

# **This Is Jesus: To the Ends of the Earth**

## *The Royal Proclamation*

**April 1, 2018**

**Feature – “Alive”**

**Worship Songs – Christ Is Risen / Death Was Arrested / T&G**

**Drama – The Centerpiece**  
**Feature – “Rather Be”**

You can try to ignore Him. You can pretend He isn't there.

But there *will be times* when it happens – when the truth of who He is and what He did will come crashing into your life.

And today – right here and right now –  
is one of those times.

With all of your heart, you should know:  
*You. Can't. Shake. Jesus.*

Would you pray with me?

Lord, I thank you for what this day means: *that You did not see fit to leave us and our world as prisoners of sin and death.* Instead, You entered into human history in the Person of Jesus of Nazareth and You trampled over death by *His death* so that Your Kingdom might be established on Earth as it is in

Heaven.

And I pray that goal might be furthered in what I say this morning.

In the name of Jesus, amen.

Good morning everyone.

Over the past couple of weeks, I've been watching a lot of movies. (As most of you know, one of the things I do every year is to take four or five current movies and build a message around each one. We're going to do that in July, so I'm in the process right now of deciding which movies to use).

Anyway ... one of the things I've noticed is that sometimes the most powerful way to tell a story is to start in the present and then flash back to some point in the past.

Typically what that does is to raise your curiosity in how things evolved to where they are in the present, and also – if the movie is any good – has the effect of giving you a “wow” moment: the realization of just how *surprising it is* that things worked out the way they did.

That's how the story is told in DC Comic's *Wonder Woman* which came out

last summer. *Life of Pi* and *Arrival* (both of which I've used in previous movie series) employ that same technique.

And this morning I'm going to try to do the same thing with the Easter story.

Because it's so familiar to us (even to those who aren't Christians), it's very easy to overlook just how surprising it was – even shocking – that things worked out the way they did for Christianity.

## **Thessalonica, A.D. 50**

So, let's begin in the year AD 50, which is about 20 years after that terrible

Friday on which Jesus was betrayed, abandoned and crucified.

**(pic of map) And in this initial scene, we're not in Jerusalem where those events took place. Instead we're in the city of Thessalonica, which is a world away – over 1500 miles according to Google Maps ...**

... and not just in terms of location.

In terms of culture, the two cities could not be any further apart.

Because it was ...

- The capital of Macedonia ...
- And located on the Aegean Sea ...

- And three great rivers ran through it ...
- As well as the Via Egnatia – a 530 mile-long road connecting strategically important cities in the Roman Empire<sup>i</sup> ...

... Thessalonica was a happenin' place!

200,000 people from all over the Middle-Eastern and European world lived there at the time, including many Jews who had been displaced from their homeland.

And because of this mix of people and cultures *and* because of the fact that Thessalonica was a *free* city<sup>ii</sup> (which

meant the Roman government allowed its residents to elect their own rulers and stayed out of internal matters), the civil authorities – those elected rulers – were very sensitive to any disturbances that might arise among the people which might lead the Romans to reconsider that policy.

But a disturbance is *exactly* what is happening in the opening scene of our story. And it's a big one.

The 17<sup>th</sup> chapter of the biblical book of Acts tells us that a group of concerned citizens has hired a gang of “villainous men” to go into the city market and stir up dissension among the crowd. They

are so successful that Luke (the author of Acts) writes that they “throw the whole city into an uproar” and, soon, a large mob is heading to the home of a prominent Jewish leader by the name of Jason.

Now, what’s interesting about Jason is that he has recently become a Christian through the influence of a team of traveling evangelists; two men by the names of Paul and Silas. And as the mob surrounds Jason’s house, two things become clear: they believe that Paul and Silas are staying there and they are not happy about it.

“Send out those troublemakers!” the

mob leaders shout. “Turn them over to us!”

When Jason insists that the evangelists are *not* in his home, a group of men from the crowd force their way inside. They search everywhere only to discover that Jason is telling the truth. Paul and Silas aren’t there.

So, they settle for the next best thing: they grab Jason and some of the other Christians who *are* in his home at the time and drag them to the “politarch”<sup>iii</sup> – that elected body of magistrates who rule over the city.

By the way, “politarch” is a very

interesting Greek word. For centuries, it appeared in no other Greek writings (other than Acts 17) which led skeptics to doubt the authenticity of Luke's account<sup>iv</sup> until ...

**... an inscription with that word  
and a listing of six of its members  
was discovered among the ruins  
of Thessalonica ...**

... which doesn't really *prove* anything other than, once again, to anchor the whole story of Jesus and his followers in a real time, in a real place in the real world ... such as AD 50 ... Thessalonica.

