

## **“Preaching Jesus and the Resurrection”**

**Acts 17:16-34**

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Folks, this is not an easy time for Christianity in the United States. There are all sorts of statistics out there about how compared to just 10 years ago, fewer people are identifying as Christians, and fewer people are attending church on a regular basis. One statistic that I find especially troubling is that in the past five years, 31% of people under 30 years of age have gone from identifying as Christian, to saying they are “non-religious.” 31 %!! Now, it is true that 21% of the young non-religious people now consider themselves Christian, which is a good thing. Also, the decline of American Christianity is being felt much more in mainline Protestant churches, (Methodist, Presbyterian, ELCA Lutheran, etc.) and to some degree in the Catholic church, than it is in Evangelical churches like ours.

However, we cannot pretend these trends are not impacting us at Chisholm Baptist Church. When I think of young adults who grew up in this congregation, I am so grateful for those who are faithfully serving the Lord here at Chisholm Baptist or in churches all across the country.

Yet there are also numerous folks who attended this church regularly when they were growing up, but who no longer go to church. Many of them continue to profess to be Christians, but others don't. Some seem to be just neglecting their Christian faith, while others say they have gone through “deconstruction” and now have beliefs very different than what we hold here at Chisholm Baptist Church.

Oh, for a long time it has been true that people often drop out of church in their 20's and return in their 30's. Getting married and having children has been a good motivator for taking life, and faith, more seriously. Yet in our current culture, I don't think we can just assume this will happen.

I am convinced that biblical Christianity faces a very challenging environment in our society right now. It is important that the American church as a whole, and Chisholm Baptist Church in particular, think carefully and prayerfully about how we can faithfully and effectively proclaim the gospel and make disciples in our culture. We need

to seek the Lord's guidance as to how we might best serve as Jesus' ambassadors in this world full of people who are (Ephesian 2:12) without hope and without God.

So where in the Bible do we find wisdom on how to do this? I think the Book of Acts is a great place to start. Luke's account of how the apostles, empowered by the Holy Spirit, (Acts 17:6) “turned the world upside down” provides both a model and inspiration.

For us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, western world, I cannot think of a more relevant and helpful passage than Acts 17:16-34, the account of the apostle Paul's ministry in the City of Athens. Let's pause and pray the Lord would use this portion of His word to help us be better equipped to bring the gospel to an unbelieving world, a world that often includes our family members and friends.

Though almost 2000 years and about 5500 miles separate us from first century Athens, which was considered the intellectual center of the Roman Empire, there are important similarities.

**First** is intellectual “hubris” or pride. As I said, Athens was the Empire's intellectual center, and they knew it. We live in the age of information. Between Google and AI, we start to think there are no boundaries to our knowledge and understanding.

Though there is so much we do not know, we still see ourselves as having unlimited potential to discover and understand anything and everything. We seem to be convinced we are intellectually superior to people anywhere at any time.

**Second**, along with this intellectual pride there is a fascination with the novel, with what is new. **Acts 17:21** **Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.** As a result, the truth of an idea was not as important as it being new and creative. They thought repeatedly talking about the same truths was boring, so when someone presented something new, everyone got excited.

Often the same thing happens in our own day. Yes, we enjoy nostalgia sometimes, but fads and trendiness pretty much rule the day. Especially in technology the latest and greatest quickly becomes obsolete. I cannot even play my once wonderful collection of CDs, or my 8 track tapes, in my new car. We are always looking for the new and improved. Thus, the idea that the most important things in the world are rooted in what happened 2000 years ago can seem strange to our ears.

A **third** similarity is mild antagonism toward Christianity. Paul did not encounter the degree of opposition in Athens that he found in other cities where Jewish leaders incited riots against Christians. Yet, the folks in Athens were, at best, skeptical of the Christianity Paul represented. Here in the United States, mild antagonism is a good description of how much of our culture treats those identified with Biblical Christianity.

Author Aaron Renn notes Christianity was viewed from a generally positive perspective in our country until about 1994. Then we entered a 20-year period of neutrality where having a Christian viewpoint was not seen as either positive or negative. Yet, now, for about the last 10 years, anything “Christian” is met with immediate skepticism in many parts of our society. Especially in the media and education system there’s a negative attitude toward Christianity which produces at minimum, a mild antagonism.

A **fourth** similarity between ancient Athens and us is religious pluralism. There were many different Greek gods and many different ways to worship those many gods in Athens. As Paul addresses those folks, he says, (Act 17:22) “I perceive you are very religious people.” He knew they were following false religions, but they were religious.

