

## **Taking a Chance**

Acts 17:22-31

John 14:15-21

Crossroads Christian Church

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Easter 6A

When I stop at a gas station to fill up the car, I sometimes notice other customers there buying lottery tickets, and the bigger the jackpot, the more customers. Young folks and old were eagerly handing over bills, and not just one dollar bills, either, to have a chance to win that big prize. Of course the odds are often millions to one against winning, but that doesn't seem to stop people.

I can't help but think of all these people with all those big dreams in the backs of their minds. What if? What if? Maybe it'll be my turn. Maybe my life will completely turn around, and I'll live in the kind of house and wear the kind of clothes and drive the kind of car that will be the envy of my friends. And if they don't like it, I can buy new friends. I won't be lonely anymore, I won't be anxious, I won't be looked down upon anymore. Is an infinitesimal chance at something like that, life so rich and prosperous, worth a buck, or a five, or a ten? I don't think so, but lots of people do. It strikes a deep, deep longing, doesn't it? We want to be successful, we want to feel that we're worth something, we want to be somebody, so we take a chance.

Let's change the scene. It's a dark upper room, with little flickering oil lamps fighting against the shadows. Although they may know it in the back of their minds, no one is willing to speak to their deepest fears—that this is the eve of execution. These poor people, fishermen and the like, had taken a chance—not a simple chance with little investment, like buying a lottery ticket. No, they had put everything aside, invested their lives, taken great risks to follow a man who might be the Messiah. Over the few weeks and years days leading to this night, they had lived under incredible

tension. Something had to happen. Jesus, and by extension, all of them, had been making waves in a don't-make-waves world. Yet they knew that they had lived under foreign oppression for generations. They were allowed to live in their own ways, according to their own dreams and customs, only to the extent that it was convenient for the Romans for them to do so. And even then, they had to pay burdensome taxes, and accept the indignity of having pagan foreign troops garrisoned in their land.

In this context, is it a surprise that many longed for a Messiah who would come like Moses came to Egypt, to free them from bondage? Is it a surprise that they would look for someone like King David to be the Messiah, leading mighty armies to turn the tables on their overlords? And given all that, is it a surprise that those who did wield religious and cultural power in uneasy alliance with the Romans would be suspicious and fearful of those who might claim to be this Messiah, who might upset the political balance and bring the full fury of Rome down upon them? And there had been many dreamers who saw themselves as messiahs and had tried to lead rebellions, sure that God would somehow be on their side, only to be crushed like ants by the powers that be.

So into this atmosphere, into this cauldron of political intrigue, social unrest, and frightened vested interest came Jesus. He was willing to die for the sake of the nation, so that the nation would not perish. He came willing to die, but he agonized for the sake of his friends, the disciples. What would become of them/ How would they find the strength, the courage, to go on, carrying his message?

Thus it was that in the upper room Jesus gave them what they needed—not what they expected, not what they hoped for, but what they needed. And what he gave in that dark upper room he gives to us.

Jesus asked the disciples for a response to his unconditional love. They know of his love for them. It was a

love that would never let go. And the disciples loved Jesus. Hadn't they taken a big chance to follow him? Hadn't they stayed with him through thick and thin? So Jesus said to them, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." And what were the commandments of Christ? To love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself.

Jesus went on to say that they would never have to go it alone. Even though he would not be with them in the earthly sense, he would never be far from them. His Spirit—the Advocate—the Helper—the Spirit of Truth—would be with them in any crisis they faced.

Think about that for a minute. Have you ever been in trouble and have someone stand by you, somebody help you out, someone go to bat for you? Maybe it was a teacher when you got in trouble at school; an understanding parent; a lawyer who pleaded your case; a pastor who was there with you in a crisis. Then you have met the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, working through another person. You weren't alone, and that made all the difference.

And so it was with Jesus and the disciples. They wouldn't be alone. In spite of his death upon the cross, Christ would live—and they would live also. All the powers of death, all the powers of sin, all the powers of fear would have no hold over them, because they would know the power of the risen Christ through the presence of God's Spirit. And it happened. It happened! Happened! Christ's Spirit came to them, and they went into the world with a message that still burns in our hearts today. They trusted Christ's promise, and Christ was true to his promise. They endured all odds, and people noticed.

One who came to follow the risen Christ a few years later was Saul of Tarsus—at first, Saul was an enemy of the followers of Christ, but later he became Christianity's greatest witness, St. Paul. After the Spirit sent him a vision,

he took the Gospel to Europe for the first time, into what we now know as Greece. Today's Epistle lesson tells us about one of his experiences there, when he preached to the philosophers at Athens. In the open public square in Athens, they had monuments there to all the gods, including one to an unknown God. That's called hedging your bets. Paul identified that unknown God as the one true God, the Creator of everything, who sent Jesus Christ into the world and who raised him from the dead. That story is just one example of how Christians have tried to bring their message into new arenas.

It was God's Spirit that guided the apostles; God's Spirit that guided St. Paul' and it's still God's Spirit that helps spread the Good News of Jesus Christ around the world. It's God's Spirit that draws us here today. When we come to the Table in a few minutes, we will celebrate the Spirit of the risen Christ at this communion table as we break bread and drink the wine. When we baptize a believer, we offer up and receive an outward and visible sign of the grace of God, given to us not because we deserve it, but because God loves us that much. People get excited about taking a chance when they run out and buy lottery tickets, and they run out and buy what will most likely be thrown away as worthless bits of paper. We have something different here. Not an unlikely chance at an improbable fortune, but a sure thing—a legacy of God's love, the presence of the risen Christ, the comfort of God's Spirit. I wonder why that doesn't seem to make us more excited? What would happen if it did? What would happen if people in the community started seeing the transforming power of God's Spirit at work in our lives? What would happen? Maybe we should take a chance and find out. Amen.

By Michael E. Dixon