

Text: Acts 17: 16-31
Title: Free Range to Rocky Hill
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Grant was raised in a fine faithful family, went to Christian schools, grew up in the church, and was surrounded by authentic-thoughtful-Christians who loved and encouraged him every step of the way. He got the best, the faith-culture had to offer.

However, Grant and his wife decided that they didn't want to force any ideas of God on their children. They didn't want to limit or restrain the Divine to one particular religion, experience, or expression. They wanted their children to pick their own path and pursue their own sense of God.

Grant believes that his children will be best served to select a faith, or no faith, or different parts of faith from the readily available panoply of faiths. He trusts that as his children come of age they will search for the God that makes the best sense to them. He is raising his children as free range spiritual chickens.

Maybe that's the best we can hope for in a post-modern, post-Christian, post-truth world. God is not limited or linked, named or contained, to any particular religious tradition. God is above, beyond, internal, immediate, and accessible through whatever practice works. Engagement with God is finally a pragmatic and personal preference. Human spirituality is best understood as a cafeteria....

Dear friends, this morning we're reminded that there is nothing new under the sun. First century Greeks affirmed a panoply of possible gods. Theirs was such a free range that they kept an altar to an "unknown god." And, alongside religious and philosophic speculation they championed great human values like temperance, tolerance, and reason. First century Greeks were not unlike twenty-first century Americans.

And that's where we pick up our intrepid missionary....

Last week we left Paul eating breakfast in Philippi. He has since traveled south to Greece and is waiting for Silas and Timothy in Athens. Our text finds him walking the streets and getting a taste for Athenian culture. Sounds lovely. Except, he's stressed by the spiritual vibe and starts to run his mouth in the synagogue and marketplace. This attracts attention; and because they love the new and the novel, Paul is invited to the Areopagus.

The Areopagus was both a place and a position.

In Greek the word means, "Ares Rock." It is a rocky hill northwest of the Acropolis in Athens. But, the Areopagus was also a council of nine chief magistrates who met on that site. Matters of the criminal courts, law, philosophy and politics were adjudicated there. I'm not sure what to liken it to ~ a cross between the Supreme Court, the National Cathedral, and Meet the Press?

When Paul spoke at the Areopagus he stood at the pinnacle of Athenian culture. Where so much of the biblical story turns the world upside-down, and the last and least are raised up, this is the gospel engaging the cultural elite. This is the gospel under the bright lights. For the first century PBS crowd this was must-see-theater ~ a bare-knuckled brawl of gospel and culture.

And, while I can think of little more boring than a sermon about a sermon....

With a winsome spirit, Paul opens on common ground by affirming the Athenian's spiritual vitality. You can imagine the Athenians patting themselves on the back. But, then Paul turns the screw a bit....

He points out that in worshipping that which is unknown they are ignorant of the God who is known. And he names that God as the creator of the cosmos ~
the one who gives breath and created beetles,
the one who ordered the seasons and carved out the mountains,
the one who fashioned sounds that are formed as music,
the one who....
You get the idea.

Which leads to a wonderful little line:

God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us...

Paul doesn't lambast searchers and seekers.

Paul doesn't wag a finger at those for whom faith doesn't come easily.

In fact, he affirms the deep longing for God ~ suggesting that it is part of the very fabric of creation. And in that longing, God is not far from any one of us.

God is not far from any one of us.

No matter where you are this morning,
no matter how dead to God you might be,
no matter how distant you feel,
no matter how indifferent to organized religion,
no matter in what free range you're wandering,
God is not far from you.
Thanks be to God.

Then, just when you might expect Paul to start thumping the Bible, he offers two quotes from Greek philosophers and poets. The line "For in him we live and move and have our being," is originally from the philosopher Epimenides. And again, Paul is staking out common ground. We are all God's offspring, so how can God reside in what we create?

And with that Paul proclaims that God is not just creator but also judge and he has set a day when all will be judged justly....

God is creator.

God is not far.

God is judge.

Good enough.

A three-point sermon.

A job well done.

Let's go get a cold drink.

Except that Paul twists the screw one more time....

Proof of this is that the man God has appointed to judge...

God has also raised from the dead...

And with that, this lovely discourse comes to a screeching halt. PBS wishes they could cut to a commercial. In the city of the "unknown god" Paul never names Jesus, but the specificity of Jesus and the mystery of the resurrection are where things come undone.

It always gets messy when it gets particular.

A new Pew Research Center study finds that one-third of Americans say they don't believe in the God of the Bible, but they do believe there is a higher power or spiritual force in the universe. In fact, nearly three-quarters of those who identify as non-religious believe in a higher power of some kind, just not the God as described in the Bible....

There are all sorts of problems and interpretations of what it means to "believe in the God of the Bible." But, you get the point. There is something comforting and familiar with a vague god; the specificity of Jesus and the implications of the resurrection are where it gets bristly.

In Latin the Areopagus is "Mars Hill."

Christians have since coined that phrase for those venues where they try to engage culture with gospel. For example, there used to be an excellent collection of interviews, reflections, and reviews called "Mars Hill" that was mailed out every few months on cassette tapes.

Or, churches have staked their claim. Mars Hill was a booming mega-church in Grand Rapids until the founding pastor went to Hollywood to write books and be on Oprah. Only to suggest that God's love stretched so far that all might be saved, and that got him labeled a heretic and booted from the insider's table.

Or, there was a Mars Hill multi-site mega-church in Seattle that imploded over misogyny, bullying, fiscal malfeasance, and plagiarism...

Clearly the engagement of gospel and culture is a messy, complex, critical, flawed, fallen, human-divine enterprise. It is beautiful and bristly, and yet it also seems to be part of what it means to practice resurrection....

For while Paul and the early apostles can't quite explain or make sense of the resurrection they also can't seem to make it less essential or particular.

For as Jesus is the singular unique incarnation of God,
and as he is resurrected from the dead,
then creation swings on a new hinge and there is something more than just a free range of gods and ideas about god.

The practice of resurrection for Paul means climbing a rocky hill and giving voice to the way in which he sees the world because of Jesus Christ.

And that's scary....

Dear friends, to practice resurrection is....

to proclaim and embody forgiveness,
to recalibrate our sense of self, others, God,
to sing,
and to engage people with the story of God in Christ.

Did I say that it's scary?

It's easier to go free range.

Hope member, educational and medical mission entrepreneur, Steve Vryhof hatched the phrase "rooted cosmopolitan" to describe a contemporary faithfulness. I like that....

We are rooted in the good news of God in Christ. We are rooted in the resurrection, but we are planted with all sorts of other vegetation. We're not rootless tumbleweeds, but we are planted in a free range. Our calling is to be nurtured and sustained (rooted) even as we grow and spread and bear fruit and intertwine and cross fertilize with other trees in the field. We don't uproot who we are, but we share common soil and the same sun and rain as our neighbor trees.

God in Christ does the work of resurrection; ours is the practice of resurrection. Ours is to be rooted cosmopolitans ~ rooted and bearing fruits of love, kindness, mercy, and hope... Rooted and willing to bear witness on both rocky hill and open range.

May we be reminded that God is not far from any one of us.

May we be encouraged by and emulate Paul's generous spirit.

May we be rooted in the love of God in Christ.

May we be willing, wise, winsome, and honest in how we tell our story about the one resurrected from the dead.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.