

June 17, 2018

Church Planting

The Resurrection Is...

Acts 23:1-11

Opening words: American Christian author and preacher, A. W. Tozer (1897-1963) once wrote, "*I remind you that there are churches so completely out of the hands of God that if the Holy Spirit withdrew from them, they wouldn't find it out for many months.*" That quote makes me ask you this series of questions. How long do you think it would take for us to discover the Holy Spirit had withdrawn from Western Reserve? Would the Holy Spirit's exit happen in an instant? Would the Holy Spirit's exit be a slow erosion? How many would never notice the Holy Spirit was gone? Do you think the Holy Spirit left Western Reserve years ago? Do you think the Holy Spirit was ever here? Do you think the Holy Spirit is with us today? The Holy Spirit is important, because without the Holy Spirit the church has no future.

Today, I continue my sermon series, *Church Planting*. You remember my task, I am preaching through the Book of Acts. Never forget it. Acts is the witness of the Holy Spirit. I am attempting to reconnect with the Holy Spirit because we need a revival. Our scripture reading for today is Acts 23:1-11. Paul's time in Jerusalem is running out, but he has one great mission left. We are told in the last verse, Paul will someday proclaim the Gospel in Rome itself. This is sermon number fifty-six in the series. I have called this message *The Resurrection Is...*

Acts 23:1-11 Paul looked straight at the Sanhedrin and said, "My brothers, I have fulfilled my duty to God in all good conscience to this day."
2 At this the high priest Ananias ordered those standing near Paul to strike him on the mouth.
3 Then Paul said to him, "God will strike you, you whitewashed wall! You sit there to judge me according to the law, yet you yourself violate the law by commanding that I be struck!"
4 Those who were standing near Paul said, "How dare you insult God's high priest!"
5 Paul replied, "Brothers, I did not realize that he was the high priest; for it is written: 'Do not speak evil about the ruler of your people.'"
6 Then Paul, knowing that some of them were Sadducees and the others Pharisees, called out in the Sanhedrin, "My brothers, I am a Pharisee, descended from Pharisees. I stand on trial because of the hope of the resurrection of the dead."
7 When he said this, a dispute broke out between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided.
8 (The Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, and that there are neither angels nor spirits, but the Pharisees believe all these things.)

9 There was a great uproar, and some of the teachers of the law who were Pharisees stood up and argued vigorously. "We find nothing wrong with this man," they said. "What if a spirit or an angel has spoken to him?"

10 The dispute became so violent that the commander was afraid Paul would be torn to pieces by them. He ordered the troops to go down and take him away from them by force and bring him into the barracks.

11 The following night the Lord stood near Paul and said, "Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome."

Joseph Wirthlin (1917-2008) was an American businessman. However, he was also a believer. He once said, "*The resurrection is at the core of our beliefs as Christians. Without it, our faith is meaningless.*" I could not agree more. Your belief in the resurrection of Jesus is not optional; it is indispensable. If you believe in the resurrection of Jesus, say, "**Amen!**"

We find ourselves today in the twenty-third chapter of Acts. Do you remember last week's story? Paul is in Jerusalem. It was far from a happy homecoming. In Paul's absence, God had been moving within the Jewish population. The new Jewish-Christians believed in Jesus, but they clung to their old ways. In other words, they still valued the laws of the Old Testament. Just because you are sincere and passionate doesn't make you right. The new Jewish-Christians were both sincere and passionate, but they were wrong. Their passion turned against Paul, because they believed Paul was ignoring the law. Do you remember the story? Paul finds himself in the middle of an angry riot. The Jerusalem Police department was called, and Paul was arrested for his own security. The plan was to flog Paul, but the beating never happened because Paul was a Roman citizen. Does any of this sound familiar? This is where our scripture lesson for today begins to speak to us. Paul is no longer in the barracks of the local authorities. They released him to his own people.

