

Text: Acts 26:1-18<sup>1</sup>

Title: The Risen Jesus: An Explosion of Hope!

Date: April 4, 2010

Place: First Baptist Church, Olds, AB

This morning I want to share with you a personal testimony to the power of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It's the story of how one life was dramatically changed by the risen Jesus. No, it isn't my story but it is a personal story. It's the story of a man by the name of Saul who met the risen Jesus Christ and that meeting changed his life forever! I could read several different accounts of his story to you this morning because we have at least three. You see, he loved to tell the story of his encounter with the risen Lord. You'll read his story in Acts chapter 9, Acts chapter 22 and Acts chapter 26, but it's the last one that I want to share with you this Easter morning.

There is nothing like the power of a personal story, especially the story of someone who is willing to die for what he believes. And Saul, whom we know better as Paul, did just that. It was because of his belief that Jesus was alive that Paul was imprisoned and eventually executed by the Romans. Why would they kill him for believing in the resurrection of Jesus? Well, if Jesus had truly risen from the dead as he had predicted, then it meant that the things he said about himself were true. And for the Romans, above all it meant that Jesus truly was God, the Lord of universe, and that the Roman emperor, Caesar, wasn't. The Roman empire couldn't tolerate the thought that there was someone with greater honor and authority in the lives of its citizens than Caesar and so Paul and those who believed in the resurrected Jesus had to die.

As I read Paul's testimony to his belief in the resurrected Jesus, remember that these are the words of a man who knows that his life is on the line. He is speaking before the Roman governor of the province of Judea, a man by the name of Festus, and also before a minor king of the region, a man named Agrippa, together with his sister, Bernice. Paul implores them...

**“...I beg you to listen to me patiently.” (Acts 26:3)**

Let's hear that as a word to us today. This is a long reading, but these are the words of a man who deserves to be heard. He lived and died for what he believed in. Let's listen together as Paul speaks to us across the years. Paul declared...

**<sup>4</sup> “My manner of life from my youth, spent from the beginning among my own nation and in Jerusalem, is known by all the Jews. <sup>5</sup> They have known**

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission, All rights reserved.

for a long time, if they are willing to testify, that according to the strictest party of our religion I have lived as a Pharisee.<sup>6</sup> And now I stand here on trial because of my hope in the promise made by God to our fathers,<sup>7</sup> to which our twelve tribes hope to attain, as they earnestly worship night and day. And for this hope I am accused by Jews, O king!<sup>8</sup> Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?

<sup>9</sup> “I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>10</sup> And I did so in Jerusalem. I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them.<sup>11</sup> And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities.

<sup>12</sup> “In this connection I journeyed to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests.<sup>13</sup> At midday, O king, I saw on the way a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, that shone around me and those who journeyed with me.<sup>14</sup> And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.’<sup>15</sup> And I said, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ And the Lord said, ‘I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.’<sup>16</sup> But rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you,<sup>17</sup> delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you<sup>18</sup> to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.’”

<sup>19</sup> “Therefore, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision,<sup>20</sup> but declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout all the region of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds in keeping with their repentance.<sup>21</sup> For this reason the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill me.<sup>22</sup> To this day I have had the help that comes from God, and so I stand here testifying both to small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass:<sup>23</sup> that the Christ must suffer and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles.”

When Paul spoke these words he had been in prison for over two years awaiting trial on trumped up charges. (Acts 21:28, 34) He could have been overwhelmed with the injustice of his situation, but instead, he was grateful (Acts 26:2) to have

an opportunity to give witness to his faith in Jesus who had triumphed over death.

Why was he in jail? Because of his confident faith that Jesus had been raised from the dead. It was his “hope” in God’s promise of resurrection that had gotten him into trouble. But Paul’s faith in the resurrected Jesus is so powerful and strong that he refused to back down. He asks his judges...

**“Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?” Acts 26:8**

For Paul, the question was not an academic one – he didn’t organize his arguments to demonstrate and prove the Jesus had risen from the dead. His experience was too powerful and personal to require that – he simply testified in court that day to an event that had radically changed his life.

