

**“AN ACCOUNTING OF OUR HOPE”**

**Acts 17-22-31; 1 Peter 3:13-22**

**A Sermon by John Thomason**

**Woodbury UMC**

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Our routines and calendars are mixed up enough as it is, and what I'm about to say may only add to our confusion. On this 17<sup>th</sup> day of May, you and I are living through three seasons simultaneously. When we dare to venture out the door and take a stroll in our neighborhood, we're aware that we're in the midst of the spring season. When we come back into our houses, where we spend nearly all of our time, we're aware that we're living in the season of a global pandemic. And then, when we pause to take a look at the Christian calendar, we're reminded that we're also living in the Easter season.

For the moment, let's leave aside the first season I mentioned, springtime, and concentrate on the latter two. We're experiencing the pandemic season and the Easter season at one and the same time; but doesn't it strike you that they seem to contradict each other in every conceivable way? The pandemic is producing disruption, fear, and anxiety on an unprecedented scale. This is a season marked by untold suffering and death. By contrast, the Easter season is all about the victory of life over death, about the birth of joy and peace and hope in our hearts. At first glance, these two seasons seem to have nothing in common. But if we take a closer look, we'll see that they reflect a similar human experience.

The Scripture lessons for the Easter season give evidence to a surprising fact: the early Christians who bask in the light of the first Easter are not cockeyed optimists or people of unqualified courage. Their hearts are filled with a mixture of sadness and joy, fear and faith, despair and hope. Why? Because shortly after the first Easter and Pentecost, they find themselves in a new and perilous situation. The Church is born in Jerusalem and soon expands to the surrounding towns of Judea. The followers of Jesus are Jews trying to win converts among fellow Jews. They meet resistance because they claim that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah of the Jews and make the further claim that he has been raised from the dead. So Jesus' disciples start fanning out into other parts of Israel and even into Gentile territory where they hope to find a more receptive audience, which they do to an astonishing degree.

Indeed, the Book of Acts tells the story of the spread of Christianity throughout the Roman Empire. It's helpful to remember that the vast ancient Rome is held together in ways that remind us of our modern American motto: *e pluribus unum* – “out of the many, one.” In the Roman Empire, there is only one political and military authority, Caesar; but at the same time, Caesar's realm embraces many different nations, languages, and religions. To use a contemporary term, the Roman Empire is “pluralistic.” A pluralistic society is a diverse society, where the people in it believe all kinds of different things and tolerate each other's beliefs even when they don't match their own. In Roman society, the authorities insist on allegiance to the emperor and sometimes crack down on people who don't practice emperor worship; but the empire remains cohesive because there is a certain amount of tolerance for diversity. By and large, the Romans live and let live.

Nowhere is this pattern more evident than in the city of Athens, the capital of Greece. Athens is to the Roman Empire what Boston is to New England – a major cultural and educational center, a place where intellectuals gather to exchange a wide variety of ideas and where ordinary citizens practice a wide variety of religions. Under Roman political rule, Athens remains a place where this kind of diversity is tolerated – but only up to a point.

In the 17<sup>th</sup> chapter of Acts, the apostle Paul speaks to a crowd of philosophers in the marketplace of Athens. He has already challenged the worship of idols in the city, but his primary message to these university types is a positive one, a message about “the good news of Jesus and his resurrection” (Acts 17:8c). This piques the interest of some who want to hear more; but others scoff and call Paul a “babbling” and “a proclaimer of foreign divinities” (17:8b). In the end, most of those in Paul’s audience are critical and dismissive of his views; but because Athens is a tolerant place, he is able to leave the city without incident. We know from reading the whole Book of Acts that Paul is not so fortunate in other places, and neither are his fellow apostles.

In the pluralistic Roman Empire, the competition of beliefs and values leads inevitably to conflict, and conflict leads to persecution of those who hold differing views. This is precisely what we see happening as the Christian movement spreads throughout the Mediterranean world. Witness invites dialogue; dialogue degenerates into argument; and argument degenerates into violence. Paul himself is on the receiving end of violence, and the writer of 1 Peter describes violence being done to the next generation of Christians.

What we see in the New Testament, then, is a Church living in an Easter season that is anything but a bouquet of lilies. The Church is still two centuries away from becoming the official religion of the Roman Empire. At this point, Christianity is just a tiny religious sect, just one religion among many, and more persecuted than most. The early Christians are buoyed by their resurrection faith and hope; but they are also suffering, and they are fearful of more suffering.

Does any of this sound familiar to you? Lo and behold, life during the first Easter season and life in our Easter season turn out to be very much alike.

We, too, live in a pluralistic society. We are far removed from the “Ozzie and Harriet” days when most Americans were white Christians who actually went to church on Sundays. Churches today have many competitors for people’s loyalty and commitment; Christ himself is just one possible object of worship among many.

