

To Know That You Know

Acts 17:22-31; John 14:15-21

April 27, 2008

Rev. Chris Cadenhead

Have you ever been sure that you knew something, only to be proven wrong? I am not talking here about simple mistakes, like when you got distracted and put the milk carton back in the cabinet instead of the refrigerator. I am talking about those times when you acted on the basis of what you believed to be indisputable facts, only to discover that those “facts” weren’t true after all – an investment decision, an answer to an exam question, something you knew was a sure bet. But you were wrong.

If you have had that experience – and we have all had that experience – then you are in good company, because it means that you are a member of the human race. As humans we sometimes get things wrong. Sometimes, we get them *way* wrong. Two centuries ago white Christians in the south knew that God ordained and blessed the institution of slavery. They were sure of it; it says so right there in the Bible. Thank God we learned we were wrong.

Or go back two hundred years earlier than that. That’s when a brilliant man named Galileo published a book defending Copernicus’ view that the earth actually revolved around the sun, not the other way around as people had always thought. But the church knew that he was wrong, for the Bible clearly says so. And so, under threat of excommunication, even under threats of torture at the hands of church officials, Galileo was forced to recant his views and was forbidden from publishing anything else on the subject. It wasn’t until 1992, three and a half centuries later, that Pope John Paul II formally acknowledged that Galileo was right.

Human knowledge is fallible. Just because we say we know something doesn’t automatically mean that it is true.

Which makes this morning’s Scripture readings all the more relevant. Though they weren’t chosen because of this, there is a sliver of connective tissue that ties them together. John 14, Acts 17, even 1 Peter 3, all at least touch on this touchy subject of knowing and not knowing. They all, in one way or another, call our attention to the distinction between those who know the truth of the gospel and those who do not. And, just as importantly, these Scriptures point us towards the bridge that takes us across that divide.

Let’s first consider 1 Peter 3. This letter deals broadly with the eerily relevant topic of how believing Christians are to live in the midst of an unbelieving world. And in verse 15 we

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come to this piece of instruction. “*Always be prepared,*” he says, “*to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.*” In other words, when people want to know why you believe as you do, be ready to tell them.

That is both an encouraging and a frightening verse. It is encouraging because it reminds us that our hope is grounded in a concrete reason. Christian hope has a shape and a source. As believers we do not have hope because we tend to be more optimistic than others. We don’t have hope because we thought about it and decided that the world really isn’t in that bad a shape after all. We don’t have hope because we see signs of progress all around us. We don’t have hope because we spent the night gazing at the stars and figured it is the logical thing to do. No, we have hope because God brought our Lord Jesus Christ back from the dead. What we believe is grounded in the resurrection and in nothing else. And *that* gives us all the reason we need to have hope.

And yet *that* also points out what is so disconcerting about this verse, because how can you possibly explain it? If people want to know why you have the hope that is in you, and you tell them, what do you do if they ask you to prove it? I think this is the great fear that lies behind our reluctance to share our faith. There is always the possibility that someone will ask a question for which you do not have an answer or raise an objection for which you do not have a response.

For an entire year I shared an apartment with a guy who was an atheist. He was a nice guy – intelligent, friendly, good sense of humor. For the most part, he was respectful of my beliefs, but whenever the subject matter came up in conversation my inability to prove anything to him frustrated me. Here was the thing that was the foundation of my life, and yet it seemed completely unintelligible to him, no matter how hard I tried to explain it. Hope does have its reason, but that reason won’t make sense to everybody.

That comes through strongly in the fascinating story we have in Acts 17. There we read that the Apostle Paul was in the historic city of Athens, home to some of the greatest philosophical minds in the history of western civilization. In verses 16-18 we read that Paul did what Paul always did when his missionary journeys took him to a new city – he went to the local synagogue. In other words, he went and found his Jewish brethren, those who shared his

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religious background. And he began to talk to them about how Jesus was the long awaited Messiah.

Well, this is Athens, the seat of pagan intellectualism, the birthplace of the open mind. And it turns out that some of the leading scholars of the city caught wind of what Paul was saying, especially that part about somebody being resurrected from the dead. That idea tickled their ears, not because they believed it, but only because it was a new idea. And for an intellectual nothing breaks the boredom of life like a new idea to chew on for a while. These great men of learning invited Paul to come and speak to them, to come and scratch their intellectual itch.

And what we have in verses 22-31 is the speech he gave at their request. Paul's words provide a brilliant example of how belief and unbelief can be in conversation with one another. His words also show us that such a conversation has its limits.

Notice that Paul begins with a bit of flattery. "*Men of Athens!*" he says, "*I see that in every way you are very religious.*" 1 Peter 3:15, which tells us to be ready to give a reason for the hope we have also tells us that we are to do this with gentleness and respect. That is precisely what Paul does. He begins with courtesy, not with hostility.

He then quickly moves on to find common ground with his audience by appealing to the natural world. When Paul spoke to his fellow Jews he could begin by appealing to Scripture. But these weren't Jews. They were pagans, so Scripture meant nothing to them. Even if they had read the Torah or the Prophets, they would have no reason to think it more important than any other text they'd come across. Paul could quote the Bible all day long and they would be totally unmoved by it. So instead he points them to the heavens and the stars and the season, to the inherent beauty in the natural world. Surely these men of learning, with their keen minds would not have missed that. Surely they would be open to the possibility that something or someone was behind it all.

