

Believing the Resurrection

SCOTT HOEZEE

The Apostle Paul never let an opportunity to present the Good News of Jesus Christ go to waste. So, while he was in the Greek city of Athens one day he decided to use the Athenian's love of conversation as a doorway through which to bring the Gospel. Some of the things Paul said that day have become vital theological topics in the history of the Church, even as the reaction he got from his Greek conversation partners that day has become a famous point of resistance to the Gospel for many people. Today on *Groundwork*, we will dig into a portion of Acts 17 to ponder this important story.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee. As we continue, Dave, in our seven-part series, and this is now the sixth program in the sequence, from the book of Acts, it brings us today, as I said a moment ago, to the 17th chapter. So we are over halfway through. There are 28 chapters in Acts and we are clearly into the second half. The blueprint, as it were, the table of contents for this book was laid out early when the Holy Spirit was promised "to come upon you while you are in Jerusalem," which is where we started, "and then you are going to move out the Samaria," which is where we went next, "and then to the ends of the earth;" so now we have been out to Caesarea, we have been out in different areas, and now we are all the way over to Greece.

DAVE BAST

Acts 17 is set in the context of one of Paul's great missionary journeys. Traditionally, we talk about Paul's three missionary journeys, plus one final journey to the city of Rome. Acts describes all of those – each of those – beginning in Chapter 13, and in Chapter 13 we read again how the Holy Spirit is the one pushing this. Didn't we say somewhere in the first program that it is the Acts of the Holy Spirit, really, we are looking at in this book? So, they are in Antioch and the Church leaders are praying and fasting, and the Holy Spirit says, somehow: Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul. So, off they go on this first journey, which basically took them through first the island of Cypress and then what is now today southern Turkey; and then comes a second journey, where Paul revisits the churches in southern Turkey, then he sees this call or sees this vision to go to Macedonia – that is northern Greece – and he hits Philippi, Berea, Thessalonica, and finally down to Athens; the great capital, in a sense, informally, the great city of philosophy and the center of Greek life and thought.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And everywhere he goes he is the Johnny Appleseed of church planting. Everywhere he goes, as you just mentioned; it sounds a little bit of the table of contents of the New Testament: Philippi – Philippians; Thessalonica – the letter to the Thessalonians, etc, etc. So, he is planting churches. Now, he is a place with very interesting soil, if you want to talk about church planting and extend the metaphor. Athens is a city that absolutely, as my kids would say: they geek on philosophy. They just love to talk and to argue and to debate; including religious topics. Everything was fair game if it made for a scintillating conversation and debate.

DAVE BAST

Right. In fact, today still we use the term “the Academy” to refer to higher education as a whole; or we talk about academics as those professors who teach these great subjects, and the original Academy was actually located in Athens, and it was a place where the philosophers walked and sat and stood and taught, and students would gather to them. So, this is Paul’s context now for sharing the Gospel, and he is not going to come necessarily to philosophize on Mars Hill, which is where this famous encounter takes place, or the Areopagus, as they called it there, but he is going to come to declare the Gospel.

SCOTT HOEZEE

From Acts Chapter 17; now we are at the 16th verse, where we read: While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. ¹⁷So he reasoned in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. ¹⁸A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him. Some of them asked, “What is this babbler trying to say?” Others remarked, “He seems to be advocating foreign gods.” They said this because Paul was preaching the Good News about Jesus and the resurrection. ¹⁹Then they took him and they brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? ²⁰You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears and we would like to know what they mean.” ²¹All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas. ²²So, Paul stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said, “People of Athens, I see that in every way you are very religious. ²³For as I walked around I looked carefully at your objects of worship. I even found an altar with the inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. So, you are ignorant of the very thing you worship, and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.”

DAVE BAST

And then here is the heart of that message; Paul goes on to say: ²⁴“The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth, and does not live in temples built by hands, ²⁵And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything; rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. ²⁶From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth, and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. ²⁷God did this so that they should seek him, and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. ²⁸For in him we live and move and have our being, as some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’ ²⁹Therefore, since we are God’s offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image made by human design and skill. ³⁰In the past, God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. ³¹For he 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.”

