

The UMC of Berea
Acts 17.16-31; John 14.15-21
6th Sunday of Easter

A few years ago, as a hobby of sorts, I took up the practice of baking bread. I do not remember why I began, but the more I did it, the more I enjoyed it, and the more I branched out, baking more and different types of bread. Sandwich loaves, baguettes, and dinner rolls—pretzels, brioche, pita, and naan: whatever the type of bread, there was something about the process of making it—mixing, kneading, and baking it—that I found incredibly satisfying.

Bread-baking is a semi-exact science but leaves a little room for experimenting. It can run the gamut from basic to a bit complex. And it takes time—requires patience—but ultimately has a tangible product. At its root—in that way—it gave me a small sense of something I could control.

That sense of control is a primary motivator for lots of folks who are picking up new hobbies these days, including baking bread. During this public health crisis, with so much feeling so uncertain, we find our hands grasping not just for something we can *do* but for something we can *control*: some tangible outlet for the anxiety that's building within us.

That desire for a sense of control is a very basic human desire and a desire that provides the context for today's story from Acts 17: the apostle Paul preaching at Mars Hill in Athens, a city—we are told—that is “flooded with idols.” Idols, of course, can be almost anything: anything we substitute for God in our lives, anything that occupies our time or attention, distracting us from our primary occupation of loving God and loving our neighbors.

We create idols out of people, ideas, objects, and activities: celebrities and politicians, wealth and possessions, careers, hobbies—even our families, children, physical appearance. United Methodist Bishop Ken Carter suggests that the most impressive structures in a city reveal our idols: athletic complexes, healthcare facilities, centers of commerce, institutions of learning—temples built in reverence to idols of pleasure, longevity, wealth, upward mobility—the people and pursuits around which we build our lives.

At the root of every idol—whether made of concrete or glass or those less tangible, more pernicious idols like wealth, privilege, and accomplishment—at the root of every idol is this desire for a sense of control: to control our circumstances, to control the divine, to “have our cake and eat it, too” with our religion—to have some almighty God whom we can control to steer things our way.

Of course, as we experience, that can be a deeply disappointing, frustrating form of spiritual practice. We experience all the time that we are not in control: none of us would choose our present communal circumstances. But that does not stop our trying. We want everything—including our religion, spirituality, god—to be quick and easy, tangible, on our terms. Idols give us that: something we can get our hands around, which is what we want especially when the world seems so out of control.

But a god we can get our hands around—a god we can predict or control—is not at all the sort of God we find in scripture—not at all the sort of God proclaimed by Paul this morning as the One “in whom we live, move, and exist.” The One we come to know in Christ—the God of resurrection—is endlessly mysterious, elusive: One who shows up in all sorts of unexpected ways, places, and persons. This God will not be reduced to any *transactional relationship*,

whereby we give some due reverence—an hour of attention Sunday morning, a prayer, an offering, a song—and thereby guarantee ourselves some earned blessing. Through and through, our scriptures warn us against such efforts to trap God in the boxes of our expectations.

Which really is good news, even if we are not in the mood for such surprises. But really, why would we worship a God who never does the unexpected? What would life be like without its surprising flashes of color, sound, and beauty—without its unlikely friendships and unearned blessings—without its moments of pure grace?

Without this mysterious God of the unexpected, the rainbow does not shine; our ancestors are not liberated; Mary remains stuck in some outpost of the Roman Empire; and Peter, James, and John just keep fishing for fish. The mysterious and unexpected are written throughout the pages of scripture and—thanks be to God—throughout the moments of our lives.

That is part of the message proclaimed by Paul today: Paul, who is one of many “patron saints” of the unexpected, the great persecutor of the church who becomes a prolific planter of churches after an unexpected encounter with God on his way to Damascus. Paul’s arrival in Athens and his preaching there continue this unexpected track.

The Epicureans and Stoics—the great “thinkers” of the day—did not suffer fools kindly, especially “amateurs,” as they call Paul, from far-off places like Jerusalem. And yet, unexpectedly, Paul plants himself there, in the high courts of intellectual sparring, and prepares to share with them his experiences with God. If we have been following the trajectory of Acts to this point, then we might have expectations for *how* he will do this. Folks like Stephen and Peter followed a familiar pattern, tracing back through the history of God’s people, presenting Jesus as the culmination of God’s loving purposes and gracious acts.

But that is not what Paul does. Unexpectedly, he tailors his message to his context. It’s a wonderful example for our own efforts to share faith with our neighbors. Paul walks around, looks around, experiences the culture of the people in that place. Then he quotes from an Athenian poet instead of reaching back into Torah. He critiques the limits of idols—our efforts for control—but not by quoting ancient Jewish prophets who rail against idolatry. Instead, he uses an example he found in their community.

“As I was walking around,” Paul says, “I noticed all your statues. I noticed how carefully you cover your bases, even dedicating an extra altar to ‘an unknown god,’ just in case you’ve missed any. Well,” Paul says, “I’m here to tell you about that ‘unknown god.’ What you worship as unknown, I now proclaim to you.”

They did not expect to hear a sermon about their “unknown god.” Mars Hill was dedicated to reason and rhetoric: what can be known, explained, proven—and, thereby, controlled. Now, Paul drops *divine mystery* on them: what little he has experienced of this mysterious, elusive, unknowable God.

Despite all their intelligence and learning, Paul reminds them there is still much that is unknown. And the “capper” on all of it, of course, is *resurrection*. Paul says that this unknown God “directs everyone everywhere to change their hearts and lives,” and the proof of God’s grace and love—justice and mercy—is found in having “raised Jesus from the dead.”

What could be more unexpected than that? What could be more elusive, mysterious, and gracious than resurrection?

As Paul knows from personal experience, resurrection changes everything. Resurrection challenges “reality,” reorients how we perceive earth and sky, water and soil, wealth and

possessions—all our idols, relationships, and even our own bodies. To proclaim resurrection is to evoke a decision: either to laugh at it or to listen to it—and, eventually, to *live* it—either to leave it and stick with our idols or to “change our hearts and lives” and come follow a Living God of Mystery into something unknown.

The God of Easter is no dead idol like the statues filling Athens—the distractions filling our lives. The God of resurrection is very much alive and always moving: both toward us and out ahead of us, in surprising, unexpected ways.

Easter is God’s great affirmation of unlimited promise and presence—beyond all our idols—through that Companion, the Spirit of Truth Jesus talks about in our other reading today. It is not a presence we can easily touch or hold or control like some statue. It is so much *more*: a dynamic and constant companion, the Spirit of the One in whom we live, move, and exist.

So, which will it be: resurrection or our idols? Around which will we shape our lives? That is the choice Paul puts before the Athenians and before us. In this, our continuing season of uncertainty: will we choose grace—life-giving, mysterious, and unexpected—or some other thing, person, or ideology that promises the illusion of control?

Always, the temptation is to run to what is easiest. But in the risen Christ, we are promised so much more: not a god we can control but a God who goes before us, prepares a place for us, stands with us and stays with us, giving us the words and witness we need to share a grace that sets the world free.

Resurrection, to be sure, is unexpected. Our world right now is uncertain. But this much we know: resurrection can be trusted, and it is happening in us and around us all the time. So, by God’s grace, may we control what we can—making choices to care for our neighbors well—while also embracing the mystery of what we cannot control: opening ourselves to being surprised by the One in whom we live, move, and exist: the God of unexpected grace, for Christ is risen, indeed. Amen.