We, too, live in a time of rampant idolatry, where people bow not before statues of gold and marble but before buildings made of those same materials – skyscrapers, stadiums, shopping malls, and other symbols of human affluence and power.

We, too, are targets for skepticism and scorn because of our religious convictions and practices. Unlike the Christians in the Roman Empire, Christians in America enjoy religious freedom and are protected from persecution by the Bill of Rights; but the fact that we are not persecuted does not mean that we are fully accepted. A growing percentage of people in America identify themselves as “spiritual” but not “religious.” They are not affiliated with any organized religion and have no intention of doing so, in some measure because they think

religious rituals and beliefs are a bunch of hocus-pocus and that church people are just a bunch of hypocrites.

And then, like our ancestors in the early Church, we too know the experience of emotional hardship and physical suffering. Yes, we are suffering today for different reasons than they do. The adversary they face is human; the adversary we face is viral; but the effect is the same. In the midst of the spring season and the Easter season, we are trapped in a pandemic season, a time of disruption and isolation, anxiety and fear, sickness and death. And here we are as the Church, trying to bear witness to the Easter gospel when it feels more like Good Friday.

It's instructive to see how the apostle Paul responds to this challenge in his own time and place. In Athens, he preaches to people who are somewhere along the spectrum of indifferent, curious, skeptical, and hostile. How does he try to reach a tough crowd like that?

I was told in seminary preaching classes, "Always begin where your hearers are." Start with something your congregation knows and understands before you attempt to move them to something new and unfamiliar. Well, this is exactly what Paul does when he addresses the crowd in Athens. He begins by finding common ground with them. He notes that they are "extremely religious . . . in every way" (v. 22). He blesses their search for God and affirms that they have some knowledge of God in nature. But then in the next breath he decries idol worship and says that it reflects a "time of human ignorance" (v. 30). He warns that God has fixed a day when we will be judged by a standard higher than our own devising. What's more, God has proved all of this by raising Jesus from the dead.

And with that, school is out! When the philosophers hear of the resurrection, most of them mock Paul and walk away. Now, notice what's happening here. Up to a point, Paul stands on common ground with his audience and has good reasons for doing so. The Athenians are all children of God and many of them are genuine seekers after God. He begins where his hearers are and even affirms a portion of what they presently believe.

Paul's approach is a good model for us to follow as we bear witness to the gospel in a pluralistic world. When you and I are in dialogue with people who believe differently than we do, or people who are skeptical about religious truth claims, or people who are nonreligious but are seeking a spiritual connection, it's both wise and helpful to meet them where they are and to affirm what we have in common with them.

And so, with great skill and sensitivity, Paul meets his audience half-way; but notice that he doesn't stop there. Eventually he draws a line in the sand. For Paul, the good news is good because it is news – that is, it isn't something the Athenians have come up with, but something that has come to them. The resurrection of Jesus lies outside the bounds of human reason; it has no analogies from our past experience. In this world, what lives, lives until it dies, and what dies stays that way. The notion that God has defeated death in the resurrection of Jesus Christ defies all logic. But this is the early Church's central and distinctive message to the world. Paul's proclaims it without apology, knowing full well that some will believe but many will not.

The writer of 1 Peter echoes Paul's emphasis and ramps up its urgency. He says, "Always be ready to make your defense to everyone who demands from you an accounting of the hope that is within you" (1 Peter 3:15b). He adds that his readers should state their case "with gentleness and reverence"; but this doesn't excuse them from speaking their truth and

speaking it boldly. When non-believers demand to know what Christians stand for, they are to give an accounting. And did you notice what they are called to give an accounting for? “The hope that is within you.”

Friends, Christian hope is not some sort of vague optimism that things will eventually get better. Optimism makes predictions about the future based on tendencies we discern in the past and the present. You know, scientists of previous generations found a cure for small pox and polio; therefore, scientists today will surely find a cure for the Coronavirus. This is an expression of optimism, and it may well be justified. But this is not hope as the Bible defines it. Christian hope is not based on projections about the future derived from trends in the past and present. The hoped-for future is a new thing, something that comes from outside our current situation. And for Christians, this new thing is the resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is what makes the Easter season more decisive and more enduring than the spring season and the pandemic season. “Because I live, you will live also,” Jesus says (John 14:19b). “Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:39).

So “with gentleness and reverence,” let’s give an accounting of the hope that is within us. What our neighbors most want to hear today is not a word of optimism – “Cheer up! A cure is on the way! We will soon return to the old normal!” No, what they most want to hear is a word of hope: Christ is the Lord of life who has conquered sin, evil, and death.

This past week I read the results of a survey in which nearly half (45%) of adults in the United States reported that their mental health has been negatively impacted due to worry and stress over the virus. And our physical distancing, while important to our health, has led to increased feelings of loneliness.

Let me ask you: do you know people today who are teetering on the brink of despair? If you do, for God’s sake and for their sake, why not offer them something truly worth hoping for?