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that is where Paul’s sermon ends because, as we will think about, once he says “resurrection,” people start to laugh, and we will talk about that in a minute; but let’s just note here for a moment – this is a long story, but Paul did his homework. He knew about logic; he knew about philosophy; he had read some of their poetry. He was able to quote, approvingly, one of their own poems back to them, and so, he just basically logically walks them through the fallacy of idolatry; of false gods, saying: Look, if you thought up a god, logically therefore, that means you are superior to the god you thought up, and who wants an inferior god? If you made the god out of gold or ivory, or whatever, obviously you are superior to the god you made because you are the one who made it. So, he keeps saying: A god has to be superior. Your gods are all inferior because they came from you. So, you are over them. He is kind of out-philosophizing the philosophers to make them open to consider: Who might the real God be who would be superior to all of us?

DAVE BAST

Yes, that is very true. He has also found a point of common contact with them. He can speak to them in language that they understand, in their own language. You know, most of these philosophers did not really believe anymore in the old stories of the Greek gods, or in the fact that a god could be contained in a statue, or that you should worship in a temple that was built by human hands. They had a sense that there was one God who was the supreme God, but they did not really know what he was like, and therefore: the altar to the unknown God; and Paul wonderfully picks up on that and says: You know what? I do know this God and that is the God I want to tell you about. So, here it is; let me share it with you; and then he, as you say, he quotes from their own poets with approval that God is the one in whom we live and move and have our being, and we are his offspring – those are both quotations – because there is truth often revealed in human religions.

SCOTT HOEZEE

They were on to something.

DAVE BAST

Yes; we call it “common grace.” So, we do not say necessarily that there is nothing but falsehood in any other religion. We look for points of contact; things that we can affirm, and that is exactly what Paul does here.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And as a smart missionary, Paul picked up on that and used what he could to reach them; but he did then say one thing that was very much not in the woodwork – not in the thinking of the Greeks – this idea of the resurrection from the dead, and we will look at why in just a moment.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, and today we are digging into Acts 17, the story of Paul’s encounter with the Athenian philosophers on Mars Hill in Athens; and you mentioned how it was the resurrection, really, when Paul talked about that, that was the showstopper, and turned the audience against him; but he had actually been talking about that earlier because in the first part of the story which we read, it says: Who is this babbler? He seems to be talking about foreign divinities. So, he had been already preaching in Athens before this great encounter.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Kind of in the marketplace, but then they bring him to this place called the Areopagus, which seems to be the serious place for philosophy; so I think they wondered: Okay, a few of us heard him mention the resurrection over by the farmer’s market, but will he dare bring it up here?

DAVE BAST

And they did not even understand it exactly because they said: He is talking about foreign gods; Jesus and *anastasis* because *anastasis* is the Greek word for resurrection. Well, Paul was saying Jesus rose...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Was the Resurrection...

DAVE BAST

But they misunderstood him and thought he was talking about one god named Jesus and another named Anastasis. So when he spells it out: No, no; Jesus died and rose again, and actually, God has appointed him to be the judge of the world; that is when the curtain came down on Mars Hill.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And the reason being – now, we do not know – as we mentioned earlier, that Paul was being very logical – building a very logical argument – maybe he was making some headway. For all we know, they were with him and nodding their heads; maybe not, we do not know, but maybe. But yes, once he mentions...

DAVE BAST

Well, surely when he is quoting their poems they are saying: Yes, yes, I like that.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Why the resurrection? Was that the place where they stopped listening and the text even says they almost laughed and scoffed and said: Ha, well, we will catch you later, Paul. We will talk about this – yeah, right – some other day. Why did they have that reaction? Because the Greeks had this very spiritualized sense of what the core of a human being was, and the body was considered to be gross; the prison house of the soul is the way the great philosophers like Socrates and Plato regarded it. Their noblest vision for the best hope we have for what we might call an afterlife would be when your soul could get out of here and float free forever. So, the idea that anybody would want their freed soul to get snagged back and stuffed back into another body, that sounded just ludicrous to them because they did not think the material world mattered as much as the world of ideas.

DAVE BAST

It was a matter for them of increasingly advancing in more and more knowledge and spirituality. For them, the idea of having to return to a physical body would be like going back to kindergarten when you have completed your PhD. They thought at death you graduated and you escaped this world of flesh and all the constraints and you became pure spirit. So, there was nothing really that could have been more jarring to the Greek sensibility.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Unfortunately, sometimes it is jarring to ours. A well-known preacher of some time ago opened a sermon and many of us lesser-known preachers have since imitated him. He sketched the vision of two people facing execution, and one man faced his death with great courage and stoicism and he was clear-eyed and unafraid; the other man was screaming and yelling and resisting; and then the preacher said, “One of these men was Jesus and the other was the philosopher, Socrates.” Even a lot of Christian people listening to the sermon thought: Yep, that’s right. Jesus was the brave one. And then, of course, you do the switcharoo, and the preacher said, “No, the brave one was Socrates, because he welcomed death. He could not wait to get out of that body of flesh. Jesus is the one kicking and screaming and saying: My God, my God, why? Because Jesus knew he came to redeem the whole of creation, including our bodies, which are good in God’s sight.

