

## Service notes and sermon for Easter 6, May 17, 2020

**Overview:** Confession of Christ and of our hope in him is the calling of all who have been baptized. Such confession includes not only our faithful testimony but also our loving obedience to Jesus' commands. As we live out our confession of Christ, we are comforted by the presence of the Spirit whom the Son has sent while we await his return.

Suggested Service is Service of the Word (CW p. 38).

Suggested Hymns: 156 "Awake, My Heart, with Gladness"  
377 "Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice"  
476 "Thee Will I Love, My Strength, My Tower"  
166 "The Day of Resurrection"

\* Please feel free to sing additional hymns from the Easter section: CW 141-168.

**Prayer of the Day:** Father of lights, every good and perfect gift comes from you. Inspire us to think those things that are true and long for those things that are good, that we may always make our petitions according to your gracious will; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

**First Lesson:** Acts 17:22-31 Paul preaches before the meeting of the Areopagus in Athens. To these pagan Greeks the apostle proclaims the "unknown God"—the God who made the world and who calls all people to repentance and faith in the One whom he raised from the dead.

**Psalm is Psalm 66** (CW p. 90) In her song to her Lord, the Church calls on the world to give fitting praise to God for his blessings.

**Second Lesson:** I Peter 3:15-22 Peter admonishes the faithful to be ready always to confess the hope they have in Christ Jesus, particularly when they face hardship and persecution. In so doing they show the power of their baptism by which they have been washed free of the guilt of sin and connected to Christ and his resurrection.

**Verse of the Day:** Alleluia. Alleluia. Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia. If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. Alleluia.  
(John 14:23)

**Gospel:** John 14:15-21 Jesus' farewell discourse continues from the previous week. The Holy Spirit is promised to the disciples, and they are comforted by the Lord's promise: that he will not leave them orphaned but will return to them. Jesus exhorts them to show love for their Lord by giving loving obedience to his commands.

**Sermon Text:** Acts 17:22-31

**Sermon Theme:** MAKING THE UNKNOWN KNOWN

Prayer: CW p. 126. Lord's Prayer: CW p. 43.

ACTS 17:22-31

ASCENSION

5/17/2020

MAKING THE UNKNOWN KNOWN

EASTER 6

MY DEAR CRISTIAN FRIENDS,

Throughout our lives, teachers have played a very important role. What they did in the formative years of our lives was to teach you and me the things we didn't already know. We might call what our teachers did for us, making the unknown known.

Those of you who are teachers or who have studied in the field of education will agree with me that in teaching we progress from the known to the unknown. For example, when you went from first grade to the second grade, the teacher would build on what you knew from your first grade experience and then progress into the unknown—or the things you would now learn in the second grade. The goal of the second grade teacher would be to make those unknown things known so that you would then pass on to the third grade; where once again the teacher would endeavor to make the unknown known.

In our text, we find Paul, the apostle and teacher, in Athens. Athens was a great city of culture and learning. The verse just before our text tells of their passion for learning. It reads, *“All the Athenians and foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.”* (vs. 21)

On this particular day in Athens, Paul has been summoned before the Areopagus—a high ranking council in Athens whose duty it was to check out any and all new teachers who came into the city. This council would check out the new teacher and determine whether they would allow him to continue to teach his philosophical or religious ideas.

So Paul is standing in the midst of this distinguished council near the top of Mars hill and he says to them, *“Men of Athens, I see that in every way you are very religious.”* By this Paul was acknowledging their wisdom and admiring their pursuit of knowledge and understanding. From observing all their statues and idols, Paul could say that they were very religious.

Yet, while the Athenians might have been very religious in that they had many statues and many idols and many gods, Paul also knew that they did not know the true God, the Triune God; and they did not know their Savior from sin, Jesus Christ. Paul pointed to their lack of true knowledge of God in their religion when he pointed to one idol in particular—the altar to the unknown god.

So Paul tells them that he will make known to them the unknown. The true God and Savior who deserved and even demanded their worship and praise, Paul would now reveal to the council and to the Athenians. How this must have raised their curiosity and interest. Here was a man so bold as to think that he could make the unknown known in a matter of minutes. This man was going to make known what the philosophers and the free thinkers had been searching for for years—the truth about God. The unknown was about to be made known to them.

The rest of this text is really all about just that—MAKING THE UNKNOWN KNOWN. In doing so, Paul will answer such standard teaching questions as who? what? and how? He tells them I. Who God is II. What we are to know about God III. How we are to make God known.

As we go through Paul's lesson of making the unknown known, we too will be reminded of certain truths about our God. We will be reminded that he is Triune—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Paul's lesson also serves to better equip you and me, God's teachers of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, for making the unknown known to an unknowing world around us.

In verses 24-26, Paul makes known the who of God. He identified God as the Creator—the one who made the heavens and the earth; and as the Provider—the one not served by human hands, but rather the One who has provided everything for us and who has given to all men even their very life and breath. For Paul to identify God as the creator of the world, as Lord of heaven and earth, as the provider of all things, is a simple lesson for you and me. But as most teachers would agree, that which appears to be quite simple can be at times the most difficult to teach. Such would be the case with Paul and the Athenians.