Anyway ... back to our story.

The angry mob – at this point, numbering in the hundreds if not a thousand or more – has seized Jason and everyone in his house.

And they're marching on City Hall, demanding the politarch take some kind of action *because of a great crime* that Jason and Paul and Silas and the whole lot of newly-minted Christians in that city have committed; a crime that will surely raise the ire of the Romans if not handled quickly and decisively.

“*These are the people who are turning the world upside down!*” they yelled.

*“Now they’ve come here!  
Jason has had them in his  
house!”*

Acts 17:6 (NTE)

“Furthermore,” they continued ...

**... and this is the really bad part ...**

*“They are all defying Caesar’s  
decrees; they are saying that  
...”* Acts 17:7 (NIV)

Timeout for just a minute. Let’s play a little guessing game.

What is it that Jason and Paul and Silas and Christians everywhere are saying that makes people accuse them of “defying Caesar” and “turning the

world upside down?”

Turn to the person next to you and tell them what you think it is.

And if you have no idea, that's ok. Just say that.

## **What They Were Saying**

Alright, let's continue.

**If you think that what they were saying was something like ...**

“Following His crucifixion by the evil Roman Empire, Jesus of Nazareth *rose from the dead* – literally, in a physical body.

Therefore, all of you should believe that *He really was* the Divine Son of God.”

If you think that’s what they were saying, that would be a pretty good guess since it *is* Easter Sunday – the day when Christians all over the world gather to remember and celebrate the resurrection of Jesus – and this is an Easter sermon.

***And ... if you think that what Paul and Silas and all their converts were saying to everyone was something like ...***

“Jesus died on the cross to take your place – to suffer the

judgement for sin that all of us deserve. So you should trust in Him and what He did instead of yourself and what you've done.”

If you think *that's* what they were saying, that would be a pretty good guess, too, because, if you've been paying attention at all, that *is* the predominant message coming from evangelical Christianity these days.

And, to be clear, *both* of those messages

- That Jesus died to save us and the whole cosmos from the effect of sin which is death and destruction, and we can receive that salvation

simply by trusting Him ...

- And that Jesus rose again as the firstborn (so to speak) of God's new creation; the initial act of what's going to happen in the future when God will once-and-for-all reverse the curse of sin and renew and restore everything to what it was initially intended to be ...

... both of those messages *are* at the heart of what Christianity claims to be true ... and also a critical part of what Paul and Silas were preaching.<sup>v</sup>

However, to be honest, neither of those messages really has the power to “turn

the world upside down” because neither one messes with the social order established by the political, economic or religious institutions of our world.

And neither one really impacts day-to-day reality very much; at least, not much beyond making Christians feel better about their past and their future.

And they certainly are *not* cause to drag a leading citizen of Thessalonica before the politarch, claiming that he and his new friends, Paul and Silas (and *all of their friends* from everywhere else they’ve traveled!) are *defying Caesar’s decrees*.

Whatever they're saying has to be a lot stronger and much more threatening than "you can be saved from your sins by faith and not works" and "a dead man literally came back to life."

So what are they saying that causes such great agitation?<sup>vi</sup>

### **They are saying that ...**

*"There is another king, one called Jesus."* Acts 17:7 (NIV)

Twenty years after the execution of a little-known Jewish rabbi, in a place over 1,500 miles away that most people would never see, this is what is being

proclaimed by Christians all over the Roman Empire.

And this proclamation is most disturbing to everyone who hears it because everyone knows *there is only one king in the realm: Caesar.*

To claim otherwise is to call down the wrath of Rome. It's to invite being nailed to a cross ... which had happened to countless numbers of people who challenged the Empire.

In fact, 20 years after this scene in Thessalonica, 11,000 men would be crucified *in one day* following the revolt of Spartacus.<sup>vii</sup> And as many as 70,000

would be crucified during the four month siege of Jerusalem in 70 A.D.<sup>viii</sup>

## **Jerusalem, 30 A.D.**

But, it's now that our story flashes back to 30 A.D., to a hill outside of Jerusalem, where “the one called Jesus” is also being crucified, hanging on a cross between two common criminals.

**The Roman governor at that time,  
Pontius Pilate ...**

*... had a notice prepared and fastened to the cross. It read: “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.”*

The Apostle John, who witnessed this event wrote that ...