DAVE BAST

Right; and one of the hardest concepts, I think, for us as Christians to embrace is the idea of the goodness of the physical; the goodness of the body as God intended it to be; the fact that this is going to be the subject of redemption just as much as our souls will be – I for one cannot wait for that. The goodness of the whole creation; the heavens and the earth and all the myriad creatures; this is why we care about creation; because it has a future. God is not going to just trash it and throw it away. He is not going to just burn it all up and sweep it away and start over again. As someone has pointed out, a friend of mine, Steve Bouma-Prediger likes to say: He said, ‘Behold, I make all things new,’ not, ‘Behold, I make all new things.’

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right – nice.

DAVE BAST

Our faith is rooted in the resurrection of the dead.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And this is not the only place in the New Testament where Paul bumped up against this. When the Corinthian church sent Paul a letter with a long list of questions and issues and controversies that were going on in Corinth, one of the last things in the letter was: Oh dear, Pastor Paul, some people in our church are saying there is no such thing as the resurrection of the dead. What do you think? And so, in the very famous chapter, 1 Corinthians 15, around the 12th verse, Paul writes:

But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? ¹³If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. ¹⁴And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. But Corinth had great Greek influence, and so here is that Greek philosophy again.

DAVE BAST

Well, and that is the next place Paul is going to go after Athens, and I actually have a sermon on that passage from 1 Corinthians that I call *What If?* What if Christ has not been raised from the dead? According to Paul, if Christ has not physically been raised from the dead, we are in big trouble; we have nothing; because this is the core and heart of our faith, not only, but of our own hope as Christians; and Paul wants to stress that point clearly.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Paul had to deal with a lot of awful things in the church in Corinth in that letter: A guy living with his mother-in-law, and people competing for spiritual gifts, and people cheating poor people out of the Lord's Supper; so Paul had a lot of strong responses in this letter, but this is the only place in the whole letter where he said: You know what? If this one is so – if there is no resurrection – this is the only place where he said our preaching and your faith are useless; futile; that is how important the resurrection is.

DAVE BAST

Yes; I want to talk a little bit more about this, and talk about it in terms of the Church today and our own faith; do we really recognize and embrace the crucial nature of the resurrection of Jesus? So, let's do that in just a moment.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and Dave, we were talking about the centrality of the resurrection, and you were mentioning that we really need to talk more about this. Why is Jesus' physical resurrection the deal breaker for the whole Gospel?

DAVE BAST

Well, here is one reason why we need to talk about it more: Because there is a certain segment of liberal theology that downplays the physicality of Christ's resurrection – in a way, like the ancient Greeks – spiritualizes it; and in their case, for a lot of people the problem is just wrapping their whole head around the idea that a dead man actually was transformed into the life of the world to come and came back from the grave. That just cannot happen, the skeptics say; so, it must be some sort of mythological retelling of a story that tries to make a spiritual truth with a crude literal story, but the reality is Christ's spirit is what came to life.

It is like the old Civil War song: John Brown's body lies a-molding in the grave. His soul is marching on. The same thing with Jesus.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Sure, Jesus rose again, in the memories of the disciples; they realized that as long as we remember him he will still be alive; so, he rose in their hearts; he rose in their memories. Please!

I remember years ago I think his name was Martin Gardener wrote a very interesting, and at times very funny novel called *The Flight of Peter Fromm*, and it is about a seminarian named Peter Fromm who encounters hardcore, 19th Century-style liberalism, and eventually kind of loses his faith and his mind over the mindlessness of liberalism. At one point, he is talking to, I think, a person who is going to become his father-in-law, but he is a very liberal Protestant pastor – very out there – and Peter is just getting so frustrated with this man's liberalism, and so he finally tries to pin him down. He says: Listen to me, Reverend, listen to me! Did Jesus really rise from the dead? Did he come out of the tomb in a new body? Did he cast a shadow? Did his sandals make noise in the gravel? Did he or didn't he? And the pastor replies: Why, yes, of course, in a spiritual way.