He had met the risen Jesus on the Damascus highway and because he told others of that event, he was hounded and imprisoned by the religious leaders who were bent on crushing the growing movement who claimed the resurrected Jesus as the Messiah promised of God to the Jewish people.

For some of Paul’s religious contemporaries, belief in the resurrection of the dead was an academic question. Paul had been a member of a religious group called the Pharisees. They were a sect that believed strongly that God one day will raise the dead but sadly, they were also among those who brought charges against Paul for his belief in the resurrection of Jesus.

Theirs was an academic belief. They believed that God CAN raise the dead. But for Paul, it was much more dynamic than that. Paul wouldn’t let the question remain academic. For him, it wasn’t, “could God raise the dead?” but rather, “had God raised Jesus?” And for the Paul the answer was a resounding, “Yes! Jesus is alive!”

The question isn’t an academic one today either – we need to decide whether we believe that Jesus was raised from the dead or not. What we decide will change not only our lives but our destinies!

Make no mistake about it: Jesus’ tomb was and is empty – the question we have to decide is “how?”

Some people suggest that the tomb is empty because Jesus walked out under his own power.

**Did Jesus really die on the cross?  
OR...**

### **Did he revive in the cool of the tomb and exit somehow under his own power?**

Did he hobble around Palestine on smashed feet, anemic from blood loss, appearing at times to disciples in this crippled and dilapidated state, and somehow convince them that he had risen powerfully from the dead?

Watching Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ" the other night reminded me of the bloodiness of Jesus' death. Gibson might well be guilty of over dramatizing that aspect of the crucifixion, but he makes a good point: the wounds Jesus suffered during his beating by the Romans and during his crucifixion make it certain that he did die. The blood loss from the whipping, the pounding of nails into his wrists and ankles and the spear wound to his side would almost certainly have induced "hypovolemic shock" in any human being.

But death by crucifixion was usually caused by asphyxiation as the individual, weakened from his ordeal, was finally unable to push himself up on his feet to breath. He would have been unable to exhale or inhale, a situation that would result in increasing carbon dioxide levels in his blood, a condition called "respiratory acidosis."

"Hypovolemic shock" and "respiratory acidosis" cannot be reversed simply by lying down in a cool tomb and resting a while. The Romans were skilled in death by crucifixion and when they took Jesus down from the cross they pronounced him dead ... they'd seen it hundreds of times before!

If Jesus died on the cross, then...

### **Did Jesus really rise from the dead?**

**OR...**

### **Was the tomb robbed by the disciples who then concocted a conspiracy to fake a resurrection?**

Did the disciples, who had deserted him at the cross and went into hiding, somehow find the courage to overwhelm the guards placed on the tomb and steal away the body and then invent the lie that Jesus had risen? Then did they take the story of their conspiracy with them to the grave as they died one after another for the lie they had contrived?

Chuck Colson – who, as a Watergate co-conspirator, has had some experience with trying to concoct conspiracies – says that the disciples forgot the basic principle of conspiracies: "Get your stories straight and stick together!"

Thomas, one of the disciples, refuses to believe the story of the resurrection – he breaks ranks with the disciples – contrary to good conspiracy planning. And the various Gospel accounts of the resurrection differ from each other in secondary elements, eg. how many angels met the women, was it 1 or 2? And the first

witnesses of the resurrection were women, and sad to say, their word wasn't worth anything according to first century courts of opinion. No, if the disciples had been intent on forming a conspiracy, they did everything wrong!

But perhaps there was no conspiracy; perhaps they were simply testifying to something they believed to be true? Perhaps, Jesus actually did come to life again after dying on the cross and then appear to Paul and to hundreds of other disciples to demonstrate the reality of his resurrection.

