the words, “I now baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.”

➔ It’s then and there that Jesus welcomed you into His family as a sister; as a brother in Christ, just as Paul was welcomed as he was baptized by Ananias.

- ✘ That moment has changed everything for you and me. His grace given there and His Holy Spirit filling you in that moment, changed you in every area of your life.

Conclusion

- ✘ The trajectory of our lives today is now different. We are forever joined to the risen Jesus.

➔ So, He meets us every day in our baptism to give us direction and purpose. He is now with us in what we say or don’t say; do or don’t do; think or don’t think; what we do with our time or money, how we treat others, how we take care of ourselves. Our entire lives are lived under those wonderful words: “I am Jesus, and by your baptism My death is your death; My resurrection is your resurrection. My victory is your victory today and forevermore.”

➔ Christ is risen. *He is risen indeed. Alleluia!* Amen.