DAVE BAST

There you go.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It was like: NO!

DAVE BAST

And the point is, if he didn't, I am out of here. I think you are probably out of here, too; and Paul certainly was out of here. I think we are with him on this, that if the central fact – and this is the point, incidentally, that he makes to the Corinthians – if the central fact of the apostolic message, which is that Jesus actually physically rose from the dead, is not true, we really have no reason to trust them for anything that they said.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, that is right. If they got that one wrong, or were lying to us, oh, boy, game over.

DAVE BAST

Yes, exactly. You cannot take the Sermon on the Mount and say, "Oh, what a sublime teaching," because this is part of the apostolic witness, too. Jesus did not write down the Sermon on the Mount, his followers did; and these are the followers who said, "He rose from the dead. That is why we listened to all of his words. That is why we treasured them and passed them on to you." So, if that did not happen, throw the whole thing away.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And not only, Dave, I think in terms of the reliability of the overall witness, which is as you just said, absolutely, certainly true, but also because it fits with the entire picture; the entire picture of the Bible that begins in Genesis with God making a good cosmos; God making a good creation, in which God took great delight in creating all kinds of variety; all kinds of daisies and butterflies and parrotfish and snow leopards. God took delight in making a good creation. The Devil has ever since taken delight in trying to trash it; and so, the whole project of salvation from Genesis 3:16 and the promise of the Savior onward, the whole project has been to restore what God made good. The resurrection – being a physical resurrection with a new body pointing to the new creation and the redeeming of all things physical fits with that. So, the whole thing unravels retrospectively, too, if this was not a real event.

DAVE BAST

Right. It is not only the ground of our faith, it is the substance of our hope as Christians. We look forward to a physical resurrection and...

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is the hope behind every funeral.

DAVE BAST

Right; and not only our bodies being transformed and glorified and restored in some unimaginable way, Paul says later in 1 Corinthians 15: You know, I cannot tell you how it works. It is like a seed. You put it in the

ground and something else comes out. But also our world is going to be real and physical and tangible and will cast a shadow – not floating away off into the clouds strumming harps forever and ever.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Which, as you know, it is often pictured even in *New Yorker* cartoons and the like, and that was what the Greeks thought. That is why this was the sticking point in Acts 17; when Paul mentioned the resurrection and it was clear he really meant it, that was the end of the conversation on Mars Hill, on the Areopagus, as we saw; and they went away shaking their heads over what a silly idea because they do not value creation, and Christian are called to value creation. In fact, there was a teacher years ago, he has been gone now for quite a while, Anthony Hoekema; he used to teach at Calvin Seminary. He wrote a book once called *The Bible and the Future*, and he made a very strong point one time. He said: Look, if your vision of what we often call heaven – if your vision does not include cougars and kittens and mountains and streams and trout, then you are conceding victory to the Devil because the new creation will be just that. Everything God made will be back because it is a sign that the Devil did not succeed in blurring and smearing and destroying what God made good. The resurrection is the firstfruits – the firstfruits – that is what the Bible calls it.

DAVE BAST

You just reminded me of one of my beloved teachers, the theologian, Eugene Osterhaven, who used to say he wanted to spend his first little while in heaven studying Geology because he was so fascinated by the story of the earth, and it will be there; it will be there; all these things will be there.

I love the phrase from Isaiah where God says, “It is too small a thing to his servant just to save Israel and Jacob. I will make you a light to the nations,” and in a sense, we could extend that to say, “It is too small a thing for God just to save our souls, or just for salvation to be somehow spiritual in nature; because it is going to embrace the cosmos as well; and not just us as individuals, but all his people, and ultimately his whole creation; transformed in a way – you know, the New Testament says in one place: Eye has not seen nor has ear heard nor has it entered into the mind of humans to conceive what God has prepared for those who love him. So, it is bigger than we can even imagine.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And my guess is that Paul, in Acts 17, knew full well, being in Greece, that when he mentioned the resurrection it was going to be the end of his sermon and people were going to walk out, but you know what? It did not keep him from proclaiming it, and that is a lesson for the Church today. People may roll their eyes over the message of Easter, but that is no excuse not to keep on proclaiming it.

Well, thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation. I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and we would like to know how we can help you continue digging deeper into the scriptures. So visit groundworkonline.com and tell us topics and passages you would like to hear in the future.

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