How else do you explain how the disciples, a group of men who hid in fear after Jesus' crucifixion, became bold witnesses of his resurrection – even to the point of dying for their confidence in the resurrected Jesus? And above all, **how do you explain Paul's 180 degree turn on the Damascus Road?**

Paul's claim is that he met the real Jesus on the road to Damascus and what happened to Paul on that road changed his life forever. It literally turned him 180 degrees – **from persecutor to proclaimer.**

That event shaped the way he saw his mission; it shaped the way he saw those who were not believers in Jesus. You see it in Paul's writings -- that day put an indelible stamp on his life!

The living, resurrected **Jesus did five things for Paul that day** and then commissioned him to go and tell people that **he will do the same things for anyone who believes that he is alive!**

Jesus said to Paul that day:

**“I am sending you to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.” Acts 26:17-18**

**First of all...**

***The risen Jesus opened Paul's eyes to spiritual reality ... and he'll do the same for us!***

**“I am sending you to open their eyes...” Acts 26:17**

Saul thought his eyes were open. He thought he was on a mission for God. He thought he was defending God by persecuting Jews who believed in the risen Jesus. He thought he knew what was real! He thought he could see reality clearly. But in fact, he was blind. And as he shared the message of Jesus with others who were as he had once been, he came to the conclusion that...

**“the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.” 2 Corinthians 4:4**

Paul is speaking out of his own spiritual experience. He’s not casting stones at people; he is empathizing with their plight. They just can’t see the wonder of the risen Jesus because they are blind to it!

I love the brief scene in the movie, *Amazing Grace*, where John Newton, (played by Albert Finney) now aged and virtually blind, speaks about that famous line from his hymn: “I once was blind but now I see.” He’s gripped with the blindness he experienced for years as a slave trader, never seeing the humanity of his cargo. But now, even though he’s lost his sight, the risen Jesus has opened his eyes and he can finally and truly see!

Paul knew blindness. And sadly, one of the things that contributed to his blindness was religion. You see, Paul’s message isn’t about religion; it’s about Jesus. Paul had been very religious. He had been a member of “the strictest party” within the Jewish faith (Acts 26:5) but all that religious commitment had never opened his eyes to Jesus.

Paul’s message, our message, is not about “religion” – it’s about a relationship with the living Jesus. Jesus wants to open our eyes to the relationship He wants to have with us – to the love & kindness he wants to give us and to the life he wants to share with us. Will you open your mind and your life to him?

**Secondly...**

***The risen Jesus turned Paul’s spiritual darkness to light ... and he’ll do the same for you and me!***

**“I am sending you to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light...” Acts 26:17-18**

When Saul met Jesus on the road to Damascus, the light blinded him. (cf. Acts 9:8-9) He was led by his companions into Damascus where in the darkness of blindness he reflected for three days on what Jesus had said to him on the Damascus Road. Although physically blind, for the first time in his life he had spiritual sight!

Can you hear his sense of wonder for his newfound vision in this brief note of thanksgiving that he wrote to some fellow believers...

**“May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the**

**kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.” Colossians 1:12-14**

The Bible uses the word “darkness” to describe a variety of challenges that we face. Sometimes “darkness” refers to things that are evil. (Luke 11:34). Sometimes it refers to ignorance, as say “being in the dark” about something. (1 Thess 5:6-8) Sometimes it refers to spiritual blindness and our inability to see the truth in Jesus Christ. (Eph 5:8) We simply don’t “get it” when it comes to Jesus.

Charles Wesley, in his hymn/poem entitled “And Can It Be?,” described the moment when he finally “got it” with these vivid words:

**“Long my imprisoned spirit lay  
Fast bound in sin and nature’s night.  
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray;  
I woke – the dungeon flamed with light!  
My chains fell off, my heart was free,  
I rose, went forth and followed Thee.”**

Sometimes darkness speaks of sorrow and distress. Psalm 23 speaks of walking through the dark valley of the shadow of death (Ps 23:4) and the risen Jesus wants to bring light to these times of our lives.

