

“The Reason We Dare”  
May 10, 2026

Acts 17:22-32

As we start our worship in these weeks after Easter, we continue to remind ourselves that Christ has risen. Christ has risen, indeed.

Such an affirmation calls us to consider just what that affirmation means for our lives. The Gospel stories of the resurrection help with this, certainly. So, too, do the stories of the early church that we find in the Acts of the Apostles. The early Christians struggled to understand the good news that life *does* conquer death, that God brings new life out of desolate situations. We continue to struggle for such understanding.

We haven’t spent any time with those early Christians this year, but as this Easter season moves toward its conclusion on Pentecost, two weeks from today, that story of Paul in Athens helps us as we seek to live in the light of the resurrection.

Athens—that storied center of Greek thought and culture—had declined some since the golden age of Plato and Socrates by the time Paul arrives there. But it is still, as one New Testament scholar put it, “a great university town and a symbol of the ‘high culture’ where important ideas have value and are carefully considered by the intellectually curious.”<sup>1</sup>

That, of course, also sound like a description of Iowa City.

In fact, when Congregational Church member Nathan Brainerd—the plaque on the communion table bears his name—died in 1911, his obituary stated: “Mr. Brainerd was a powerful factor in the upbuilding of the Congregational church in Iowa City. Just as prominently as with church life, he was identified with all other educational and religious movements that found recognized existence in the Athens of Iowa.”

We are a sophisticated crowd, interested in ideas and culture. Let’s be honest, however, and recognize as well that, as in ancient Athens, idolatry lurks everywhere.

Let us watch and listen, then, for Paul speaks as much to us in contemporary Iowa City as he does to those in ancient Athens.

It is the idols, of course, that first attract Paul’s attention and his ire. His Jewish heritage leads to his outrage. The *Torah* given by Moses told the Jewish people—as it tells us—“You must have no other god besides the Sovereign God. You must not make a carved image for yourself, nor the likeness of anything in the heavens above or the earth below, or in the waters under the earth. You must not bow down to them in worship.”

Paul is outraged to find a city so full of idols. And, like Socrates, he takes his arguments against idols to the marketplace. We should listen because idolatry is not an ancient problem alone.

John Calvin famously said that the human mind “is a perpetual factory of idols.”<sup>2</sup> We are full of pride and boldness, daring to imagine a god according to our own capacity. As a result, we keep churning out images and artifacts that substitute for the living God.

The factory is in operation 24/7—and it’s putting out a lot more than golden calves, a lot more than the 22-foot-high golden statue of the president that was unveiled in Florida last week. Now, the pastor who spoke at that dedication said: “Let me be clear: this is not a golden calf. This statue is a celebration of life.”

I would disagree.

The poet, Kathleen Norris, does agree with Calvin when she says that “Human beings are incurable and remarkably inventive idol makers.” It is our idolatry that makes love impossible—whether it be love of self, or of neighbor, or of God—because we are quick to put an idol above all else. We see this in the scorn for others that is rampant in our nation. And if we look closely enough, we see similar scorn for others in our own hearts and lives. How quickly we give something a higher status than it should have.

We are—each of us and all of us—a perpetual factory of idols.

One of Calvin’s heirs, Presbyterian minister and novelist Frederick Buechner helps us when he says that “Idolatry is the practice of ascribing absolute value to things of relative worth. Under certain circumstances money, patriotism, sexual freedom, moral principles, family loyalty, physical health, social or intellectual preeminence, and so on are fine things to have around, but to make them the standard by which all others values are measured, to make them your masters, to look to them to justify your life and save your soul is sheerest folly. They just aren’t up to it.”<sup>3</sup>

We think of idolatry as the particular vice of religious people. But the unreligious succumb to its temptations as well.

Religious to the point of idolatry, the Athenians also hedge their bets. So, in this city Paul finds a place of worship and an altar inscribed with the words: “To an unknown god.” Just to be on the safe side.

Perhaps we can cut the Athenians some slack. Let us recognize that, really, God is unknown and beyond our understanding and describing. One person called our idols “markers of our search for meaning.”<sup>4</sup> As we search after the “unknown god”—as all of us do—our paths are marked by those things that at one time seemed holy, seemed sacred, and no longer do.

