

Russell Conwell, founder of Temple University, gave a famous speech over 6000 times called “Acres of Diamonds.” Conwell told a true story of a boy he knew from Massachusetts who went to Yale and became a mining engineer. He was a brilliant student, and during his senior year he was paid fifteen dollars a week as an assistant in his department. When he graduated, they offered him forty-five dollars a week to remain an instructor. But by that time, he had gold fever and wanted to become a wealthy man, so he persuaded his widowed mother to sell the family farm in Massachusetts and go west with him in search of gold. He never found gold, and the last Conwell heard of him he was working for a copper mining company in Minnesota for fifteen dollars a week.

Not long after the new owner took possession of the family farm in Massachusetts, he was harvesting potatoes. As he carried a bushel of potatoes through the narrow stone gateway, the basket caught on the posts, and he had to set it down and push it through. As he was doing so, his eye caught a shiny stone that turned out to be a block of native silver worth more than a hundred thousand dollars! The boy who went to Yale had passed through that gate a dozen times a day, said Conwell, and his sleeve had brushed against that same block of silver. It was almost as if it was saying to him, “Here is something of enormous value waiting for you to take it.” But he never did. He went off looking for wealth in other places (Killinger, *The Ministers Manual* 1998, 31).

Paul was trying to say to the Athenians, “God is as near to you as that block of silver was to the young man going through the gateway, only you don’t realize it.” He literally said, “*The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth*” (v. 24). He could see how close they were to discovering the presence of God. In the Areopagus, the place of the Supreme Court, the Stoic philosophers were eager to hear what this new speaker had to say, so they allowed him to take a place of prominence on the gigantic stone used for public speeches. It was perhaps the very stone where Socrates made his last proclamations before his death.

Although Athens was nothing like it had been in the days of Socrates, the evidence of its former greatness was all around. In many ways, Athens had the grandest history of any city of the ancient world. Paul had walked through their lovely city and seen all the evidence of their search for the eternal and the beautiful. He had seen the glistening temples raised to Diana and Apollo and Zeus and Poseidon. He looked around at the perfectly artistic Doric temples. To his right were the Acropolis, the Parthenon, and many other altars and temples to various gods. The statues of marble, gold and silver were the most beautiful and perfect ever made.

Athens was the home of the great philosophers from Socrates to Plato. The great dramatists Aeschylus, Sophocles and Aristophanes wrote their magnificent works here. There was a golden, perhaps the most shining society the world has ever known. But four centuries had passed since Socrates stood where Paul now stood. Those centuries saw Athens fall from its former glory. Now so-called philosophers loitered about the city trying to imitate the mental greatness of Socrates. But now they spent “their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.”

Verse 18 tells us that “*Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.*” Well, you win some and you lose some. Paul had personal experience with the truth of that old adage, and some relevant experiences can be seen in Acts 17, Paul’s famous conversation with the Athenians at the Areopagus. The day was not without its victories, however. The end of the chapter tells us that Paul’s words, used by the Holy Spirit that day, did capture not only *the attention* but also *the hearts* of a few of the folks who had been listening to Paul. But it was apparently only a few. Most left that day’s spiritual conversation with wry little grins on their faces, shaking their heads at Paul’s clincher line about how God raised the Savior he was talking about from the dead. To the Greeks, being raised back to life had all the appeal of a root canal without anesthetic. Escape *from* the body was their goal. So, the prospect of getting one’s body back in the sweet by-and-by seemed less like a glorious

reward and more like a cruel punishment. And any god (small g) worth his salt would surely know that much.

So, most of them left shaking their heads or giggling. That was too bad, because this Paul person had been doing well. He was no hick from the sticks, and he was no crazy-eyed street preacher either. He was clearly well educated and well spoken. What's more, he had done his homework by researching their culture and its religious landscape. He knew something about their various gods and could even quote from their literature and poetry. This man was worth listening to, worth giving a shot to make his case there in Athens, where the trading of ideas and the offense and defense of intellectual debate was many people's favorite indoor non-contact sport.