During a 15 year span, Mae Bakay was blindsided by hardship more than a few times. First, her infant grandson died as the result of physical trauma at the hands of a daycare provider. Then Mae’s first husband, Leslie, was diagnosed with terminal cancer and wasted away before her eyes, painfully ending their 40-year marriage. A couple of years later, Mae remarried. The sparkle returned to her eyes. Mae and Hank were very much in love. But, sadly, as they were getting dressed to go out to celebrate their first anniversary, Hank collapsed and died of a heart attack. Mae, a strong Christian, has watched four of her adult children go through the agony of divorce. She has agonized with them. To top things off, Mae was diagnosed with macular degeneration in both eyes. She is now legally blind. A dark personal world has become darker. But Mae Bakay does not live in despair.

Mae Bakay writes a monthly column for her church newsletter called “Mae’s Weavings.” Using the dark threads of personal pain and the bright threads a faithful God has used to suture her emotional wounds, Mae weaves a tapestry of devotional thoughts. It is a tapestry that regularly encourages those who attend her church to deal with their own darkness.

This is what Mae wrote in January, 1990.

*"I step into this new uncluttered year with a greater faith and trust in God than I have ever known.*

*The dark trials of the past decade have prepared me to face the challenges of a new one. I have learned to "draw near to the thick darkness where God was." (Exodus 20:21) I found Him to be there in my darkest hours. He gathered me in His arms and carried me close to His heart.*

*The dark waters of trial did not overflow me. God parted the waters and I walked through the flood on a dry path. As I was tried by fire I was not consumed but refined! God's presence went before me and made the crooked places straight. "And I will give you the treasures of darkness and hidden riches of secret places, that you may know that I, the LORD, which has called you by your name, am the God of Israel." (Isaiah 45:3) Treasures and riches indeed! Reading His Word and meditating on the riches of His promises, I experienced more fully the faithfulness of God. As I prayed, I accepted in my heart that, "all things work together for good to those who love the Lord."*

*There were times when fear, frustration and loneliness overwhelmed me. I doubted and asked, "Why, Lord?" Thank you for not letting go of my hand when I was faithless. Thank you for fulfilling your promises never to leave me or forsake me. Thank you for the treasures of darkness I have found as I have drawn near to you in my dark trials...*

*I walk into the New Year in the strength of the Lord. In my heart I know that His grace is sufficient for all my needs. May I always see the light of Your love, Father, in my darkest hours.*

And then Mae closed with the words of a familiar Gospel song...

*Because He lives I can face tomorrow.  
Because He lives all fear is gone.  
Because I know who holds the future,  
And life is worth the living,  
Just because He lives!*

*Mae Cromwell-Bakay  
January 1990<sup>2</sup>*

**Thirdly...**

***The risen Jesus delivered Paul from spiritual tyranny and brought him to true freedom ... and he'll do it for you and me, too!***

***"I am sending you ... so that they may turn ... from the power of Satan to God" Acts 26:17-18***

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.crossroadschurchweb.org/home/140004017/140004017/docs/jan2010.pdf>

Jesus tells Paul that he will deliver people from “the power of Satan” (v.18) and bring them “to God.” What the Bible tells us is that we all live under one of two powers: either we live under the power and authority of Satan or we live under the power and authority of God. But we can’t see it until our eyes are opened. The “The Truman Show” is a story of a young man whose whole life is played out under the watchful eyes of TV cameras and millions of people worldwide. Everyone knows it’s a show, everyone that is except Truman Burbank – he thinks it’s his life.

His whole life is scripted – he operates under the illusion that he is making choices, but his life is controlled by the producer of the show, a man called, Christof. Truman believes he has freedom – but he can’t leave “his community” – something always intervenes to keep him at home – a home that is in reality a tightly controlled TV set.

Coming to faith in Christ is like finally breaking free from the script that we play out. It’s coming to wide-eyed reality – knowing that we are making choices that either support what God is doing in the world or that support what Satan is doing. Coming to faith in the resurrected Jesus is the end of innocence and an awakening to maturity. We realize that our lives do matter ... for eternity! The things we do in the power of the resurrected Jesus are things that last forever!

Faith in the resurrected Jesus does not mean that we check out of this world and live only for our “pie in the sky by and by.” It means living every day with a sense that the resurrected Jesus is at work in us and through us to accomplish eternal things in the lives of the people around us.