As we change, our understanding of God changes as well.

As our understanding of God changes, we change as well.

And just at this point Paul surprises us again—or at least he surprises me.

He doesn’t fault the way that the Athenians think or the way that they act.

He doesn’t go on the attack.

He speaks with humility and with love about the search for God that engages each one of us and that is at the heart of all of us.

Speaking to these sophisticated people who seem so bewildered, Paul is compassionate. He seeks *and finds* common ground. He tells the Athenians—and tells us—that they have a better sense of this “unknown god” than they might think.

Maybe we shouldn’t be so surprised.

Paul's good news is rooted in the goodness of creation and the God who made the world and everything in it. This unknown God is the Ground of All Being, the One in whom "we live and move and have our being." We are all the children of this loving God who provides rain and fruitful seasons, filling our bodies with food and our hearts with joy. Everyone—*everyone*—is included in the love of God. Everyone—*everyone*—is accepted by God and a recipient of that love.

Again, we see the real problem with idolatry is that it puts something—anything, everything—before the love of God, the love of neighbor, the love of self. When other human beings forget this and seek to exclude and condemn and marginalize people, we understand it as our calling to do what we can and say what we can to make the accepting and welcoming love of God evident once more. We speak and act, not on our own but as part of something far greater, more powerful, and filled with love and compassion for the whole creation. We join with others in finding our way back to God, back to what we don't know, back to love.

And when we ourselves forget and exclude, well, we, too, find ourselves in need of others who can show us the way back, who can help us, as Paul says, *repent*—that wonderfully disturbing word that means to turn around and head in a different direction, away from the cliff that we are rapidly approaching.

Of course, the reason that we would dare to do any of this—set aside our idols, seek the good of others, live as though we are all children of the one God, is the resurrection.

The power of the resurrection is the ability to act that comes from the faith—not the certainty, but the faith—that God is bringing about a new creation and we are a part of that work and that creation. And because we are part of God's new creation, the work that we do continues to matter.

The power of the resurrection is the ability to act because in the resurrection we come to see that, as it has been said, the arc of the universe is long but that it moves toward justice, even though this world can, as it does in these days, seem so obviously filled with such evil and injustice. Resurrection empowers us to act "in faith," that is, trusting that the ultimate direction of creation is toward God's good purposes for all of life.

This power comes not through our own positive thinking or by our strenuous efforts. This power rises from God's vindication of the suffering and death of Jesus in the resurrection, in which we see by faith that even at the moment of great suffering and death, God was at work bringing life—and by that same faith claiming that God continues to do so today.

We, too, want to know such power—power that sets us free to love with abandon, to act even when fear presses in, to draw out the best in ourselves and other people.

In Athens, as in Iowa City, resurrection is a little too much for some people. Acts tells us that: "When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed." Or as one translation puts it, "At the mention of the raising of the dead, some burst out laughing." Of course they did.

Many still do.

Paul himself would write to the early Christians in Corinth that the whole Christian enterprise was "foolishness to the Gentiles." But in this great foolishness there is a greater wisdom at work.

For this this foolishness is also the power of God—an ongoing act of bringing wholeness, fullness of life, to us and to all creation.

Because of the resurrection, we are able to look at and accept the harsh realities of our lives. Life doesn't always go as we would want it to go. Friends betray, marriages fail, children get ill, those whom we love die. We know that violence is all too real and there is enough injustice in the world to make us heartsick. We are broken people and we live in the broken places of this world.

When we recognize that we walk in the valley of deep darkness, we also see the wisdom of God in the foolishness of the resurrection.

So, we find ourselves in the Athens of Iowa, united with those in the Iowa City of ancient Greece. We are like those Athenians who say instead: "We will hear you again on this subject." We need time in order to understand this good news, to see our golden idols grow dim beside the brilliant light of new life in Christ, to hear our questions answered in the great love that God has for each of us and for all creation.

Easter continues. Resurrection continues.

In that faith, we dare to move forward.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Wall, *Acts*, NIB, pg. 243)

<sup>2</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes* (I. XI. 8)

<sup>3</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*, pg. 40

<sup>4</sup> Jason Cox, "Paul: Appealing or Appalling?" <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/fr/node/275251>