In our culture, religious pluralism is not so much people turning to other religions like Islam or Buddhism, but rather that there is an almost infinite number of individual spiritualities, often quasi-Christian spiritualities. Many people claim to have their own view of God, of who He is and how He works. And they are convinced their personalized version of religion is superior to traditional Christianity. We who consider

ourselves Bible believing Christians, are just one voice of many in the religious marketplace.

Okay, intellectual pride, a fascination with what is a new, a mild antagonism toward Christianity, and religious pluralism are characteristics of both first century Athens and 21<sup>st</sup> century America. My point is simply that the apostle Paul’s approach as he sought to reach the people in that ancient city might be a good strategy for us to employ today.

So how does the apostle Paul seek to present the gospel, make disciples, in this type of context? Luke highlights a number of things in his report of what happened in Athens. It seems Paul is intent on communicating the gospel in a culturally relevant way, quoting even pagan Greek poets to help make his points. However, Luke makes an important summary statement and says **Acts 17:18b He (Paul) was preaching Jesus and the resurrection.** As he concludes his “sermon” to the leaders of the city at the Areopagus, Paul says, **Acts 17: 30, 31 In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.”**

In other words, he says God is calling everyone to turn to Him. And turning to Him involves acknowledging that everything revolves around Jesus. He is the one who will either save or condemn. And how do we know it all revolves around Jesus? Because God raised Him from the dead!

That is proof that Jesus is the one whom it is all about. It is proof that our eternal destiny hangs on response to this one man, Jesus. It is the proof that calls all people, everywhere to repent, to believe the gospel, which means turning to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Preaching Jesus and the resurrection. That is what the apostle Paul did in Athens.

And it is what he and the other apostles did throughout the book of Acts, although there was sometimes a little different emphasis. Frequently they were addressing Jewish audiences and they pointed to Jesus’ resurrection as proof that He was

the Jewish Messiah, the anointed one whom God had promised.

Jesus' execution on the Roman cross, a very public event, was seen by most Jews as an obvious disqualification for Jesus being the Messiah. "Cursed is anyone who hangs on a tree," was the Old Testament saying. The apostles claimed Jesus' resurrection trumped what happened on the cross. By raising Jesus from the dead, the Father had made it clear that His crucifixion was a terrible injustice, and that Jesus is indeed God's chosen Messiah.

Now, the folks in ancient Athens would not be terribly interested in Jesus' messianic role. However, He made even more extraordinary claims, including that He was the eternal Son, God the Son. Jesus' resurrection from the dead was seen as confirmation that this claim was true. Paul put it this way in **Romans 1:4 And (He) was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord.** That is part of what Paul is telling the folks in Athens. Yet, I think he is also saying that Jesus' resurrection is such an extraordinary event, so unique and outside normal human experience, that it puts Jesus in a category all by Himself. Now, it is true there are other ancient resurrection myths, stories of gods coming back to life after dying some way. Some are tied to growing seasons, spring bringing life after the dead of winter. Norse mythology has Odin, the chief god dying to some degree and then coming to life as an even greater god. The big difference, of course, is that none of these resurrection myths have any root in history. There is no evidence any of these "resurrections" actually happened. Yet, when Paul preached Jesus and the resurrection, he certainly was not describing a myth.

Listen to what he writes in **1 Corinthians 15:3-8** describing the message he was proclaiming he says, **For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received:** (Meaning received from Peter, James, and other apostles, a reminder this is the consistent message of early Christians) **that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scripture,** (Jesus and the

resurrection) **and that he appeared to Cephas, (Peter) then to the twelve.** (The other apostles) **Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, through some have fallen asleep. The he appeared to James, (Jesus' brother) then to all the apostles.** (A second encounter) **Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.** (On the road to Damascus.)

Paul seems intent on emphasizing this is not a myth. This really happened. And here is the evidence, the proof.

Folks, my main point in this is that we as, 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians, need to be doing what the apostle Paul did in the first century. We need to be talking about Jesus and the resurrection. When we get into discussions with other people it's easy to focus on cultural and political issues that are in the headlines. It is easy to get wrapped up in the perceived flaws and failing of the Christian church. But we need to be talking about Jesus in the resurrection.

And folks, I think if we do that clearly and consistently, we will get people's attention. One of the differences between ancient Athens and our current environment is that they were almost entirely "pre-Christian." The people had almost no exposure to Christianity before Paul's arrival in the city. Most were not even that familiar with Judaism, the religion from which Christianity had grown. As we noted, part of the reason the Athenians were willing to listen to Paul was because his message was new and novel. We, however, seem to be surrounded by post-Christians, people who tried or at least dabble in some form of Christianity thought they found it lacking. They are resistant to the Christian message, because they believe they have "been there and done that." I suspect you know folks like that. They maybe went to a Catholic, Lutheran, or even Baptist church when they were growing up, but for whatever reason, they have abandoned that childhood faith and now are just not interested.