#### **Fourthly...**

***The risen Jesus forgave Paul all his sins ... and he’ll do it for us!  
“I am sending you to open their eyes, so that ... they may receive  
forgiveness of sins” Acts 26:17-18***

When God opened Paul’s eyes to his need for forgiveness the weight of sin was almost unbearable. Paul would later describes himself as “the foremost” of sinners (1 Tim 1:15) because of what he had done against God and against others.

Paul had sinned against people – he had hunted down believers in Jesus and had supported their execution for their faith. (Acts 26:10) And Paul had sinned against God – he had rejected the Messiah and had worked to stamp out his name. (Acts 26:9) When the risen Jesus met him on the road to Damascus, Paul has asked, “Who are you, Lord?” And Jesus had responded...

**“I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.” Acts 26:15**

Paul's sin was very personal – it was a personal attack upon Jesus himself! But God freely forgave him all his sins and welcomed him into **“the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.”** (Colossians 1:14)

The Christian counselor, Archibald Hart, defines forgiveness as “surrendering my right to hurt you for hurting me.” That's exactly what God did for Paul. And that's exactly what he'll do for you. And that's exactly what God wants us to do for others, too.

Chris Carrier was 10 years old when he was kidnapped. He was burned with cigarettes, stabbed, shot in the head and left to die by his kidnapper. Miraculously, he survived, even though he lost the sight in one eye. No one was ever arrested.

Recently a man confessed to the crime. Carrier, who is now a pastor went to see him. He found his attacker, David McAllister, a 77-year-old ex-convict, frail and blind, living in a nursing home. Carrier began visiting him, reading him the Bible to him and eventually leading him to faith in Christ.

Carrier says: “While many people can't understand how I could forgive David McAllister, from my point of view **I couldn't NOT forgive him**. If I'd chosen to hate him all these years, or spent my life looking for revenge, then I wouldn't be the man I am today, the man my wife and children love, the man God has helped me to be.”

Paul found that no matter what sin had been committed, the grace of Christ could remove it and the risen Jesus stands ready to do the same for you and me.

**Finally,**

***The risen Jesus promised Paul a wonderful future ... and he offers it to you and me, too.***

**“I am sending you to open their eyes, so ... they may receive ... a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.” Acts 26:17-18**

The word translated as “a place” is more literally “a share in.” The NASB translates the phrase as: “an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in me.”

Paul received payment in full for the work he was about to do – an inheritance that money would not buy nor that good deeds could earn – promised to him before he ever preached a single sermon or led anyone to faith in Jesus. How would you like a retirement plan like that?! He lived his life with his focus on the promise of a reward in heaven that awaited him.

You might remember the movie, *Chariot's of Fire*, which, in part, told the story of Eric Liddell, the Scottish Olympian who refused to run on Sunday and then went on to win Olympic gold and set a world record in another event. Liddell would later become a missionary to China and die in a Japanese prison camp during World War Two.

Ian Charleson, who played the role of Eric Liddell in the film, had to learn how to run with his head tilted back in the style of the Olympic champion. During the filming, Charleson concluded that Liddell's unconventional running style was inspired by trust. "He ran with faith," Charleson said. "He didn't even look where he was going."

He ran looking up – that same confidence in God led him to serve in China as a missionary where he eventually died – still looking up to the reward promised him by God.

So how about you, this Easter?

- Do you need someone who can enable you to see spiritual reality? The risen Jesus will open your eyes.
- Do you need someone who can bring light to the dark trials you face in life? The risen Jesus will be that light.
- Do you want to break free from the empty script of your life and live a life that will count for eternity? The risen Jesus will show you how to do it.
- Do you need someone who can lift the burden of failure off your back? The risen Jesus gladly will.
- Do you need to know that there is a future ahead of you that makes all of the struggle of life worthwhile? You'll find that meaning and purpose in following the risen Jesus, because he'll lead you there.

### **Invitation to Prayer Ministry**

**Final Song:** And Can It Be?

**Benediction**