

## **“This Experience is from the Risen Lord”**

**Acts 9:1-19a**

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As any middle-schooler knows, operating a combination lock can be exasperating. Even when you have the numbers written clearly in your notebook (right 34, left 16, right 41) and even after a grumpy eighth-grader shows you for the third time (how does she make it look so easy), a kid can still not quite get how to turn the dial until the tumblers fall into place and the door pops open.

Putting tumblers in proper sequence so that a problem is solved doesn't get any easier with age. Ask President Obama or the boys at BP. Drop a cap on the underwater gusher (right 34), put the world's largest straw into the middle of the spewing crude (left 16), slam the liquid flume with concrete, mud, golf balls and anything else laying around the garage (right 41), “man, we still didn't get it!” Nothing like an oil leak to remind us how difficult it is to turn the tumblers into place, unless it would be a brewing conflict between the Koreans or a mass murderer in hiding in Afghanistan or an economy that won't come to life even though it has been hit with trillion dollar defibrulators.

Dr. Stephen Hayes, professor of psychology at the University of Nevada and author of the book “Get Out of Your Mind and into Your Life” says we are no better at manipulating the tumblers in our minds. Hayes notes that we often see our interior lives as a giant chess game involving the various emotions that compete inside us. We try to protect our happiness by placing our rook of optimism in front of the dark knight of depression or throwing a pawn of “serenity now” in the way of the queen of anxiety. Hayes writes that sooner or later, however, we come to realize that we are not the one moving the pieces. At most, we are the chessboard, in touch with every emotion and thought process that plagues and promotes life, but at the mercy of the greater forces that make the complex moves.

As a young man, the apostle Paul thought he moved the king, the queen and all the other pieces of life. He was confident that he could make the tumblers fall into place and crack the solution to any problem. When his Jewish brothers and sisters began following the Way of Jesus Christ, Paul had a remedy for the problem: round the heretics up, imprison them and if they refuse to recant, stone them to death. Once those considering Christian baptism saw the consequences of their foolhardy commitment, Paul believed they would drop out of the movement and life would return to normal.

The stoning of Saint Stephen was to be the death blow to the preaching of the Gospel, but Paul couldn't quite make the tumblers fall into place. Stoning Steven was relatively easy until the man looked up at the heavens and claimed to see Christ alive and well and then used his last breaths to echo the words of Jesus on the cross: “Father forgive them for they don't know what they are doing.”

They made him pay for his stubbornness but when his bloody robes were laid at Paul's feet, the mass defection Paul anticipated did not occur. In fact, many Christians seemed inspired by Stephen's heroic death and invested more of themselves in the Jesus movement. So Paul stepped up his assault on the new faith. Luke tells us that he went from house to house, literally dragging men and women who had been baptized in the name of Christ into prison. Even his gestapo tactics, however, did not squelch the movement. Instead, the followers of Christ simply fled to Damascus and other nearby cities where they felt out of range of Paul's murderous intentions.

The young zealot was not to be outdone, however. He believed the solution to every problem was greater effort, more intensity, perseverance, focus. Throwing some basic provisions in a knapsack and recruiting a few henchmen to back him up, Paul took off for Damascus to capture the fleeing followers of Jesus and bring them to justice by any means necessary.

And that is when he was blinded by the light. The 104<sup>th</sup> Psalm praises God for being clothed in a garment of light and for using the wind as God's messenger and fire and flame as the Lord's minister. Maybe it was a fleeting glimpse of God's luminous robe or possibly the fire and flame that lit up Paul's path, knocked him to the ground and took away his sight. Luke tells us his "eyes were wide open, but he saw nothing."

Then the winds delivered Christ's telegram, "Saul, Saul" the risen Lord whispered, "why do you persecute me?" The flattened tormentor inquired, "Who are you Lord?" "I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting. Now get up and enter the city and you will be told what to do." His traveling companions helped their blind leader to his feet and guided him to Damascus, to the home of a man named Judas who lived on a street called Straight. Paul waited there in total darkness for three days, going without food or drink.

If we stop and listen at this point in the story, we can hear the tumblers falling, but Paul is no longer turning the dial. A much mightier and far more graceful hand has clicked a few events into place and something totally new is about to open up in Paul's life.

