

SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER | MAY 17, 2020

ACTS 17:22-31 | PSALM 66:8-20 | 1 PETER 3:13-22 | JOHN 14:15-21

Today's reading from the book of Acts is Paul's famous speech in Athens. This speech has the curse of being too famous for its own good. In many churches, this text is a model of how to evangelize. First, you flatter people by telling them how religious they are. Second, you say that they have some good ideas. Third, you quote some stuff from poets they know. And finally, you say that their ideas actually aren't good enough, and they need to accept Christ as their personal savior. That's what St. Paul did in Athens. So it's what you should do when you go to, I don't know, Walgreens.

Instead of using this text as a step-by-step guide for evangelism, it's more helpful to explore why this crowd of Greeks would have found it so controversial in the first place. And what's funny about the speech Paul gives is that most of it would have been palatable to these Athenians. You could imagine they would be nodding their heads along in agreement. People search for God? Yea. God gives life and breath and all things. Eh, depends on who you talk to. But not out of the realm of possibility. The real issue, the thing that people react to and reject, is Paul's claim that God "has given assurance to all by raising Jesus from the dead." The thing they can't wrap their heads around is the resurrection of the body.

The Greeks Paul was talking to had very particular beliefs about bodies. St. Luke makes explicit reference to two schools of thought that were common in Athens. The first were the Epicureans, who believed that the gods were about as interested in humanity as you are in a Little League team your kid doesn't play on. Not much. Because the gods don't really care, the Epicureans said, just try to maximize your pleasure and be as happy as you can. The second were the Stoics, who reacted the other way. They believed that there was a kind of divine harmony in the universe and the goal of life was to align yourself with that divine permeation. There was a divine spark in your body and the goal of life is to strip away everything that distracts you from that spark. These are two very different ways of thinking, but what they have in common is a belief that bodies really don't matter. They are either just temporary shells of our true selves or containers for souls or something to be transcended.

But when Jesus is raised from the dead, he is raised as a body. Not as a principle (life is stronger than death) or teachings (we can still love our neighbors as ourselves) or a cliché (death doesn't have the last word). He is raised as a body. His body is different. It is transformed in some way. It walks through walls but has a stomach. People can't recognize him, but then they suddenly can. Jesus's body is different, but there's no question that the risen Jesus has a body. All of which means that bodies matter. That bodies have integrity. They aren't just instruments or tools. They are us. Bodies are both physically and theologically material.

And that sort of gets to the heart of what's happening in this encounter and why so many of these Greeks respond so harshly. Paul is speaking about transformation while these Greeks are thinking about transcendence. The Greeks assume that salvation doesn't require bodies. After all, your body really isn't you. But Paul makes a rather radical claim. That because Jesus's body has been raised from the dead, your body is involved in salvation as well. It's not as if salvation requires you leave a part of yourself behind or escape from yourself. It's about the transformation of who you are and what you do.

And what do our bodies do? They grow. They get sick. They eat. They work. They have sex. They rest. They move. They carry our experiences. They carry our time. They carry our histories. When we say we believe in the resurrection of the body, we don't just mean we believe that the

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tomb was empty on Easter morning. We mean we believe in the transformation of our entire selves. That the narratives carried in our bodies and what we do with our bodies communicate something integral about the kingdom of God.

Few of us are, to my knowledge, Epicureans or Stoics, but we often buy into their language of transcendence, particularly when it comes to bodies. To take a rather silly example, I frequently get emails from this company that publishes books of the Bible as single volumes with modern design and clean layouts and bright art, basically scripture washed with a kind of Millennial Aesthetic. They're nice to look at, but there's something odd about them. Mike Linderman up the street at Redeemer Ramsey, who apparently gets spammed with the same emails as me, recently put his finger on what feels weird about them. There are next to no people in any of the pictures. And in the handful of pictures that do show people, their faces are never shown. As if to say that these people only exist in theory. Not with particular lives and stories and histories. But just as an idea. But none of us actually live that way. None of us eat, grow, rest, etc. etc. in general. We do it in a million little particular ways.

When we had our leadership retreat at Cross Roads in March, we started our time with a simple exercise. Maybe today you can think about how you would do this exercise, too. Everybody got a piece of poster board and they drew some sort of story of their faith life on them. Not just the date you got baptized and confirmed, but about your experience of faith throughout your life. And when we went around the room and shared, two things became clear. First, no one had a linear story. No one had a story that said, I accepted Jesus Christ as my personal savior the day I was born and my life has been perfect ever since. People had lots of stories of ups and downs and questions and answers and still being somewhere in between.

And second, probably more important, many of the things people talked about that had affected their faith weren't things that were immediately tied to church. They were about family and work and food and mentors and traumas and accidents and illnesses and joys. There wasn't a clear line between this is my embodied experience and this is my faith. They were one and the same. When people talked about how they had grown in faith and love, they didn't say, "This is the ten percent of my life that's related to God. And this is the ninety percent of stuff that has nothing to do with God." They implied that God had always been and working in and through them, even when they didn't fully realize it. God doesn't just love my soul or my prayers or my piety. God loves me.

That's what the resurrection is all about. It's not about leaving a part of yourself behind. It's not about life in theory. It's not about a little piece of you continuing on after you die. It's about the ways in which God persistently transforms our lives, our experiences, and our bodies. Or as St. Paul would put it, how God transforms us.

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