Then, almost as quickly Paul moves from nature to religion. As he looks at all their shrines to all their idols Paul recognizes that these are people with a deep religious sensitivity. As it turns out they do have a sense that there is something or someone behind it all, and they

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have a city full of temples to prove it. Yes, all their religious searching and seeking is totally misguided, but Paul gives credit where credit is due. At least they are searching and seeking. He even quotes an unknown poet of theirs to draw attention to their own religious impulses.

All seems to be going well. Paul is establishing common ground and laying what appears to be the foundation for a winsome argument. But then something happens and things go sour, for that is when Paul takes a leap of knowledge that is so far and broad that not even these great men of learning can follow him. Paul tells them about the resurrection. He says that the God who is behind everything they see, the God who has inspired their spiritual longings – He isn't just any God. He is the God of Israel, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the one and same God who brought back Jesus Christ from the dead. And he alone is the God who is to be worshipped.

And what do these great men of learning do when Paul tells them that, these men of powerful intellects who supposedly have the ability to weight the merit any idea? They laugh and scoff. A small handful believes, but most of them just reject Paul's words as superstitious nonsense. So much for their open mindedness.

Here is the great problem we face. Here is why giving reason for the hope we have is such a humbling challenge. You cannot reason or argue your way to the resurrection. There is no logical train of thought that will lead you straight the idea that God must have surely brought Jesus back from the dead. The idea of resurrection – and the God who causes it to happen – is not the natural outcome of any other idea. You can gaze at the beauty of the natural world and get a sense that there might be someone behind it all, but there is nothing in the starry sky to tell us that the One who is behind it all is the God who reveals himself as Yahweh – the great I Am. You can ponder the spiritual longings in the hearts of men and women around the globe, but you will find nothing there to insist that the object of those longings let Himself be born into a manger in a place called Bethlehem. You can celebrate to the predictable rhythms of the seasons, but there is nothing in the blooming flowers to tell you that because of a cross and an empty grave death has been swallowed up in victory. Not even the philosophers of Athens have figured that one out.

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There are some things you cannot know unless they are revealed to you by a source beyond you.

Which brings us to the beautiful words of John 14. This morning's reading is an excerpt from Jesus' long farewell speech to his disciples. Jesus is preparing them for his departure. And here in these few verses, Jesus himself points us to the distinction between those who know and those who do not know. On the one hand there is the world, those who do not – Jesus actually says those who cannot – believe. Jesus says there are those among us who will not be able to see, no matter how many logical arguments are made. Their eyes and ears and minds and hearts are blinded to the gospel.

On the other hand there are those who do know, who have seen that Jesus is the truth and who have cast their lot with Him, perhaps even in the absence of logical arguments.

What's the difference between these groups? And how does one cross over this divide of knowledge? The answer, simply put, is the Holy Spirit. He is the living, indwelling presence of the risen Christ, and He is how you move from unbelief to belief, from not seeing to seeing, from not knowing to knowing. The truth of Jesus Christ and his resurrection cannot be reasoned; it can only be revealed.

“The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him,” Jesus says, speaking of the Holy Spirit. *“But you know him.”* Why? Is it because you heard a really good argument in favor of it? Is it because a winsome preacher told you about it? Is it because you got alone with your thoughts and decided that it must be true? No. *“But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you.”*

Now I know that drives the logically minded ones among us crazy, because the reasoning is circular. How do you know him? Because he lives in you. But how can you be sure that he lives in you? Because you know him. You can't break in to that circle by means of any other argument. There is no universally agreed upon knowledge, there is no universal common ground by which to argue our way to the truth that Jesus is risen. If there were, then everybody in the world would be a believer. It would just make sense to anyone who stopped to think about it.

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But if what Jesus said and did just made sense to everybody, then how did he manage to make people so mad that they hung him on a cross?

There is a place – an important place – for intellect in the faith. Down throughout the ages God has blessed the church with men and women of great intellectual skill who help us think rightly and carefully about what we believe. We are to worship God with our minds as well as with our bodies and spirits. But in the end, true knowledge of the gospel comes only by means of the Holy Spirit. And the Spirit blows where it will. Faith is not the result of human striving. It is a gift of God.

How, then, do we follow Peter's instructions? Given the mysterious nature of the Holy Spirit, how can we give the reason for our hope to those who don't believe? Jesus has already told us. "*If you love me,*" he says to his disciples in John 14:15 – "*If you love me you will...*

- construct eloquent arguments for my resurrection?
- convince everyone you meet that I am real?
- Understand all the mysteries of the triune God?

No. What he says is, "*If you love me, you will obey what I command.*" The best evidence we can give for the hope we have is not abstract argument, but concrete example. For if the Holy Spirit is truly living in us, it will no longer be we acting and speaking on our own. He will act and speak through us.

And who knows? Maybe He will bridge the divide of faith for someone else as he once did for us.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.