

Pastor:

You may be seated. Grace, mercy and peace to you this morning from God our Father, and from our risen Lord and savior, Jesus Christ. I know you've all seen before and after pictures, many commercials, and many of the reality shows on television play off of this before and after theme. They're used to show the amazing transformation that will take place if you use a particular product or follow a certain program. The before picture shows a yard full of weeds, the after picture, a lush green and completely weed-free lawn. The before picture shows the bald head, the after picture, a thick head of hair. The before picture shows the flabby tummy and the 52-inch waistline, and then the after picture of chiseled rock-hard abs. The before picture shows the run down fixer-upper house, the after picture, a beautifully restored and decorated home.

But there's nothing in the entire world that has a greater before and after effect than the events of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, which we celebrated now just two weeks ago on Easter Sunday. That picture being the source of countless other amazing and miraculous before and after pictures in the lives of God's people. It is one such picture that was described in our first reading for today from the Book of Acts where we are presented with the before and after pictures of a man named Saul. Our lesson begins, "Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples." That's the before picture of a man who was public enemy number one of Jesus Christ and the early Christian Church. The before picture of a Jewish crusader who refused to believe that Jesus of Nazareth was the son of God who came into the world to live, die, and then did rise from the dead in order to save all mankind from sin.

This is the before picture of a man who sincerely believed that he was serving God by ridding the world of Christians, stomping out that false teaching that Jesus is not only the Jewish but the world's Messiah, doing everything in his power to have Jesus' followers arrested, imprisoned, and even killed. It's the before picture of the man who stood by and watched while Stephen was stoned to death for his faith in Jesus Christ, an event described in Acts chapter seven. But then as Saul was traveling to Damascus with letters from the high priest in Jerusalem authorizing the arrest of any Christians he might find there, the picture begins to change. Our text says, "As he neared to Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' 'Who are you, Lord?' Saul asked. 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting,' he replied. 'Now, get up and go into the city and you will be told what you must do.'"

Saul, the great enemy of Christ and persecutor of the Christian faith had just seen and heard the resurrected Jesus himself. As a result, he is struck blind and has to be led into town. For the next three days, how Saul must have painstakingly pondered all that he saw and heard on that road to Damascus. Can you even imagine the thoughts that raced through his mind during that time? It's all true. Everything about this Jesus is really true. What have I done? I've persecuted and tortured those who followed Jesus and believed in him, and now I've seen Him myself and He is who he said He is. I've hated and persecuted God himself. I deserve nothing but His anger and eternal punishment. That is surely what I'm now about to receive. Weighed down by the burden of his crimes against the Lord.

No doubt fervently confessing his sin and earnestly pleading for God's mercy and forgiveness, Saul is then visited by Ananias, a disciple and believer in Jesus who God sent to minister to him. "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road as you are coming here, has sent me to you so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." Immediately something like scales fell from Saul's eyes and he could see again. He got up and was baptized. It is then that we begin to get a glimpse of Saul's after picture, and it's an after picture like no other. One that pictures Saul no longer as an enemy and persecutor of Jesus, but as his friend. Ananias even now addresses him as brother. A picture of a man who didn't receive the anger and punishment from God that he deserved, but instead was forgiven and restored solely by God's grace in Jesus Christ. Could there be a more amazing and miraculous before and after?

But if we pause to think about it, it is no less amazing and miraculous than the before and after pictures we can see in our own lives. We too have a before. Just like Saul's before, ours isn't a very pretty one, but one that shows us as we confessed a few moments ago as poor, miserable sinners, enemies of God deserving nothing but His anger and punishment. Our before picture reveals a past filled with shameful things we wish we had never done, a past filled with shameful and hurtful words that we can never take back, a past filled with shameful and lustful thoughts we would never want anyone else to know about. Without Christ coming to us, revealing Himself to us, just as He came to Saul on that Damascus road, making Himself known to us in the waters of holy baptism, we would still be that before picture. There would be no after. We would still be enemies of God fighting against Him and His kingdom, stumbling around in the blindness and the darkness of sin and unbelief, lost and destined to be separated from God forever.