*Many of the Jews read this sign, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and the sign was written in Aramaic, Latin and Greek.*

*John 19:19-20 (NIV)*

Point being ... there was to be no question of what the charge was: *that Jesus was claiming to be a king*, though He had explained to Pilate that He was not like any earthly king and had repeatedly warned his followers *not to rebel against Rome*.

But Pilate was taking no chances because this wasn't the first time that a

young Jewish man had gained a following by claiming to be the promised Messiah of Israel (which most Jews understood to be a political and military savior from the line of King David who would overthrow the Romans and restore Israel to its rightful place in the world).<sup>ix</sup>

- Several years before Jesus was born, a man named Theudas made that claim and about four hundred men joined his revolt. He was killed, all his followers were dispersed, and his movement came to nothing.
- Then, at almost the *exact same time*

when Jesus was born, another man known as “Judas the Galilean” claimed to be the Messiah and led another band of people to rebel. He, too, was killed, and all his followers were scattered.

And now, Jesus, a descendant of David through His mother Mary, is meeting the same fate – the fate of anyone who poses a threat to Roman authority.

**Later that afternoon, His lifeless body is removed from the cross and placed in a tomb that had been hewn from solid rock (which was the custom in that day).**

A circular stone is rolled in front of the entrance and, in the mind of Pilate and

the religious leaders (who had colluded with Pilate to get rid of Jesus and the threat He posed to *their* authority), “that would be the end of that.”

Jesus had finally been dealt with just like every other supposed Jewish Messiah.

And now His followers, like all of theirs, would disperse and scatter.

Except, in this case, that doesn’t happen. Jesus’ followers *do not* disperse and scatter.

**Instead, even though they had seen Him crucified, they are absolutely convinced that He – not**

**Caesar – is now reigning as *the King of the World.***

In their minds, Jesus has not become merely a “spiritual savior” who leads people out of this world to a mystical place called Heaven.

**Instead, they are convinced that God’s Kingdom, which Jesus constantly talked about, is now arriving “on Earth as *in Heaven.*”**

And in their minds, Jesus’ execution isn’t a defeat. Not at all.

**Instead, they’re convinced it is a victory. By His death, they believe, Jesus has dealt a death-blow to death and the demonic powers which are holding the whole world**

## **captive.**

It's pretty incredible – crazy even – what this ragtag group of about 120 people came to believe:

- That Jesus is now King.
- That His Kingdom is now arriving on Earth as in Heaven
- That He has “trampled over death by death”<sup>x</sup> as the song put it.

But not only do they come to believe these things *themselves*.

**They go everywhere proclaiming these things and inviting others to join them in living in the upside-down “Way of the King” (which we’ve talked about since the first**

## **of the year).**

And through their efforts, little communities of believers (called “churches”) began to spring up for the purpose of learning the Way, and living the Way and proclaiming the Way ...

- Beginning in Jerusalem<sup>xi</sup>
- And then spreading to the surrounding provinces of Judea, Samaria and Galilee<sup>xii</sup>
- And then all along the Via Egnatia into cities like Thessalonica
- And then, incredibly, into the city

of Rome itself<sup>xiii</sup>

- And from there to “the ends of the earth” including, incredibly, the Kansas City Northland in 2018 A.D.

Of course, the million-dollar question is  
... *why did they believe and say and do such  
crazy and dangerous things?*

After all, up to this point in Jewish history, there's typically not been a lot of energy around self-proclaimed messiahs who are dead.

There's only one answer that makes any sense whatsoever of what happened over the next 20 years:

Jesus followers believed what they believed, said what they said and did what they did because they had witnessed the most important event in all of human history. And they couldn't ignore it or pretend it didn't happen or try to explain it away.

They had witnessed not only the death and burial of Jesus of Nazareth.

**They had also witnessed His resurrection and ascension to the dimension of reality where God Himself lives – which we call Heaven.**

As Luke explains in the first chapter of Acts:

*After his suffering, Jesus presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God.*

*On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”*

*Then they gathered around*

him and asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”

*He said to them: “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority.*

*“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”*

Acts 1:3-8 (NIV)

They believed what they believed, said what they said, and did what they did because of what they had seen, heard

and experienced: *Jesus alive again, in the flesh, and then ascending into Heaven.*

And just to be clear, not one of them expected anything like this to happen. As the great New Testament scholar and historian, N.T. Wright, puts it:

The Messiah was supposed to fight God's victorious battle against the wicked pagans; to rebuild or cleanse the Temple; and to bring God's justice to the world. Jesus, it appeared, had done none of these things.