Hans Mol, in his book, *Identity and the Sacred*, says that before conversion can occur in our lives, we must enter into a period of disorientation. This confusion is prompted when we discover that our plan for controlling our world simply isn't working anymore. Paul is knee-deep in disorientation. Luke says his eyes were wide open, but he saw nothing. That's how we react to disorientation. Whether it is walking across a room with the lights off or feeling our way through a cave or hiking through a forest on a moonless night, we open our eyes Barney Fife wide, but see nothing. Paul, the man who always had an answer for everything was silent. The one who was charging after his vision was now blind. The Pharisee who commanded others was now being led around by his subordinates. The man with the plan had to wait like a schoolboy in the principal's office for further instructions.

As Paul cooled his heels in what was for him, complete humiliation, a vision took the voice of the risen Lord to another person: Ananias, a follower of Jesus living in Damascus. Christ tells Ananias to go to Judas' home and lay hands on Paul so he can receive his sight. Because of Paul's reputation as a cut throat, however, Ananias declines the assignment. The Lord simply grips Ananias a little firmer as he turns him to the right and then the left and says, "You must go for I have chosen him to be my instrument to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel." Something like a tumbler fell into place and Ananias obeyed. When he laid his hands on the former persecutor, scales fell from Paul's eyes and he regained his sight.

From his new vantage point of humility, Paul yielded his life to the direction of his newfound Lord and was baptized as a disciple of Christ. The final tumbler fell into place and Paul's heart popped open to God's saving grace.

Twelve-step groups used to advise us to put our hands flat against our noses and then they would say, "Your ability to control your world stops at your hand." They now know that even that is not true. Although we can develop less reactive responses to life, we don't have much more power over the processes that go on in our minds and body than we do over the ups and downs of the New York Stock Exchange. Very few people however, understand this truth in their youth. For almost the first third of our lives, we believe that we are in charge. If we are incredibly fortunate, some less severe experience comes along, knocks us on our backs and drives home the point that we are simply not in control of what happens in our lives. Sadly, the most stubborn among us don't learn our lessons easily, so we maintain the illusion that we are in command until something even more painful reveals our powerlessness.

Maybe you are right there, eyes wide open but seeing nothing, disoriented as a cat in a pond, flailing around like a pig on ice, ready for further instructions from whomever it is that can make the tumblers fall into place. Although it feels miserable, you actually are on the threshold of a new life.

On our recent vacation, Karen and I enjoyed a performance of Cirque du Soleil. As I watched the orchestrated pandemonium, a few spiritual insights about control illuminated my mind. If a performer wants to be a star who takes charge of a theatrical production, she or he best stay away from Cirque du Soleil. For the performers are definitely not in command of the show. Some leap through the air from a flying trapeze and sail into the arms of another. To complete the daring act, they always have to let go of the first bar before making contact with the one sent their way. Some are swung throughout the arena on ropes and belts, tied and bolted by others. One group skated up ramps and flipped onto platforms with such perfect timing that one performer's skates left the loft just as another's rolled into place. At one point a dancer tumbled across the stage and dove into a hole that was not there moments before, falling onto some kind of mattress or cushion, I trust, pulled into place by an unseen stage hand. Another acrobat spun and contorted on a moving ladder that would have crushed her had her fellow actor not held the rolling base in balance.

Throughout the amazing show, people came together and flew apart in a kaleidoscope of color and motion that had to be executed with precise timing, exact skill and total obedience to the designer's plan. Each performer had to put him or herself in the hands of whomever it was that orchestrated and directed the beautiful work of art. At any point, if any acrobat, actor or dancer had decided to take control of their act and do things their own way, not only would the show have unraveled, somebody would be hurt. They had to rely on the artist in charge and the plan the artist had put in place.

My favorite moment in the show came when thousands of tiny lights dropped from the ceiling and filled the arena with sparking light. Then a woman dressed in white and bathed in the illumination of a single spotlight sailed gloriously across the sky, perched upon a trapeze as the Beatles sang "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds." What a rush she must have felt as she put herself totally in the hands of whoever it was who operated the swing and the lights and the music. Had she been too afraid to turn loose of her illusion of control, had her terror of the unverified kept her rooted on the ground, she would have never known the thrill of flying through the air with the greatest of ease into the waiting arms of the one appointed to catch her and hold her fast.

The essence of the Christian life is our willingness to trust our lives to God. We have to learn to let go of the illusion of our own self-empowerment and trust that God not only knows what we should do, but will help us make our contribution to the Master Artist's breathtaking plan. It is always scary to turn loose of our ego driven lives and sail out into God's waiting hands, but there is no other way to experience the fullness of God's presence in our lives. So let's trust the Artist in charge and the brilliant plan God has in place. Let's get our instructions from our risen Lord through prayer, reflection and conversation with the Scripture and then, let's sail upon the Spirit's power with the greatest of ease into the arms of the One who promises to catch us and hold us fast.