Or they might be like my friend whose dad would scold her for not being devout enough in her bible reading and church attendance. Yet his life was full of hypocrisy. He eventually had an affair and abandoned my friend, her mother, and her siblings. She saw Christianity and what she saw

she didn't like. In many ways, post-Christian people are more resistant and harder to reach with the gospel than "pre-Christians."

But there are a couple of things to keep in mind. #1, there are growing number of "pre-Christians" in our midst, especially among folks in our communities under 40. These people did not go to church when they were kids, have never really gone to church and they have little if any understanding of Christianity. They often don't even know that Christmas is about the birth of Jesus and Easter is about His resurrection. When you have the opportunity to tell someone like that, the story of Jesus for the first time, make sure you tell that story well.

#2, Most post-Christians, most people who have "deconstructed out of Christianity," are rejecting churches and Christians, not Jesus. And what we need to do is put the focus back on Jesus. The message of Jesus and His resurrection is one many of these "post-Christian" individuals have not really considered in a long time, if ever. It is not that other questions and issues don't matter. They do. But the reality is Jesus and His resurrection matters more than all these other questions and issues.

Why? Because if this extraordinary event, Jesus resurrection from the dead, really happened, if He was truly dead on Good Friday, but then truly alive on Easter Sunday, it does indeed put Jesus in a category all by Himself. Every religious leader, every scholar, ever political leader, if they have a tomb or grave, it is occupied.

Jesus has the only tomb that is empty. That puts Him head and shoulders above any other human being. It is part of the reason anyone and everyone needs to ask the question, needs to answer the question, "Who was/is He?" You cannot just ignore Him! If He is the only person ever who truly conquered death, don't you at least need to consider His claims? Yes, His claims are extraordinary. "I am the eternal Son of God. Your eternal destiny depends on our response to Me. I will one day rule as King of all, forever."

Those are His claims! Was He telling the truth or not? Oh, people might try to dismiss Him as some kind of "fruitcake," a completely delusional lunatic. Or they could claim He was just the

world's greatest conman, a deceptive and manipulative liar, who managed to attract multitudes of followers. Yet, it is hard to read the gospel accounts in the New Testament and think either of those conclusions are plausible.

Many of you have watched at least some episodes of "The Chosen." Yes, there is debate over whether the portrayal of Jesus in this series is fully consistent with what the Bible says. However, I don't believe any reasonable person could consider the Jesus portrayed in "The Chosen" and conclude he was a lunatic or liar. And if either of those were the case, it still doesn't explain the empty tomb on Easter Sunday and Jesus resurrection from the dead.

But some might say, "Pastor Dan, you are assuming a lot. This Jesus supposedly lived 2000 years ago. How do we know that such a person even existed? And if He did, how do we know He made the statements and claims you say He did? Maybe other people just put words in His mouth. And you certainly cannot expect people to believe in something like a resurrection from the dead? That doesn't happen."

Okay, no I don't really expect people will believe everything about Jesus just because I say so. In fact, the apostle Paul's message about Jesus and the resurrection was not embraced by everyone in his audience. **Acts 17:32** says **When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, "We want to hear you again on this subject."**

And folks, that is what I would ask anyone who is not a believer in Jesus, what you can ask any friend or family member who is not a believer, to do: "Listen again, think more investigate this subject. Examine the evidence, weigh the arguments, and honestly consider and answer the question; Whom do you believe Jesus Christ to be? And are you living life today in a way consistent with who you believe Him to be?"

Friends, those are important questions. And if you have not answered them in your own mind and heart, I urge that you do that today. There are not any more important questions in the world. And though you don't want to be hasty in reaching a conclusion, you really do not want to procrastinate. We live in a very uncertain world.

Our individual lives are uncertain. It is certainly possible tomorrow may be too late.

If you want to chat more about this, you can talk to me, any of our pastoral staff or any of our deacons and deaconesses. We would love to talk to you about who Jesus really is and what it means to trust and follow Him.

For those of you who are believers in Jesus, which I am confident includes most of you in this room, I encourage you to be talking to your family members and friends about Jesus and the resurrection. This week, Easter week, is a great time to do this. Or you might want to invite them to come to church with you next Sunday. We will be talking about Jesus and the resurrection.

That will be our topic, not just because it will be Easter Sunday, but because I cannot think of a more important topic for anyone to consider. Prayerfully ponder who you know that needs to hear that message, and then ask the Lord to give you the opportunity to invite them to join us.

Jesus and the resurrection. Believe it, share it, and celebrate it.