

PAUL, ONE UNTIMELY BORN



1 Corinthians 15:3 "For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas (that is, Peter), then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me."

This is the last sermon in a seven-part series that I have been preaching all this Eastertide entitled "Witnesses to the Resurrection," a rare chance to review all of the stories in a single season. Over the last several weeks, we have looked at most of the stories that have been handed down to us from those

who saw the Resurrected Jesus in the first days after he was raised from the dead. We looked at the account of the women, looking on from afar, who discovered the empty tomb on that first Easter Sunday morning and who were the first to hear the news of the Resurrection from the angels, but who then fled in fear and said nothing to anyone. We reflected upon the familiar tale of the Doubting Thomas, seen as more unique for Jesus' scars than Thomas' doubt. We considered the story of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, where Jesus became known to them in the breaking of the bread, and then vanished from their sight. We looked at the story of the Beloved Disciple, who alone among Jesus' followers understood the meaning of the empty tomb, and we considered the report of an appearance of the risen Jesus to his unbelieving brother James, and speculated about a possible appearance to his mother, Mary. Last week, we noted Jesus' individual appearance to Peter and on another occasion to a crowd of more than five hundred individuals at one time, most of whom were still alive in St. Paul's day. This morning we look last of all at the report of a Resurrection appearance to the Apostle Paul himself, to one untimely born.

The story of the encounter of St. Paul with Jesus on the road to Damascus is well known. Indeed, it is described in some detail in the Book of Acts not less than three times (9:1-18, 22:1-16; 26:12-9) and there are also scattered references to the

event in Paul's own epistles to the Corinthians and the Galatians (cf. 1 Cor. 9:1; 15:8; Gal. 1:16). Later Christians have referred to the episode consistently as "the Conversion of St. Paul." We even have a feast day by that name on the church calendar each January to celebrate the event. However, we sometimes forget or overlook what Paul actually thought of the episode. For while "conversion" may be a convenient word for the transformation of Paul's life that began that day, Paul himself never ever refers to the incident as such. For Paul, his experience on the road to Damascus was just another "revelation" or "appearance" of the Risen Christ, the last of a long line of Resurrection appearances according to his own words in First Corinthians. The encounter there on the road to Damascus was for Paul just like Jesus' appearance to Peter or to James or to the twelve.

In fact, Paul needed his personal experience of Christ there on the road to Damascus to be understood by the early Church as identical to those appearances of Jesus to the other apostles, because Paul believed that this experience authenticated his standing as an apostle in the early Church and validated his controversial mission to the Gentiles. If you are at all familiar with Paul's epistles, then you know that there were endless disputes in various locales about the real nature of Paul's authority and standing in the Church. For Paul, that

authority was founded in the appearance of Jesus there on the road to Damascus.

And Paul's standing in the Church did indeed need special justification, because Paul was not one of the original twelve apostles chosen by Jesus, nor was he even a follower of Jesus during his earthly ministry. Indeed prior to his experience on the road to Damascus, Paul had been a notorious persecutor of early Christians, a feared enemy of Christ. Indeed, Paul was on his way to Damascus that very day "still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord" with letters from the high priest in Jerusalem such that if Paul found "any belonging to the (Christian) Way, men or women, he might bring them (back) bound to Jerusalem" (Acts 9:1-2).

Indeed years before, Paul makes his first appearance in the New Testament at the stoning of St. Stephen, after his inflammatory defense to the Jewish Council, after which an enraged crowd was grinding their teeth against the new deacon Stephen while they dragged him outside the city's gate to execute him; a crowd who first took off their cloaks and lay down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul, who was, according the scriptures, "consenting to (Stephen's) death." One can well imagine that witnessing the terrible stoning of Stephen had a great impact on the young Paul (Acts 7:58; 8:1), where the calm, forgiving figure of Stephen

contrasted sharply with the angry mob which "cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together upon him."

Indeed according to the scriptures, Stephen at his death had a vision very similar to Paul's on the road to Damascus. Calling out as they stoned him, Stephen said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing at the right hand of God" (Acts 7:56). Paul too saw the heavens opened on the road to Damascus, then the Son of man, in Paul's experience actually called out to him, saying, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" (Acts 26:14). The similarity between Stephen's and Paul's visions deserves our careful attention and marks an important distinction between these appearances and those earlier ones. For despite Paul's insistence that his appearance of the Risen Jesus was equivalent with the others, with that of Peter, and James, and the twelve, Paul's experience was really more like Stephen's. It was not a "real" earthly Resurrection appearance, the way the earlier ones were. For Paul's and Stephen's stories are both post-Ascension experiences. Jesus had by the time of their experiences ascended into heaven according to the Scriptures. The Resurrected One wasn't walking around the hills of Galilee any longer. And any appearance of Jesus after the Ascension was more a heavenly vision of the reigning Christ standing at the right hand of God, than an earthly appearance of the Resurrected Jesus, in whose wounds Thomas could place his

hand, or who could sit down and eat with his disciples, or walk and talk with them along the road to Emmaus. No, Paul's vision of Jesus was NOT like the earlier ones, despite his insistence later that it was.

Nevertheless, Paul's story remains vital to us when considering the other Resurrection appearances, for three principal reasons. First, the difference in tone and quality of this experience of Paul (and Stephen), as contrasted with the earlier ones, reinforces the earthly reality of the Resurrection to some extent. The earlier appearances are more clearly not simply heavenly visions, but earthly encounters with the Risen Jesus. The appearance to Peter, and James, and the twelve were not like Paul's, they were not momentary visions, which the others around them neither saw nor understood. Those earlier appearances, as I hope this sermon series has shown, were long-lasting encounters shared among a large number of differing persons over a significant period of time.

Secondly, the fact that Paul's appearance occurred after the Ascension doesn't make it any less important or forceful. Though it may have been only a heavenly vision of Jesus there on the road to Damascus, it nonetheless transformed Paul's life. It changed a young man who had been breathing threats and murder against the disciples of Jesus to become **the** leading missionary force of early Christianity, a pioneer in formulating the

Christian faith and the ethical implications of the Gospel. Paul became one of the early Church's greatest evangelists and missionaries and preachers, and the founder of numerous Christian congregations throughout Greece and Asia Minor. Paul became a hero of the faith, all because of his encounter there on the road to Damascus.

And finally, Paul's story suggests what can happen to us. We are not going to see the Resurrected Jesus on earth; we cannot demand the kinds of proof that Thomas did. But like Paul, and Stephen, and John on the island of Patmos, we may see the Ascended Christ. It is that image of Jesus with which we must contend. We, like Paul, are untimely born, but we believe because of the truths that others have made known to us. In the words of Jesus to Paul there on the road to Damascus, they were sent "to open our eyes, that we may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that we may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in (Jesus)" (Acts 26:17-18). Let us all therefore give thanks to the God for those Witnesses of the Resurrection, and let us pray that like Paul, our lives may be transformed by our experience of the Risen and Ascended Christ. AMEN