

EASTER VI

Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' Acts 17:22

Let me introduce myself. My name's Paul, the Preacher Formerly Known as Saul. I'm the smartest guy in the room—in any room. In fact, I'm usually the smartest guy in any city. You might not know that by my previous occupation. I was a tent-maker, a useful, necessary, but rather humble craft. In fact, making tents is still my day job.

But my vocation, my true calling, is the preaching of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. *What? you may be asking yourselves? Who's this Jesus? We've never heard of him here in Athens.* Or, if you have heard of him, you may wonder what a guy who claims to be so smart is doing ranting on about an obscure Jewish rabble-rouser from a primitive part of the world?

It wasn't always this way. I used to hate Jesus, and despise all those who followed him. I thought he was a quack, a faker who was polluting the purity of Judaism, and I considered all his groupies to be a contemptible army of dolts who had drunk his wine and been hallucinating ever since. To my eternal shame, I even helped to kill one, the sainted Stephen, who as he was about to be stoned to death asked God to forgive us our sin, because we didn't know what we were doing

Now, at the time I thought that prayer simply demonstrated the stupidity of the whole Jesus movement. Praying for your killers? How bizarre is that.

But the memory wouldn't leave me, it plagued me, and a few days later as I was riding home to Damascus I dropped like a stone off my donkey. Something blazing had struck me, and I was blind for three whole days. During that dark time I had plenty of chance to think and pray, and it came to me that that blaze was Jesus, and the Good News of God's grace and forgiveness. God's forgiveness of me, even me, a stone killer. That's what Stephen was talking about.

I never saw Jesus in the flesh, but he has appeared to me as the Risen Christ as vividly as any human being, as real as my own mother, and I know Christ is the Savior of the world. Once I knew this, knew this with my whole heart and soul, my whole mind and body, all I could do—all I can do for the rest of my life—is tell others about God's incredible mercy, and about the gift of love and assurance that God sent in the person of Jesus, his beloved child.

So I'm here to tell you, people of Athens. You need to receive this news, to believe this news. But I know I'm in the center of the cultured world, the most sophisticated civilization known anywhere, and even though I'm smart, and can talk the leg off a mule, and have mastered the art of rhetoric in order to deliver my message to greatest effect, I'm still a bit anxious here.

You've called me a seed-picker, a babbler of secondhand ideas, without the scholarly credentials you so respect. After all, Socrates taught right here, where I am standing. How am I going to get through to you? How

am I going to gain your attention, your respect? Not for my own sake, but for the sake of the Gospel, the Good News.

Well, flattery's always a winning ticket. You are very religious already, I can see that. I'm religious; you're religious. Common ground already. I'm okay; you're okay. I don't mean to imply you're not. You are not devoid of spiritual depth and yearning.

How do I know? Because I've seen your altar 'to an unknown God.' This, people of Athens, touches my heart. I won't call this altar an idol, as some intolerant folk would. I'll call it a testament to your intellectual skepticism, your suspicion of certainties, of dogma and doctrine. I'll call your altar a sign of your groping toward the truth, your determination to honor and worship the promise of God.

And that God is not my God, not your God—I mean, not mine only, not yours only. That God is *our* God.

I have planted churches in various cities around the Mediterranean, and if I do say so, I've been very successful in spreading the Jesus movement. But the challenge doesn't stop with a winning start-up. I've got to keep all these young churches— young in years and young in spiritual maturity—on the right track. I have to keep reminding them that in the Good News of Jesus there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, man nor woman. We are all one in Christ.

That doesn't mean we give up our individuality. Not at all. It means that, as Jesus told his original followers, *in God's house are many rooms*. In God's house there's room for all of us, if we chose to take up residence there. God cherishes our singularity, our differences; God celebrates our

Jewishness and Greekness, even while inviting us into a community where such differences are transcended and overcome by love and forgiveness.

Of all this I am certain. I know, people of Athens, that you are not so certain yet. I bow down to your uncertainty. I welcome it. Your uncertainty is a sign and symbol of intellectual strength and integrity, of your ability to live with ambiguity, with the unknown.

And so, Athenians, let us worship together. Let us worship our God, known and unknown, the invitation, the mystery, the promise. Alleluia!
Amen