Paul is standing before the Sanhedrin. You remember them, the Supreme Court of the Jewish faith. The same ones who gave Jesus such a hard time. They have obviously been frustrated with Paul from the beginning. Without fear, Paul looks straight at them and tells them he is being directed by God Himself. They are not impressed. The High Priest, Ananias, orders Paul to be struck. Paul is not intimidated by the attack. He verbally fights back. He begins to attack the Sanhedrin itself. He brings up a topic he knew would divide the group - the resurrection. You can call it theological hair splitting, if you wish. The Sanhedrin was made up of two groups, the Pharisees and the Sadducees. The Sadducees were logical in nature. If it couldn't be explained by science, then they did not believe it. The Pharisees were more open-minded. The tension between the Pharisees and the Sadducees was hidden, but real. The topic of the resurrection exposes the tension between the two groups. Once again, Paul finds himself in the middle of a great storm. A fight breaks out among the members of the Sanhedrin. So, the commander orders Paul to be taken back to the barracks, yet again for his own safety. From that lowly position, the story ends with God standing before

Paul. The Mighty One both encourages and challenges Paul. He is pleased with Paul, so Paul will have the same opportunity to witness in the capital city, Rome. If you are thankful Paul went on to Rome, say, **"Amen!"** Let me be the first one to tell you:

Next year, 2019, Easter is on April 21. Like every Easter, it will be a great day in the life of the church. It will be the climax of Holy Week. It all begins with Palm Sunday. We will remember the massive crowd, and how Jesus was the eye of the storm, riding that humble animal. Then, we will remember how Jesus cleansed the Temple of the money changers. It has nothing to do with fundraising for the next youth mission trip. They were selling salvation. The temple was not a place of profit, but prayer. We will remember how Jesus cursed the fig tree, the very symbol of Israel. Then, we will remember Jesus's timeless teachings in the temple courts. Each lesson is a prize. Then, we will remember how Jesus washed the disciple's feet, and how Jesus transformed the Seder into a new memorial, one of our two sacraments, Communion. I believe, we will do the Living Last Supper again. Then, we will remember how Jesus went to the garden to pray, and how the Master was arrested. Next, we will remember his trials, and his execution. On April 19, 2019, we will be standing in the mausoleum at Green Haven Memorial Garden. On April 20, 2019, we will remember nothing, because there is nothing to remember, because Jesus was dead. Then comes the surprise ending we all know. It was early on Sunday morning. The women came to treat his dead body and made a discovery that changed everything. Jesus, once dead, had returned to life! I have never been able to explain the resurrection, because I can't explain a miracle. But, I do know this: it changed everything! April 21, 2019 will be a great day, because it will be a day to remember the resurrection of Jesus one more time. Let me say this clearly:

Easter is about the resurrection of Jesus! Easter is not about the celebration of spring. However, by April 21, the weather should be improving. Easter is not about clothing. Those days are over. The days of the Easter bonnets are gone. We live in an informal society. Easter is not about extra flowers in the sanctuary. However, they add beauty and color. Easter is not about extra music. However, many do enjoy it. Easter is not a high attendance figure. However, the pews will be filled with friends we haven't seen since Christmas. Easter is not about a large offering, because generally that doesn't happen. It is not the same as Christmas. Easter is about one thing: the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the cornerstone of our faith. The early church understood the significance of the resurrection, so the early believers began to worship on Sunday morning, because every Sunday was a little Easter. **The resurrection of Jesus is our identity.** Here is the question you must answer. Do you believe in the resurrection of Jesus? If you believe in the resurrection of Jesus, say, **"Amen!"** I don't want to sound critical, but I do want to sound honest. The contemporary church seems to have forgotten the significance of the resurrection. We are preoccupied with our good works.

Last week, I spent several days at Annual Conference. You know Annual Conference. It is the most wonderful time of the year ☺. It is not a vacation. I am required to go to

Annual Conference, so I go under protest. The East Ohio Annual Conference is held at Lakeside, on the Marblehead Peninsula. The best part of this Annual Conference for me was staying in the cottage with friends. It was like my safe-haven. The worst part of Annual Conference was everything after I left the cottage. There is a surplus of meetings. There is a surplus of posturing by my colleagues. Don't fool yourself. Ministers are competitive and are good liars. Many try to promote themselves.

