

John 14:15-21

Today's texts lift up two important events: Paul's speech before the Areopagus in Athens, and the ascension of Jesus. You recall that Jesus made several post-resurrection appearances. This is the final one as he is taken up into heaven. In the church year, this happens forty days after Easter and a few days before the Day of Pentecost, which we will celebrate on May 31st.

I would like to turn our attention this morning to the Acts passage.

My husband says when he was in officer training shortly after being elected a Ruling Elder, he was told that an elder should be ready to preach at all times. In fact, back in the day, some church elders carried a sermon in their wallets or folded up in the pocket of a suit jacket. Leaders of the Church *should* be ready to preach the gospel at all times.

Paul was ready to preach before the Areopagus, the high court of intellectual and religious sparring, in Athens. This would not be a friendly audience. He was there to be tested. So what does he do? Well, he doesn't start with the Westminster Catechism, or preach the importance of baptism. He doesn't even enumerate the four spiritual laws that characterize some Christian preaching.

No. Paul meets them where they are. He says he has noticed the numerous statues displayed in the temples around Athens. There were idols to everything. There was even one dedicated to the "unknown God," in case they had forgotten one.

And that's where Paul seizes his opportunity. He tells them that he stands before them to introduce them to that unknown God. "What you worship as unknown, I now proclaim to you."

The court of the Areopagus was about the strength of reason and rhetoric. The Greeks were all about the life of the mind. Some adhered to a philosophy that

the flesh, the human body, was inferior to the mind and the spirit. Some went to great lengths to deny the needs of the body or to satisfy the desires of the body. We have a more integrated understanding of life that includes body, mind, and spirit.

Paul whets his audience's intellectual appetite by saying there is more to learn. And to this body of critical thinkers, he drops a great mystery: the mystery of God in human flesh, the God who defies death by resurrection.

"God calls all people to repent, to follow, for judgment in righteousness by an appointed Savior, who has given us assurance by raising the Savior from the dead."

And in his death, is the promise of ours.

Willie James Jennings, professor at Yale, has written, " To speak of the resurrection of Jesus is...speech that changes reality, reorients how we see earth and sky, water and dirt, land and animals, and even our own bodies. This is speech that evokes a decision: either laugh at it or listen to it. Either leave it or draw near to his body. It is his body or your stones."

One positive outcome from this sheltering at home era is that we have been compelled to look at our immediate surroundings. How have we spent our time? I can't tell you how many of my friends and family members have taken the opportunity to clean out closets and attics and garages, getting rid of those things they no longer use or need or ever needed. I actually found the floor of a closet I haven't seen in about twenty years.

My husband and I just spent a week with our two year old grandson. It was great fun, at least most of the time. It was good to be reminded of the early days of our family life, when we had little ones to feed, and bathe, and dress and comfort. We heard expressions we hadn't heard in a long time, at least in such direct language. "Mine!" Whether it was a cup, a toy, a shoe, when it seemed to

Thomas that he was about to lose something, he loudly protested and claimed it as his own.

Most of us outgrow that behavior. We know that hanging onto or accumulating things can be a form of idolatry. So can the unhealthy pursuit of recognition, power and wealth. They become the stones that Dr. Willie Jennings warns us about. Like the idols in Athens, their promises are empty and they may come with a high price.

Friends, Jesus isn't a stone like the idols found in Athens. He is a living Savior who paid the highest price and keeps his promise: to be at home with us on earth and to welcome us to a home with him in the world to come.

I'll take it. How about you?

Pastoral Prayer and the Lord's Prayer

Lord of love,

in the upper room, you gave us a new commandment to love one another. You have demonstrated before us the power of love to bring healing, redemption, and hope in the lives of all your people. Just as you have called us all into the ministry of grace, you have empowered us with gifts to carry out your purpose. The weeks have been long, O God, and we are weary. So many lives have been disrupted, services interrupted, and events cancelled. Illness and death have been our food day and night. We have become isolated out of necessity, and that has brought its own set of troubles. And so today, we come before you to dwell in your presence and receive the courage to be your people in this time and in these circumstances. Remind us when we bring the names of those in need before you, we also bring our own needs and concerns. Hear now the names of those who long to feel your love and grace...

We celebrate with the graduates among us, for the successful completion of their academic pursuits and their optimism and goals for the future.

In the words of the prayer that never fails, in gratitude for all life's blessing, we pray, Our Father...Amen.

Blessing

Wherever we are, we are in God.

Wherever we are, we are in Christ, and Christ is in us.

We go forth in peace and hope,

with the support of God's Spirit,

in faithfulness and trust.

and with enough transparency that, through us, others may glimpse the Divine.