Therefore, no Jew with any idea of how the language of Messiahship

worked at the time could have possibly imagined that, after his crucifixion, Jesus of Nazareth was “the Lord's anointed.”

“But from very early on, Christians affirmed that Jesus *was indeed* the Messiah, precisely because of his resurrection.

And because of that, it followed that Jesus is Lord – Jesus is King – and, therefore, Caesar is not.”<sup>xiv</sup>

All of which goes to explain why our opening scene of an angry mob twenty years later crashing some guy's house 1,500 miles away is so surprising and

even shocking.

## So What?

Of course, at this point, the question is (as always) ... *so what?*

I mean, this is a really cool story. And it is surprising – even shocking – that things worked out the way they did for Christianity. But what does that mean for you and me today?

I think it means the same four things it did in 30 A.D. and 50 A.D.

First of all, I think it means that *Jesus is still King* and still in charge ... which

means that Donald Trump and the Republicans are not. And neither are Chuck Schumer and Nancy Pelosi and the Democrats. Or any other political leader or party. (BTW, if you're new with us, you should know that we try to offend everyone equally here).

The amazing thing about the Kingdom of God (as we have learned over the past few months) is that it can exist right in the middle of the Kingdoms of this world and even in spite of them which is why Jesus didn't seek to endorse, control or overthrow the political, economic and religious institutions of His day.

And, quite frankly, I don't He's that interested in doing anything of the sort in our day.

Instead, I think (and this is the second thing all of this means for us today) ... I think Jesus is much more interested in the fact that *His Kingdom is still arriving on Earth as in Heaven* as men and women rethink everything they think they know about how life is supposed to work (which He called “repenting”) and embrace His upside-down way of living

...

- Where leaders are servants instead of entitled bosses
- Where the rich (and that includes

pretty much everyone in this room) ... the rich reject a life of conspicuous consumption and embrace one of radical generosity towards people who are less fortunate and the causes God loves.

- Where his followers don't reciprocate when wronged but instead turn the other cheek in hopes of reconciliation.
- Where they love and forgive everyone, even their enemies.

... just to name a few of the things Jesus taught as “the way” that leads to abundant life and full-human flourishing.

Third, I think it still means that because Jesus has trampled over death by death, we can look to the future with confidence.

And we can know that there is nothing that ever befalls us that is not redeemable either in this life or the next by the God who can raise the dead.

And finally, I think it means – actually, I know it means – that no matter who you are or where you've been or what you've done, you are invited to participate in the upside-down community of Christ-followers known as “the church” – *this church* if you so choose – and learn with us and believe

with us and follow with us and serve the world (including our enemies) with us and proclaim the Good News with us.

The question is ... who do you want to be king over your life?

Someone is going to be – either you or someone else. How is that working out for you? How is it working out for those around you?

You could let Jesus be your King. He's willing. And He is able.

As we close this time, I invite you to stand with me and sing a song that expresses both what Christians believe

about Jesus and what we intend to do about it.

And this can be a prayer of desire between you and Him. “Jesus, this isn’t true of me yet, but I want it to be.”

So, let’s stand and sing together.

## **Worship – What a Beautiful Name**

## **CLOSING COMMENTS – Rick**

Very quickly before we leave ...

1. “Fool for You” couples event THIS Friday at Tiffany Greens Clubhouse \$25 per couple, PLUS free childcare here at the building.

2. Next week – continue in this series  
“To the Ends of the Earth” ... what  
Christians did to turn the world upside  
down for good and how it might happen  
again.

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<sup>i</sup> <http://www.biblearchaeology.org/post/2014/02/19/How-Beautiful-are-the-Feet-on-the-Via-Egnatia.aspx>

<sup>ii</sup> The Life, Times, and Travels of St. Paul, pg 334

<sup>iii</sup> Acts 17:6

<sup>iv</sup> The Acts of the Apostles, pg 80 with intr. and notes by T.M. Lindsay.

<sup>v</sup> This point is illustrated in verses 1-4 of Acts 17.

<sup>vi</sup> Acts 17:8 (NTE)

<sup>vii</sup> <https://www.thoughtco.com/who-was-spartacus-112745>

<sup>viii</sup> <http://historum.com/ancient-history/39734-fall-jerusalem-70-ad.html>

<sup>ix</sup> Acts 5:36,37

<sup>x</sup> From N.T. Wright, <http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2014/05/28/4013711.htm>

<sup>xi</sup> Acts 6:7

<sup>xii</sup> Acts 9:31

<sup>xiii</sup> Acts 28:31

<sup>xiv</sup> <http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2014/04/17/3988223.htm>