But when this same man—who once wrote to believers in Corinth that if Christ is not raised, we are of all people the most to be pitied—got to the part about the resurrection, and said, *“For [God] 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”* (v. 31), the game was over. The verses that follow tell us the crowd sneered at Paul's talk of resurrection. In verse 32 some said, *“We want to hear you again on this subject.”* What they meant was, *“We'll talk about this with you later...much, much later!”* The heart of the Gospel proved to be too much for some folks. If only Paul had stopped talking one sentence sooner! If he only had a good preacher's sense for knowing when to quit. After all, the day did not have to end the way it did. Or did it?

Acts 17 bears living testimony to a truth the church has known for about 2,000 years, namely, no matter what you say or do, some people will just not believe the good news of the gospel. It sounds too good to be true. There is a stumbling block at the heart of the message, and it's going to trip up some people every time. But that is why it has always been tempting to change the message too. Out of a mistaken desire to be “successful,” to say nothing too offensive, to be all things to all people, more preachers than I can say, over the centuries have managed to do what Paul refused to do. Namely, to quit one sentence sooner; to leave out the main stumbling block of Christ's death and resurrection; to turn

the resurrection into something more digestible, more like something we have all experienced at one time or another.

Let's imagine it would be something like this: Resurrection means remembering the departed Jesus. He lives in your memory. Or let's say it might be: Jesus rose again "in their hearts." He remained an inspiration to everyone. Play with the word "historical" long enough and we get to the place that whatever "historical" means, it's not the same thing as JFK's assassination or Caesar's crossing the Rubicon. It was "historical" with scare quotes conveying a wink and a nod, not taking the resurrection too seriously as an event in time.

Or say that resurrection is "natural," an everyday sort of event not so very different from maple trees budding with new leaves after a winter season in which they looked dead. Easter = Springtime, the sprouting of daffodils and tulips after a bleak season of snow and ice. It happens all the time. Or say that whether Jesus rose again from the dead or not, isn't so important—it's being loving that's the key. Live like Jesus (like Gandhi or like Lincoln or whoever).

Or say that yes, it's OK to believe in the resurrection but it's just one good religious idea among many valid ideas from many different faith traditions and so let's not make it the be-all and end-all of the Christian faith.

But whatever you say or preach, just make sure it's going to fly, it's going to be OK with more folks than not and so will keep anyone in the crowd from walking away with an eye-rolling expression—or a sneer.

That's the temptation. But Paul did not give into it. Acts 17 might have had a happier ending if he had given in, if he had sugarcoated the truth and tailored his message more to his audience. Paul did his homework. He said, "*People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.*" He knew what he needed to do to keep the people tuned in to his sermon. But if he went too far, it would be an open question whether 2,000 years later there would still be anything like the first century church on this earth. There's a point that's worth pondering!

Remember the story of the young man who went looking for gold and missed the treasure of silver in his own backyard? Isn't that an apropos image of our own desperate search for God in all the wrong places? All we have to do is say "Yes, Jesus!" and live every day in the knowledge that we belong to him, and he is with us always. It would transform our lives, and we would see that the things we want most deeply in life are all within reach.

One of the qualities of a vital Christian church is our individual and community commitment to worshipping "*the Lord of heaven and earth,*" no matter how that practice is shaped or scheduled. We're not here to see and be seen; nobody is taking note of who looks the best-dressed at Ken Mawr; and there better not be anybody here scoring the Sunday sermon! 😊 We're here because we're all leaning into Jesus' resurrection, living like Easter matters to us by gathering together to remind one another that we live in expectation of whatever it is God is doing and will do in and through us. In our own congregation—Christian worship might mean an inspiring anthem from the choir that opens our service of worship; or it could mean Jayne improvising at the piano while we bring our offerings to God; or it may mean the youth of our congregation calling us to worship or reading aloud the morning Scripture; or it might mean all of us puzzling through a challenging Scripture passage together. It could mean so very many things, because together we are determined to come here to wait with expectation to hear from God and in return to give God our thanks and praise. Week after week we practice our faith in worship because we are people reaching for God, recounting Jesus' resurrection, and replenishing our reservoir of faith for God's gracious work among us!

How do we practice the spiritual discipline of worship? When we add our own voices to the voices already raised, we find our place in the search for God, as we practice worship, week in and week out. When we do this, we are living like Easter matters to each of us. And as we give to God our worship, we celebrate the resurrection and the astounding good news that God "*has given proof of this to everyone by raising [Jesus] from the dead*" (v. 31).

Remember: "*The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth*" (v. 24). Thanks be to God. Amen.