

Reading: Mark 16:9-15

In less than 24 hours everything had changed. From the triumphant entry into Jerusalem on Thursday to Jesus' crucifixion Friday, everything had changed for the disciples, the hand-picked twelve. Although Jesus saw his execution coming, they did not. They could not stay awake for him as he prayed. One of them betrayed him. One of them had denied that he knew him. Three times. They scattered. And now he was dead.

Jesus had been teaching and grooming the twelve to carry on his work after he was gone. In numerous settings in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, the four books of the New Testament that relate the life and teachings of Jesus, he holds private teaching audiences with them, explaining, sometimes as if to a bunch of dunderheads, what he meant by the teaching he had given publically. Yet they seemed woefully unprepared to carry on his legacy. They certainly did not think they were ready or capable. What are we to do, they asked each other.

What changed?

The story we are told in the Bible is that Jesus was resurrected in the flesh. He visited the disciples in various settings, affirming that he had risen from the dead, as predicted in the scriptures, meaning the Hebrew Bible, also known as the Old Testament. Of course, it was the women close to him, Mary Magdalene and Mother Mary, who first "saw" Jesus. And of course, the men were dismissive, until they witnessed Jesus with their own eyes.ⁱ

Now I'm not saying that Jesus was resurrected in the flesh. That is the biblical story, one appropriate to the culture and time in which these stories were finally written down, 30 to 90 years after Christ was killed.

I am saying that something happened to the 11 remaining disciples that gave them strength, that transformed them. (Remember, one of their number, Judas, betrayed Christ and, a short time later, took his own life.) Somehow the 11 were empowered to deliver the message of Jesus far and wide, at great risk to themselves. After all, their leader had just been executed. Jesus had warned them that this might happen to them.

What changed for the disciples?

They were afraid, grieving for a beloved teacher. Confused. And yes, they were humble. They felt totally inadequate to the task, did not know where to begin. We don't hear any of them stepping forward saying "I've got it. I'll take over where our master left off. Just follow me." At least not in the early years.

But over time, days and weeks, Jesus appeared to them, individually and in groups. While the authors of the Gospels take great pains to assure us that this was a physical manifestation, that Jesus could be touched, there are many biblical scholars who disagree. But they do agree that Jesus did appear in some way. This is not uncommon, even now, for those who have lost someone dear. To those who have had them, these experiences of loved ones being present are very real. When he appeared, Jesus reassured his chosen and reiterated their task to carry his teachings, the love of God, to the world. Then he empowered them. John 20:21-22 says ²¹ Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." ²² When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit.

The disciples received something. They were changed, transformed. They did go out and preach Jesus' message of love and acceptance and of God's rule on

earth. They did this so successfully that it wasn't long before people like Saul were hunting them down.

Saul of Tarsus was one of the Pharisees, that same group of Jewish Temple elite who assisted with the execution of Jesus.ⁱⁱ Within a couple years after Jesus was executed, Saul, a Pharisee among Pharisees, was on a search and destroy mission for early Christians. He would find and arrest them, then haul them back to Jerusalem for trial.

Now for those of you who know the Bible, you'll recall that Saul underwent his own transformation. From anti-Christian Jewish zealot, Saul became Paul the Apostle, unquestionably the greatest emissary, after Jesus, of the early Christian church. Now zealot and humble are not words typically used to describe the same person. Something must have changed for Saul. What was it? The biblical story is that Saul was on the road from Jerusalem to Damascus to track down more Christians when he was struck down by a blinding light. He heard voices. He was told to take up and spread the message of Jesus.

After his conversion experience, Saul took on the name Paul, and attacked his new mission with the same zeal with which he formerly hunted down Christians.

