



He rose back to life to live forever. He accomplished everything he said, and he showed it. He was alive. The woman saw him. They proclaimed it. And yet, what do we see happening? The first thing that happens that first Easter and the following days? It almost seems like the church is shrinking, not growing. The disciples, instead of being emboldened by his resurrection, are locked behind closed doors in fear. And in fact, if you look at the number of those disciples out of those 11, one of them was seemingly no longer a disciple. But what we're going to see this morning is God's response to this shrinking church. Our resurrection goal includes growth. Growth for ourselves in the faith, and growth for God's church. And that's what we see. Despite all the fears, despite the setbacks, despite the denials, and even the persecution and attacks, the church, God's people, grow. That'll be our focus today as we see God's response to a cowering, fearful church. He will make it grow.

You would think that God doesn't have to help those who leave his Church. In fact, God ought to let those who leave his Church—like Thomas or others who find themselves cowering in fear—he ought to let them remain outside his kingdom. But instead, he invites them back in. He strengthens them. And that's what we see especially this morning as we look at the word of our God in the book of Acts chapter 18. We reach our resurrection goal with growth in the church.

The apostle Paul and his companions had encountered a lot of setbacks along the way as they made their way on Paul's second missionary trip. They finally made it to Macedonia and went down the peninsula of Greece towards the city of Corinth. And on his way, Paul encountered setback after setback. In Philippi he was beaten, flogged, and thrown in jail. And then he moved on his way as he was forced out of town. He got to Thessalonica and they were chasing him out of town within a few days. And then he got to Berea. At Berea the people are more noble. There were some believers there, of course, just as Paul found in every place. But the opposition came down from Thessalonica and drove him out of town. Paul had to leave once again. Oh, but maybe he could find some good in Athens, the cultural center, where they might listen to him and hear the gospel preaching. But in Athens he was mocked, laughed at. There were some believers. But it seems like for the most part Paul was dismissed.

Where's the growth? What's happening with God's resurrection message proclaimed by his great apostle? Well, Paul, it says, arrives at Athens and then he's mocked. He leaves. We pick up here in Acts chapter 18. *"After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth."* Corinth was probably about a size of a million people at this time, a major city in the Roman Empire and a major town. *"There, he met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife, Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all the Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them. That is, he stayed with them. And because he was a tentmaker, as they were, he stayed and worked with them."*

So that's his plan, huh? Paul, the missionary sent out by the church, commissioned by Jesus directly, comes to the great city of Corinth, and what's he doing? He's making tents. That was his job. Paul, after all, had to have a skill set, an occupation, and his job regularly had been a tent maker. And he encountered two other people that were also in the business, so he joined with them and was making tents. Maybe at this time, you might think of Paul—after rejection, chased out of town, more rejection, mockery, laughed at,— maybe he would just settle there and think to himself, "What's the use?" And day by day, he'd be making his tents, earning a living. Isn't that what we might be tempted to do if we were called to share God's Word and we found we didn't have enough support so we had to just work a full-time job?

But when we look at this, we can't say it's mere coincidence. God provides. God wants his church to grow. We don't know if Aquila and Priscilla were Christians at this time. They are just described here as Jewish. So they had the Old Testament faith. We do know that these two, over time, did not only become Christians, but people who would support Paul. They would remain behind in Ephesus as teachers of the Word, prominent figures in the church. God was planning things out. And it wasn't merely the emperor Claudius who expelled the Jews from Rome that meant them to be in Corinth. No, it was God's working across history. This was not a coincidence. This was God providing. In a city of perhaps a million, Paul ran across the very two people who God would use to sustain him when he needed to work extra on the side to earn a living.

And there with Priscilla and Aquila, Paul doesn't just give up and make tents. He does what some preachers do today. We call it a tent ministry. He worked with them, but *"every Sabbath he reasoned in the synagogue trying to persuade Jews and Greeks."* See, as tempting as it might be for us to just throw in the hat when we have setbacks and think, "maybe God doesn't want me sharing the gospel because my car broke down. Maybe God doesn't want me to share the gospel because I'm so busy I lost my job. Maybe he doesn't want me to be a missionary or an evangelist because I'm just working another job 24-7." What about the missionaries and pastors who failed to have their means met by the church? Paul was sent. Paul had a calling to share the gospel. And it didn't matter whether he received the needed funds or not. He was going to do his work, even if it was just on the Sabbath when he was done with his regular tent making. God provided. Even though there weren't enough Christians yet in Corinth for the gospel to spread with full-time ministry, God sent Paul. And God sent two friends into Paul's life so that Paul could at the least preach every Sabbath.

Yet God does more. *“When Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia, (they were Paul’s other companions who had remained behind,) Paul devoted himself exclusively to preaching.”* Now, that his companions had come from the previous churches that had been established in the other cities, it’s evident Paul received support. In fact, as Paul later on, years later, wrote his letter that we have, 2 Corinthians, he had to defend the reason why he was a tent minister. It was not necessarily because he had to. It was because he wanted to share the gospel for free in Corinth. But when support had come from the other churches, Paul devoted himself exclusively to preaching.

Paul was like the missionaries that we often send who have their daily bread met. They don’t have to work a side job so they can day-by-day proclaim the gospel. Even though Corinth, once again, had not yet enough Christians to support Paul, the Christians in Thessalonica, Philippi, and Berea were sending support so that Paul could spread the gospel further. And day by day he preached. God does this today, right? There are pastors, teachers, deacons, servants of God’s Word who could only on a part-time basis share the word unless they received support from others. We send out missionaries and we provide so that they can do full-time preaching and teaching. Think how easy it would be for us to say, “Well, maybe the Word isn’t being spread since we don’t see much growth. So why should we spread the gospel somewhere else? We’re facing persecution here in America. Why would we want to send missionaries anywhere else?” But God provides. As we look for our resurrection goal, he doesn’t want his church to simply sit down and cower in fear like the disciples behind closed doors. He wants us to support gospel preaching today.

