

## **SAUL'S EASTER STORY**

Acts 9:1-9

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If you have heard more than a couple of my sermons, you know that I firmly do NOT believe that everything happens for a reason, I do NOT believe that bad things only happen to bad people. I DO believe that messages like that can be spiritually and psychologically harmful to people. What I believe is that we live in a world where both beautiful and terrible things happen. God does not orchestrate these events, but God does give us the ability to cope — God gives us strength, and courage, and God gives us one another. Whatever we go through, we're not doing it alone.

Sometimes, though, it is fun to just marvel at certain coincidences. Something almost too amazing to be believed happened in the year 2010, at a small liberal arts college in Florida. The college, which attracted mostly progressive-minded students, had somehow also managed to attract the son of one of America's most prominent white supremacist leaders. The student, Derek Black, attended the school because he wanted to study history, and his political identity was unknown for a while. But once people figured out who he was, and realized that he espoused the same views as his father, he was both feared and shunned on campus. The very first time he received any kind of social invitation it was, ironically, from the Jewish kid down the hall. Matthew Stevenson knew who Derek was, but still, he sent the text message: "What are you doing Friday night?"

Matthew was the only Orthodox Jewish student on campus, and he hosted Sabbath dinner in his apartment every Friday night, along with his roommate, Allison

Gornik, who grew up in the Cleveland area. Matthew told his friends that he'd invited Derek to sabbath dinner because, he said, "Maybe the best way to change his mind is not to ignore him nor to confront him, but to include him. Let's try to treat him like anyone else." Derek accepted the invitation. That Friday. And the Friday after that. And the Friday after that. Matthew and Allison and their group of friends became friends with Derek. Slowly their conversations became deeper. It turned out that Derek had an open mind. It turned out that Derek read the emails Allison and Matthew and the others would send him. And one day, Derek renounced the beliefs he'd held since he was a child. He informed his family, and then he told his story to a national audience.

This Tuesday, he and Allison will be speaking in Cleveland at an event called Unlearning Hate. They've been traveling the country talking about their experiences. Derek's story has been told in a book titled Rising Out of Hatred.

You could call it an Easter story, this rising. This victory of good over evil. Love over hate.

Derek Black was Enemy Number One before his conversion. And that's the way Saul is described in our scripture passage for today. The early days of the church were times of violence and persecution, and Saul was actively involved. Jesus had made enemies, after all — questioning authority, turning expectations upside down - and now Jesus' enemies were after his followers. Jesus' enemies thought they'd buried that spirit of radical inclusion for good, and that things could go back to normal. Let the authorities have their unquestioned power back. But Jesus' followers were not just alive, they were growing in number.

In Acts chapter 8, you can read about what Saul was up to: “Saul began to wreak havoc against the church. Entering one house after another, he would drag off both men and women and throw them into prison.”

But one day, as he’s walking, something happens to Saul. He is blinded by a bright light and he hears a voice calling his name. “Saul, why are you harassing me?” It is the voice of Jesus, who apparently has had enough of Saul, and is ready for another Easter story. Saul wasn’t alone when this happened. Those who were with him heard the voice as well. They took Saul into the town of Damascus where he spends three days in the dark...three days without food or drink...and if you were to continue to read further, you’d see that, like Jesus, Saul emerges from his three days of darkness as a new person. Eventually he’s given a new name to fit his new identity, and he becomes the most enthusiastic evangelist the church has ever known, tirelessly starting churches and telling everyone who will listen that there is a power greater than evil, a light that overcomes darkness, a goodness that changes lives.

I talk to a lot of people who wish for a dramatic Easter story in their own lives. People plagued by doubts who long for God to speak to them, in clear and unmistakable ways. People who long for a sense of direction, for answers, who wish God would tell them exactly what to do. People who feel as if life has been one hard obstacle after another and desperately need for their burdens to be lightened.

I have been asked to mentor a group of younger ministers in our region, and I was with a few of them on Thursday. Waiting for the rest of the group to arrive, I started chatting with one young man and he told me that he had received a message from God he could not ignore. He was working for his brother in law’s company, he was happy,

he and his wife were establishing a life for themselves in the Washington DC area, and one day as he was driving a truck for work, he heard, from the back seat of the cab, a voice that said, "Feed my sheep." He heard it so distinctly that he looked over his shoulder to see if someone was there. It was so real that he pulled his truck over to the side of the road, called his wife and told her about it. A few months later they'd left DC and moved to Pennsylvania where he started seminary. Wow. That doesn't happen to too many people I know. It doesn't even happen to too many people in the Bible. God speaks to Moses and the prophets, but most people just sort of stumble in the dark.

At the time of Saul, the time of Paul, there were no "Christians" yet...no one called by that name. That name came a little later. Instead, those who followed Jesus were called "People of the Way." They were known, not so much for what they believed, as for the way they lived, the way they walked as it were. Like when Jesus called the disciples, those early followers left the confines of home and all that was comfortable and walked the road God set before them. They were known by their character, by the way they loved one another.

For most of us, Easter happens not with a bolt of lightning, or a blinding light, but in more gradual and subtle ways. We notice, as we are walking our way through life, that we have developed companions, people who are walking with us, people who help us stay on the right path. We notice that journeys that used to be painfully difficult seem a little easier. We find that we have the courage to speak up when we hear other people speak in hateful and bigoted ways. All of this is Easter. All of this is life triumphing over death.

You think that prayer is something that only “works” for other people, yet you keep on trying. And then, one day, you notice that you’re more aware of God’s presence. It’s not dramatic - it’s no voice from the back seat of the car - but it’s as real as the beating of your heart. You listen more, and then more again.

It’s the way spring comes to Cleveland. So slow that you think it will never happen. You’re overwhelmed by so much rain, so many cloudy days, you wonder if you’ll ever be able to put away your sweaters and boots. But one day you look out and the sun is miraculously shining and everything is new and green.

We keep walking. We put one foot in front of the other, on days when we feel like it and on days when we don’t. We walk, together, through the challenges of our lives. And we are nourished by the spiritual food that is offered at the table of the risen Christ.