Paul traveled all over the Eastern Mediterranean, establishing and providing council to Christian house churches. As did members of this fellowship when we first began in the 1950's, those early Christian gatherings were held in homes. Paul was arrested and beaten and lashed numerous times, the same punishments he had formerly meted out. He eventually died in Rome, likely by beheading.ⁱⁱⁱ

We know of Paul's experience and work through his letters, which comprise nearly half of the 27 books of the New Testament. Of the 13 letters, six have been

directly attributed to Paul, while the remainder were heavily influenced by him. These letters are the earliest account of Christianity, written in the 30 years subsequent to Jesus' death, well before the Gospels.

Again, humble is not a word one might use to describe Paul. He was the self-described best Jew and best Pharisee prior to his conversion and best apostle of Christ later, although he did attribute the latter to the Grace of God.^{iv} So how was he susceptible to transformation?

The Bible is relatively silent on what might have been going on for Saul at the time of his vision. We do receive one substantial clue: Saul had recently approved of and witnessed the stoning to death of a Christian, Stephen, the first known Christian martyr. Stoning is not an easy death. It is slow and gruesome. Perhaps this weighed on his mind. Perhaps he was puzzling over the strength of conviction that led these early Christians to be willing to accept imprisonment and even violent death for their beliefs. Perhaps he wondered at this "Holy Spirit" thing that was evident, that was working in these people. Whatever it was, he was open to change. The normally zealous Saul was in a more humble frame of mind. The power of what he was witnessing, the power of Jesus, were able to speak to him.

I'd like to relate one more story of transformation--my own. This is a story about how I was called to ministry. I told a little piece of this last week.

The short version is that I was attending worship at my longtime home UU church in Davis. We had a guest preacher, Leisa Huyck, whom some of you have heard here. Leisa came out of the environmental consulting world, as did I. As I listened to her preach on the role of spirit, of UU ministry, in environmental work, it was as if I, too, had been hit by a blinding light. I suddenly knew that I needed to

become a minister. I knew that leaving civil engineering would not be abandoning my environmental work but would be continuing it in a different way.

What was my state of mind that, finally, allowed me to be receptive to becoming a minister? I say finally, because I had been pulled this direction for a long time. Perhaps, even from childhood, when I was an altar boy in the Episcopal Church. More recently, I had been a worship associate with the Davis church and loved it. After assisting with worship, people would ask me when I was going to seminary. My pat answer was, "I am not. It's too expensive. I'm too old.

I don't want to be a beginner again." What I didn't say was that I was also frightened. I didn't think I could weather the criticism and blame that can be directed toward a minister. I'd heard of this in lengthy conversations with the minister of the Davis church, Beth Banks. What had changed for me was some work I had recently completed in therapy. My fundamental sense of self and my intrinsic value had shifted. While I did not realize it in the moment, this was the missing link to allowing me to say yes to the call. I was humble, in that I was under no illusions that this transition would be easy. There were many obstacles to overcome and much personal growth work still to come. However, I was newly confident in the abilities I did have and knew that I could make the transition from civil engineer to minister. I was open to transformation.

M. Scott Peck, author of *The Road Less Traveled*, has this to say about transformation. "The truth is that our finest moments are most likely to occur when we are feeling deeply uncomfortable, unhappy, or unfulfilled. For it is only in such moments, propelled by our discomfort, that we are likely to step out of our ruts and start searching for different ways or truer answers."

It behooves us to listen to our discomfort, to those inner voices, to our dreams. They are gifts, guideposts, for our journey through this sacred life we have been granted. Be humble. Be open to the idea that your reasoning mind may not have all the answers about how your life should proceed. Be open, as were the disciples, as was Paul, as was I. But rest assured, you do not have to go into church ministry--at least not most of you. There are many ways of doing ministry in this world.

May it be so.

ⁱ Mark 16.11; Luke 24.8-12;

ⁱⁱ Matthew 12.14; John 18.3

ⁱⁱⁱ Accessed 3/31/18. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_the_Apostle#Two_years_in_Rome

^{iv} Phil 3.4-6; Gal 1.13-14; 2 Cor 11.22-23; 1 Cor 15.9-10