

## ***Taking a Stand: Paul's Defense, Acts 23:6-11***

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Dear friends in Christ, I greet you in the name of our Resurrected Lord!

If you've been tracking with us in this sermon series in Acts, you know that last week we left Paul in Corinth, just after his visit in Athens in chapter 17. And, you have probably noticed that we have moved rather rapidly ahead to chapter 23, in which Paul literally takes the witness stand for his faith -- in particular, his stand on the Resurrection. If you are *truly* diligent in your reading, you know that this defense of Paul's is only the first in a series. Today, he is in the presence of the Jewish ruling body, the Sanhedrin. But it only gets the ball rolling as Paul next defends his faith before 2 governors (Felix and Festus) and then before King Herod Agrippa. From there, Paul is sent to Rome to defend his case before Caesar.

Why a stand on the Resurrection, in particular? Why not the crucifixion? Let me remind you that before his conversion, Paul knew all about Jesus' crucifixion; and yet he still arrested Jesus' followers and sent them to prison. It was only when Paul encountered the Risen Christ on the Damascus Road that he was changed completely. Everything this brilliant Pharisee knew and believed was re-interpreted in the light of the Resurrection. Simply knowing Jesus had been crucified hadn't convinced him of Jesus' deity; just as it hadn't convinced Jesus' followers. It was the *Resurrection* that made the difference. At that point, everything lined up, coming together like pieces to a puzzle: salvation through God's grace, not by the law of Moses. God's desire to forgive, not to punish. A new life with a new purpose, even here and now. Because of the Resurrection of Jesus Paul was a new man, with a new goal of preaching this Good News to all he met, Jew and Gentile.

Today we read of Paul's appearance before the Sanhedrin, a ruling body that was comprised of two Jewish ideological parties: the Pharisees and the Sadducees. You have heard that the Pharisees held a general belief in the Resurrection -- that is, the future event on the day of judgement, when God's people would experience a bodily resurrection at the beginning of a new age of God's just rule. But no one expected a resurrection *before* that Last Day. When Jesus died on the cross, no one went around saying, "Oh well, let's just wait three days and he'll be alive again." Jesus' crucifixion at the hands of the Romans meant simply that the disciples had backed the wrong horse. So, when Jesus was raised from the dead -- just as he had predicted -- the disciples' whole worldview changed. The Resurrection was proof that all Jesus had said and done was true. It gave clarity to what his death on the cross meant. It began a movement that continues to impact the world today.

Now, that doesn't mean the crucifixion was unimportant. When Paul spoke of the Resurrection (which he did often) it was a shorthand for what he considered to be a single act of grace: the crucifixion and resurrection. Together. This *singular event of grace* is what offers forgiveness, life and hope. The Resurrection is essential to the message of the cross.

Paul takes a stand on the Resurrection, and in this he never wavers. Not only his defense; not only his preaching and his writing; but Paul's very life demonstrates this stand. Paul, like the others apostles, demonstrates extraordinary courage, persistence and sacrifice in the course of proclaiming Jesus' resurrection. They even risked their lives on this stand. This extraordinary dedication is, in fact, one of the arguments that is used in proving the truth of the Resurrection.

The debate over this truth is demonstrated in our reading today, and it hasn't stopped ever since. There are those who acknowledge Jesus as an historic figure, who died – full stop. If this were true, then here are some of the ramifications:

First, it would mean no forgiveness. Christians believe that on the cross, Jesus provided the way of atonement with God, paying the penalty for our sins and thus offering us forgiveness. The Resurrection completed the work. Without the Resurrection of Jesus, we would still be living under the Law, under which all of us are condemned.

Second, no Resurrection means that God is a liar. Jesus is a liar. The apostles were liars. The whole Bible is a lie. According to British New Testament scholar N.T. Wright, the entire Christian religion, without the Resurrection, would be the world's greatest conspiracy.