On Tuesday night, I attended a missions fair. There were displays of the various mission projects of the United Methodist Church and the East Ohio Annual Conference. In the name of Jesus, we have helped many. I talked to a man and told him I was going to Ukraine in a few weeks on a mission trip. He responded in a degrading way. He said, "So, are you one of these professional do-gooders?" I didn't really didn't know how to answer. However, it does force me to ask another question. As a church, is our identity our good works? If the answer is yes, then there is something very wrong. Our identity should not be our good works. Our identity should be the resurrection of Jesus. When was the last time you spoke about the resurrection of Jesus? When was the last time you spoke of our latest fundraiser? The resurrection should be our identity. If you believe in the resurrection of Jesus, say, "**Amen!**"

As Paul stood before the Sanhedrin, he spoke of the resurrection of Jesus. He did not talk about the latest fundraiser. He spoke of the resurrection of Jesus, and look what happened. The text does not hide the conflict. When Paul brought up the resurrection of Jesus, a great conflict broke out. Our identity, the resurrection of Jesus, is controversial. On that day, it was the Pharisees, who believed in resurrections, against the Sadducees, who did not believe people could be resurrected. In our time, it is Christianity, which is built on the resurrection of Jesus, against other world religions. Paul knew what he was doing. He knew the resurrection of Jesus was controversial. I believe, he knew it would always be controversial. Do you believe his words in Romans 10:9? It says, "*If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart he was raised from the dead, you will be saved.*" That is my favorite Bible verse, and the first creed in the history of the church. It is good news for those of us who believe in the resurrection, but it is not good news for those who do not believe in the resurrection. It means the other world religions are wrong. That means that 68.5% of the world population is wrong. Christians only make up 31.5% of the world's population. That means 5.2 billion people in our world are wrong. The resurrection is not Good News to everyone.

Several years ago, I wrote a sermon series called *Christianity and World Religions*. It was based on an Adam Hamilton study of the same name. We looked at all the other major world religions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, and Islam. The first sermon in the series was called *Responding to Other World Religions*. It forced us to respond to other religions. I took my stance, based on Romans 10:9, that you must believe in the resurrection to be saved. That should not be surprising, because you are in a Christian church. As I circulated my sermon, a few people responded. One person did not have

kind words. He said, I was narrow-minded and people like me were the reason there was so much tension in the world between the world religions. His words illustrate for us part of the truth for today: **The resurrection is controversial.**

Recently, I was talking to someone who had a family member who was marrying a Jewish girl. It was reported she was a nice young woman, who will add to the family. The question of salvation came up. The question was, will the Jews be saved on judgement day? Based on Romans 10:9, I said, "No!" But, I added, I am glad I am not the judge and I do believe the Jews have a special relationship with God. That was my honest answer. However, I also confess, my answer of NO makes me uncomfortable. **The resurrection is controversial.** If you believe in the resurrection of Jesus, say, **"Amen!"** Yet, despite the controversial nature of the resurrection, we cling to the resurrection because **the resurrection is our hope.** Let us look at the text one more time.

In verse six, Paul calls the resurrection our hope, and this story ends in hope. After all the ugliness in Jerusalem, God tells Paul he is not done. In verse eleven, Paul is told that someday, he will witness about this resurrected Jesus in Rome itself. In the Christian faith, we believe there is always more to come. Do you remember this story?

Former Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev (born 1906) died on November 10, 1982. Then-Vice President George Bush went to the funeral to represent the United States. The funeral was held in the heart of Communism, Red Square, Moscow. Brezhnev laid in state in front of Lenin's Tomb. He was buried along the Kremlin Wall. (Did you know two Americans are buried along the Kremlin wall?) No expense was spared and no detail was overlooked. Yet, the one thing that caught George Bush's attention was a silent protest carried out by Brezhnev's widow, Victoria. She stood motionless by her husband's coffin until seconds before it was closed. Then, just as the soldiers touched the lid, Brezhnev's wife performed an act of great courage and hope, a gesture that must surely rank as one of the most profound acts of civil disobedience ever committed in the history of the Soviet Union: she reached down and made the sign of the cross on her husband's chest. There in the citadel of secular, atheistic power, the wife of the man who had run it all hoped that her husband was wrong. She hoped that there was another life, and that life was best represented by Jesus who died on the cross. She hoped that the same Jesus might yet have mercy on her dead husband. Aren't you glad you aren't the judge? This is the point: Communism could not defeat the resurrected Jesus. Nothing can defeat our resurrected Jesus.

The resurrection is our hope. Without the resurrection of Jesus there is no hope of eternal life, but with the resurrection we have hope. Heaven is waiting for all who believe in the resurrection of Jesus. Can I ask you a question? Who do you long to see when you get to heaven? The resurrection is our hope. Do you remember the words of Joseph Warthin? He once said, *"The resurrection is at the core of our Christian beliefs. Without it, our faith is meaningless."* And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**