The gospel spread. It says *“Paul was testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Messiah.”* Probably what I would argue would be a better translation, *“Jesus to be the Messiah.”* He’s the living Messiah. Paul was proclaiming what they laughed at in Athens, that this man who died is alive. He was proclaiming Jesus to be the Son of God who paid for the sins of the world.

But guess what happens with that gospel message in Corinth? Paul was sharing the wonderful message of the resurrected Jesus. But it says *“They,”* that is the Jewish people that heard him, *“opposed Paul and became abusive. He shook out his clothes in protest and said to them, ‘your blood be on your own heads. I’m innocent of it.’”* Once again, opposition. As if Paul hadn’t faced enough in Philippi, Berea, Thessalonica, and in Athens! Now in Corinth, as he finally gets to do full-time preaching, what happens? He’s rejected.

What ought Paul do to them? Paul says, *“Your blood be on your own heads.”* Isn’t that what God should do when his Word is rejected today, when people hear the gospel, when missionaries are supported and sent out and they’re not received? We see God had sent Paul to them in mercy, despite the fact he knew many Jews would reject him. He still sent Paul to them first. And God also desired that others would hear the message. Paul says, *“From now on, I will go to the Gentiles.”*

What about us when the gospel is dismissed, abused, or slighted? What about when we leave behind the preaching and the teaching of God’s Word? I don’t know if you’ve been to any of our state parks or some of the county parks, but they have certain hours where they’re holding their operation, and there’s a gate. There are only certain hours you can make it into the park. And they say that if you need to leave the park, you’re free to leave. But oh, don’t back up at the gate. You may have seen those curved spikes on the road. They’re those spikes that stick up with the curve so that your tire can go out of the park, but if you dare go into the park or try backing in, it will pierce your tire and destroy your car. The park is basically saying, *“You’re free to leave, but if you leave, you’re not coming back the way you left.”*

Isn’t that what God should say to those who leave his church or who abandon his word? Isn’t that what he should have done to Thomas, who said, *“I will not believe.”*? Isn’t that what he should do to us for the times when we said, *“Lord, I’m having struggles here. I don’t think I want this word right now.”* Shouldn’t he say, *“You’re free to leave, but you can’t come back.”*? Still, in grace and in mercy, God sent his Word to the Jewish people in Corinth. And God sent his Word to the Gentiles in Corinth. And God sent his Word to you, even despite the times you and I didn’t deserve it.

Then Paul left the synagogue and went next door to the house of Titus Justice, a worshiper of God. How about that? He’s kicked out of the place of worship, but right next to the place of worship is a believer who wants to hear more of the gospel. Once again, God provides. He wants the gospel to be spread. And then it adds, *“Crispus, the synagogue leader, and his entire household believed in the Lord. And many of the Corinthians who heard Paul believed and were baptized.”*

The church grows. This is what we see as we look at the history of God’s kingdom. People reject it. The word is despised, abused, mocked, rejected, and yet the church grows.

God, in his grace, proclaims the Word. He proclaimed it in your life. He proclaims it and continues to share it to the mission fields that you support. And yes, there will be rejection. But there will also be, as it says, many who believe, many who hear and believe and are baptized. And when this takes place, God says, *“Here is paradise!”* It’s like when the parks open their gates for anyone to come in. God says, *“This is the Way, my Son, and through his blood and his sacrifice, you have access to my kingdom!”* And it’s far greater than any national state or whatever park you might enter. It’s the kingdom of our God. He doesn’t charge any admittance. It’s completely free and won by him. And we know that the glory of his kingdom will last because he rose to life and said to Thomas, *“Look at my hands and side. Stop doubting and*

believe. ...Blessed are you who believe when you have not seen." That's what God did! He sent the gospel. The Church has grown since the time of Paul's preaching. It continues to grow today.

Finally, God provides. One night, the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision. *"Do not be afraid. Keep on speaking. Do not be silent, for I am with you. No one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people within this city. So Paul stayed in Corinth for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God."* A year and a half might not sound much like much for us who are used to having pastors stay several years at a place of preaching or even decades. But remember, Paul couldn't stay but days or weeks in some of the other places. God provides. He provided his gospel promise, a provision of protection and progress for Paul in the city where he was.

And he provides the same thing for his Church today. As we look forward to our resurrection goal of living with him forever, he tells us, "Do not be afraid. Keep on speaking. Do not be silent. Don't close the doors and cower in fear. Don't let the opposition and rejection shut your mouth, but speak up. Don't be silent. Support the gospel ministry." Support gospel ministry like they did in Philippi and Thessalonica and Berea, so that others might hear as the word of God is proclaimed that Jesus is the Messiah, the living one. And he says, "Speak up, for I am with you." It's the living Jesus who told his disciples, "Surely I am with you always." He made a promise of provision and protection for Paul. The same stands for us. He will watch over us.

We pray he will watch over missionaries and teachers and pastors around the world until we all reach our resurrection goal. And the God who reached us in grace, despite the times we spurned his word, in patience has invited us to hear his Word over and over. He will invite many more and the Church will continue –despite opposition to grow. And in the end, by the grace of our God and the power of his gospel, we will reach our resurrection goal with growth in the church. Amen.