While these are simple and time honored truths for you and me, they were not so for the Athenians. Paul is addressing a group of people heavily steeped in superstition and in the many gods of ancient mythology. Even Zeus, their chief god, could not stand up to the description of this God that Paul had just made known to them. Zeus was a powerful god, but he had never been recognized as the creator, preserver, and Lord of all things. Not even all the ancient gods combined could live up to the Almighty God that Paul had just described to them.

Another eye opener for the Athenians is that this God did not need to be served by human hands. The Athenians were used to gods who needed statues and idols and rituals and even human sacrifices. To think that the true God did not need these things was diametrically opposed to their way of thinking.

Their way of thinking was that we always provide things for our gods. The very idea that God is our Father who provides everything and that we are his offspring and in him we live, move, and have our being was foreign to the Athenian way of thinking of a god. They had always been in a position of serving a god out of fear and to appease the anger of their gods. Never had they known, as you and I do, to worship and praise a god out of love and thankfulness for all that he has done for us.

While these basic facts about God are easy for you and me to see, what about the people around us? Talk to a neighbor, a colleague, a friend or a relative. See what different ideas you'll get about God. I dare say that there are many Athenians in the world today—people who do not really know God, know his blessings, or know his love. Many have a vague concept of God, but do not recognize him as Lord of heaven and earth. Who God is still an unknown to many in the world today—an unknown that you and I need to make known.

Now that Paul has covered the fundamentals concerning God, namely making known who the true God is, he goes on to the question of what. Here Paul makes known what God has done in sending Jesus to be the Savior, raising him from the dead and appointing him as judge of the world.

There is a phrase in this section that at first glance is puzzling. Paul says, *In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now commands all people everywhere to repent.*” It would be a mistake to say that God would overlook ignorance when judgment day rolls around. Remember Paul is speaking to Gentile pagans, people who may have never heard this message of the gospel before. Paul tells them that God will overlook their ignorance in worshipping false gods in the past; but now that Jesus had come and was being made known to them, all people everywhere are commanded to repent of their sins and turn to Jesus. This was their time of grace. This was their time to come to know the true God, to repent, to believe in Jesus’ resurrection, and to be saved. This was a time to turn from their idols and turn to the true God and the Savior Jesus Christ, who was being made known to them.

Paul further makes known to them what God will do by telling them that God has appointed a day in the future when judgment will take place by the man he has appointed. The time of forbearance, of overlooking the past, would be over. This demanded their immediate repenting and turning to God. God has given proof of this by raising his one and only Son from the dead. Jesus would be the one who will judge the world. They would be judged not by their past idols, but by whether they believed or rejected Jesus as the only Savior from sin.

What this lesson taught the Athenians is that while the true God provided them with everything, including their very life-breath, he didn’t need anything in return. It also taught them that what God wants is their hearts. There was to be no other God. And, as there is but one God, there is only one way of salvation. That salvation was by what God has done for us in sending his Son; and not by what man could do for God.

The lesson is also a good one for you and me and for our world today; for people today are tempted to turn to the idols and temptations of this world. There are still idols in our everyday lives. They may take on different shapes and forms than the idols of the Athenians, but they are idols nevertheless. Anything in this world which draws a person away from the true God and away from Jesus as the only Savior from sin is an idol in whatever shape or form it may be.

Paul has now made known the who and what of God. Now we want to look at how Paul made the unknown known and how you and I are to do this in our day and age. This is where you and I, the former pupils, become the teachers in making the unknown known to an unknowing world around us. As any teacher would agree, to be a good teacher you must stay ahead of your students. This means that you and I need to be constantly studying the Word of God—the Bible. There is where the true God has revealed himself and it is from the pages of Scripture that you and I will know the true God and be able to make the true God known to the world around us.

The next thing we learn about is how to make the unknown known from Paul’s lesson is his methodology. He went from what they knew to what they didn’t know. He revealed to them how God created the world and everything in it. He showed them how God is Lord and ruler of all. He explained that God alone will judge on the Last Day by the one he has appointed, namely Jesus Christ his only Son, who died on the cross and was raised again to life.

Certainly, Paul knew the fear of witnessing, of making the unknown known as he spoke before the Areopagus and no doubt heard the sneers when he mentioned the resurrection. There will always be those who hear of the true God and of his salvation and who reject it, even in our day. But there were some that day who wanted to hear more.

When you and I simply make known the unknown concerning our God and Savior, there will be some who want to hear more. The Apostle Paul often spoke of the inexpressible joy which he had in making the unknown known. It is a joy that one cannot know unless one has shared his joy of salvation with another. You and I have the joy of salvation—the blessed hope of everlasting life in heaven; may we also experience the joy of making the unknown known. May the true and only God, the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit bless our efforts to make him known throughout the world. In Jesus name. AMEN.