

May 17, 2020 – Acts 17:16-31 & 1 Peter 3:13-22

Why are you a Christian? It's a simple question. Why? Whether you're sitting in a pew here or sitting at home right now, you're listening to a Christian pastor preach from the Christian Bible about Christian doctrine. And if someone were to ask, I hope all of you would call yourselves Christians. But why?

Let's reframe this. If someone were to walk up to you and ask, "Why should I be a Christian," what would you tell them? If they wanted one and only one reason why they or anyone else should be a Christian, what would you say?

Would you talk about the forgiveness of sins? Or the rewards of being part of the church? Would you maybe even talk about the end times? Hell-fire and damnation? Heaven and paradise? What would you say?

I ask this not of my own accord, but because it's the same issue that the Apostle Peter brings to our attention in our Epistle Lesson: "*in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you.*"

Always be prepared to make a defense of your faith. Always be prepared to provide a reason for the hope that is in you. Always be ready to answer anyone who asks you, "Why are you a Christian?"

Paul is faced with that very question in our First Lesson today. And his answer may be surprising. Because most of us would go with one of the answers I suggested before. Forgiveness, fellowship, eternal life. That sort of thing. And those aren't wrong answers. They're all very good reasons to be a Christian. Yet, Paul doesn't go in any of those directions.

But first, let's get a little context here. At this point in the book of Acts, Paul is on the run. He's been on a missionary journey, preaching the Gospel. But when he gets to the city of Thessalonica in northern Greece, he is confronted by some rather angry Jews who rather aggressively reject his message. To the extent that he must be smuggled out of the city at night before they have him murdered. Leaving his friends Timothy and Silas behind.

He doesn't let that stop him, though. He continues to preach the Gospel. And so the Jews continue to chase him. Until he finally ends up in Athens. Athens is the capital of Greece. It's a major city. Large enough that it's easy to get lost in the crowd. Paul decides this is a good place to sit and wait for his companions to catch up with him.

While he's there, of course, he continues preaching. Preaching everywhere, really. Both synagogues and marketplaces. To both Jews and Greeks.

And one day a group of philosophers happen to hear his message. They are Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. Now, if you're not familiar with those terms, those two groups represent two of the most popular and two of the most opposite philosophies in ancient Greece.

Epicureans were all about pleasure. They had a bit of an "eat, drink, and be merry" mentality. They believed that life really had no meaning, so you might as well enjoy it. Stoics were the exact opposite. They believed that emotion only clouded your judgement and prevented you from seeing the true meaning in life, whatever it is.

And while both groups were quite religious, neither one subscribed to the ancient mythologies that we normally associate with Greece. Zeus and Athena and such. Their gods were far more impersonal and undefined. Epicureans and Stoics might seem like kind of an odd pair to be hanging around together. But as we find out, they're both part of the Areopagus, also known as Mars Hill.

The Areopagus was a outcropping of rock next to the acropolis of Athens, right in the center of the city. It wasn't very large. About the size of the meeting room down the hall. Big enough for maybe a couple dozen people to gather. And standing on it, you had a great view of all the grand temples on the acropolis. If you're wondering how I know all this, it's because I actually once stood on the Areopagus. It was a very cool feeling.

Anyway, the Areopagus was a meeting place for all the prominent philosophers, theologians, teachers, scientists, doctors, and every other highly educated person in the city of Athens to get together and discuss the meaning of life, the universe, and everything. And they were always looking for something new to discuss. Thus, when they hear Paul preaching about Jesus, they think he's teaching people about a new god to worship. And they're interested because, you know... they haven't had a new god in a while.

So they invite him to speak to their group on the Areopagus. And, of course, Paul's not going to pass up an opportunity like this, so he agrees. He stands up in the middle of the Areopagus. And he follows Peter's advice. Not only does he give the reason for the hope that is in him. But he does so with gentleness, respect, and a good conscience.

He observes how religious they are. I can just see him pointing to the Acropolis nearby. The Parthenon towering above them. The hilltop full of temples. The Athenians were proud of their temples. Proud of all the gods they worshipped.

But Paul points out, even after filling their temples with idols and altars, they're still not sure they're worshipping every possible god. And so they've gone ahead and set up one more altar, to the unknown god. It's their safety net, just in case there's a god that they've missed.

Well, Paul tells them, you're right. You have missed one. You've missed the real one. You've missed the one who made the world and everything in it. But if you think this little altar to the unknown god is good enough for Him, well then you're sadly mistaken. Because the one true God doesn't want or need a temple or an altar.

In fact, He doesn't need anything at all. He doesn't need your worship. He doesn't need your idols. He doesn't need your offerings. He's the one who gives everything to you. He gives you life and breath and everything. He gives you this earth and all the nations upon it.

You guys are philosophers. You know better than to believe in silly little gods like Zeus and Athena, who need altars and idols of gold, silver, and stone. Images formed by the imagination of man. You believe in a bigger deity. In whom we live and move and have our being. Who created us so that we are His offspring. I believe in the same thing.

But I also believe that we need to repent. Because I believe in sin and hell. And I believe that this world will be judged for its sinfulness. And I know that those are things that are hard for you to believe. Because you don't have any assurance that what I'm saying is true. You don't have any assurance that anything is true.

You want assurance. I'll give it to you. The man who was sent by God – the one who's going to do the judging – yeah, he was crucified, dead for three days, and then came back to life. How's that for assurance? How's that for authority? How's that for truth?

I don't care if you're a Greek philosopher who doubts everything he hears. Or a member of this congregation talking to a friend who just can't understand why being a Christian matters. You can believe whatever you want, but the fact remains that Jesus Christ rose from the dead. And you have to deal with what that means.

And what does it mean? Well, it means that Jesus was neither a liar, nor a lunatic. That he said what he said because it was true. And important. And worth believing. The resurrection authenticates everything that Jesus said and did.

You can argue with the Bible until you're blue in the face. But ultimately Jesus pointed to Scripture and said, "Believe this." And then went and did the one and only thing big enough to guarantee that he knew what he was talking about.

So you wanna know what my answer to the question is? If you ask me, why are you a Christian, you know what I'll say? Three words: Christ is risen.

And that means everything else in Scripture is true. That means I have forgiveness of sins. That means I am part of a Holy Christian Church. That means there is a judgement for sin coming. And that does mean I have the hope of the resurrection and an eternity in paradise.

But all of those things are kind of secondary to my unwavering, unflinching conviction that Jesus Christ rose from the dead on Easter morning. And therefore I can rest everything I believe on Him and Him alone.

He is the unknown god made known to humanity. That we might have assurance of God's Word and God's will. That we might know the Father and know His love for us. And know without a shadow of a doubt that He will come for us one day soon.

And so we say these words not out ritual or habit or tradition. But out of conviction and faith and hope: Christ is risen... he is risen indeed... alleluia. Amen.