Third, if Jesus had not been raised from the dead, it would call into question his divinity, for how can God die and *remain dead*? If Jesus were not divine, his miracles would be a hoax. His teachings would be empty. Jesus would be no more than an historical figure – like Ghandi or Abraham Lincoln – but certainly not God, as he claimed to be.

But the truth is that Jesus both died and rose again. And here are some of the arguments that support that position:

1: His tomb was empty. No bones have ever been found; there is no cult around any such relics. **Empty tomb.**

2: There were many eyewitness accounts to the risen Christ – Paul mentions in our second reading today that more than 500 people saw him. Documentation of his resurrection happened very early – eyewitnesses made these reports (an important feature of historical verification). Read through the book of Acts: the Resurrection is mentioned no less than 16 times. In all the letters in the New Testament, it is mentioned at least 28 times. **Eyewitness reports.**

3: His followers were transformed from a band of fearful men in hiding, to courageous people who boldly proclaimed Jesus' resurrection in public, in spite of risk of imprisonment, torture and worse. In fact, most of the apostles died as martyrs, never giving up the fight. To me, this is one of the most compelling arguments. Who would risk his life for a lie? **Followers were transformed, fearless.**

4. There was an explosion in the number of believers, establishing the Church, which has since grown and expanded to every continent – and is still expanding today. The activity of the Church has been remarkably persistent, despite persecution. This speaks to the truth of Jesus as its living leader. **Explosion of believers.**

5. Believers throughout the centuries have continued to have personal encounters with Jesus through Word, Sacrament, prayer and life experiences. **Continued encounters with Jesus.**

Folks, Jesus is alive! That is the bottom line. And it means that his followers will also experience resurrection on the Last Day, as the Pharisees believed. But it means more than that: it means that God's Resurrection power seeps into our lives, even here and now, giving believers new life, new purpose, new hope for today as well as for tomorrow. As Jesus told his disciples, the Kingdom of God is here. Now.

Paul made his defense for the Good News wherever he went, an opportunity that all Christians have. It is more than an opportunity, it is part of the package of believing. Jesus told all his followers to go out and tell his story, making new disciples. Peter later wrote,

***Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. (1 Peter 3:15)***

Like Paul and the others, we also have to take a stand. So, what do *you* say? How does your defense take shape?

Well, it can be a fairly daunting thought – and we have talked about this before. But it helps to review, and today we can take a lesson from Paul. First, know your audience. Every time Paul defended his faith, he knew who he was talking to and what they believed. What about you? Knowing your audience means you start by listening. Ask questions. "Tell me more about that." Or, "What catches your attention?" Remember that witnessing is always about relationship – telling someone facts without care about who that person is and what their basic concerns are, usually falls flat.

Second, tell what you know. I'm reminded of what Joe Hill said a few weeks ago about being a witness – not having to prove a point but simply telling what you have heard and seen. Speak to your own experiences. You are not the defending attorney; you are the *witness*.

Third, start with the basics. I remember one evangelist who said a good place to start is to convey two simple truths: *God is good. Christians are normal.* Then, seek an open door – maybe it's Creation itself. Our world and its order, detail, beauty and diversity. How it functions, not as a painting to be admired, but as a world that offers you food and shelter; adventures and challenge; comfort and delight. Let these conversations lead you naturally to speak of the Creator.

And finally, lean in on the Resurrection. Tell stories of Jesus: what he said and did. How people were drawn to him, how they kept coming back for more. How he loved us enough to go to the cross. And finally, how God raised him from the dead, which means everything Jesus said or did is true. And it means you and I will also be raised again.

Paul and the apostles gave their lives to proclaiming the Resurrection. It is not so much that they grasped its truth, but that this truth grasped them – and never let go. The same is true for you and me. The Resurrection of Jesus is the key to faith in him; to a new life beginning now; to a hope of life with him eternally. Where do you take your stand? I promise you: your answer will be life-changing.