We would still have only our ugly before picture to look at. But the resurrected Jesus has changed all of that. By grace, our risen Lord has rescued us from our before pictures as he took all our shameful sins onto Himself, carrying them to the cross. We will never have to suffer the punishment for who we were before, the

punishment of a holy God that our sins deserve because God sent Jesus to suffer and die in our place, and then triumphantly rise from death and the grave. He is risen. He is risen indeed, hallelujah. Which means that by His grace alone, we too now have an after picture. A picture that was snapped in that miraculous moment when the resurrected Jesus revealed Himself to us. That miraculous moment when water was sprinkled on our heads and those powerful and miraculous God-breathed words were spoken over us, "I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

In that moment, just like Saul, we were changed forever. We were given an after picture. No longer God's enemies, but his friends, brothers and sisters, in fact, of our risen Lord Jesus Christ. That's my before and after picture and story, and it's yours too. But there's another before and after in the story of Saul. It certainly would've been enough of an undeserved blessing for this great sinner to just receive and hear those words of forgiveness, redeemed and forgiven by his savior for his shameful past. But the resurrected Jesus doesn't stop there. He continues to guide Saul's life in such a way that the early Christian Church's public enemy number one becomes the greatest missionary for Christ in all the Church's history. At the very end of our text, we're told that Saul immediately began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the son of God, and we know the rest of the story. The great persecutor of the faith becomes Paul, the great Apostle, God sent to proclaim that same faith first to the Jews, then to the Gentiles, and to the entire then-known world.

This man who had done everything he could to make Christians suffer, would now be led, Paul says, even privileged to himself suffer all kinds of things for the sake of the gospel. He would suffer hatred and ridicule from his fellow Jews. Hunger, shipwreck, beatings, arrests, imprisonments, and ultimately death, all for the sake of creating after pictures for all who would receive the message of God's forgiveness and salvation earned for them through the innocent life, sacrificial deaths and triumphant resurrection to life of Jesus Christ. Through his pen, inspired by God's Holy Spirit. The gospel continues to be proclaimed by Paul to this very day as 13 of the 27 books found in the New Testament of the Bible are letters authored by the guy we now recognize in his after picture, the guy we know of as the Apostle Paul. Talk about before and after. God not only chainsaw by revealing Himself to him in the risen Christ on that Damascus road, He then used Paul and continues to use him to reveal Christ to those who still only have a before picture without any hope of an after.

God wants to and can use us in the same way. I sometimes hear things like, "Some people are never going to change. He has a bad temper. She was caught shoplifting. He's a drunk. She sleeps around." It can seem to such a person as

though they have been marked for life. That they'll never be given a second chance. Sometimes even in our own families, we're ready to throw in the towel. "He'll never change. She'll never change. Why should I talk to my son or daughter, my dad or mom, my brother, sister, aunt, uncle, cousin? After all these years, they'll never change." It's true that like Paul, all people do have a sinful nature, a before picture that doesn't want to change its sinful ways. But remember the story of God's amazing grace, transforming the before picture of Saul, the persecutor, to the after picture of Saul, the child of God. Then again to Paul the Apostle, a missionary and great proclaimer of the gospel. Remember how the resurrected Jesus has changed you.

Paul later wrote to the Corinthian Christians, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has gone, the new has come." Or for our purposes this morning, we could say the before has gone. The after has come. Remembering that, remembering our own before and after pictures is how we can keep from giving up on someone else. When I remember the amazing grace that saved even a wretch like me through the power of the Holy Spirit that is now alive and at work in me, I can begin to accept the unacceptable again because they too can be touched and changed by this resurrected Jesus. God can use even me and He can use even you to lead them to an after picture of forgiveness, hope, and new and eternal life. May God grant it for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.

Speaker 1:

Now may the peace of God that passes all understanding guard and keep your hearts and minds.