



"Risky Business"

Sermon Series: "The Way of the Spirit"

Acts 17:1-15

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Introduction.

You and I live in a day when people like to do extreme things. For example, hang-gliders enjoy the rush that comes from taking a risk as the glider floats on the warm thermal currents coming up from below to sustain the flight. I am told that every year 4,000 more people take up the high-risk sport of rock climbing. Using the grace of a ballet dancer and the strength of an athlete, they jam their toes and fingers into the cracks of the vertical rock face and seek to defy the law of gravity. Still others like the sport of whitewater rafting. Every summer 25,000 people shoot the rapids of the Arkansas River in Colorado. Maybe you're planning a family vacation there this summer. Rising and falling with the swirling current, they enjoy the thrill of trying to tame the river.

In another kind of risk, other people enjoy playing the commodities markets. Betting on the future price of certain goods, they seek to profit in the face of an unknowable future. Some risk is a reality for most of us nowadays. Starting a business is risky these days. Starting a family is risky, too. Life is risky.

Yet how many of us identify the call of the Lord Jesus Christ with a willingness to take risks for the sake of the Kingdom of God? We are willing to take a risk in other parts of life, but are we willing to risk for the Lord? Most followers of Christ tend to play it safe in Christian life. We are fearful our faith will cost us something and people will think we are a religious zealot or a Jesus Freak. However, this morning we study a passage which tells of a man who took a risk and others who turned the world upside down. They responded to the message of God's grace in such a way that they even risked their lives for the gospel.

I. A Man Who Took A Risk.

We are told that during Paul's second missionary journey, in spite of having been beaten in Philippi, he and Silas were strengthened by the Lord to share the gospel in Thessalonica. 35 miles southwest from Philippi was the city of Amphipolis on the Egnatian Highway. Although it was a larger and more important city than Philippi, Paul and his companions decided to pass through it. As they continued west-southwest another 27 miles on the road, they also passed through Apollonia. Their desire was to reach Thessalonica, the capital of the province of Macedonia and the largest and most prosperous city in the entire region. It was another 40 miles beyond Apollonia, and the entire journey covered about 100 miles.

Thessalonica was a harbor town situated on the Thermaic Gulf, and it commanded a strong trade on the Aegean Sea. It was a flourishing commercial center, and the people were proud of having been made a free city in 42 BC. In the second civil war of the Roman Empire, the city sided with Mark Anthony and Octavian against Casius and Brutus, and because of its loyalty, it was made a free city. Paul seems to have viewed Thessalonica as a strategic center for the spread of the gospel throughout the whole Balkan peninsula (see 1Thess. 1:7,8).

When they arrived there, as was their custom, Paul and his companions went to the Jewish synagogue, and on 3 successive Sabbaths, they proclaimed the good news of Jesus Christ. Some of the Jews were persuaded, along with a great number of God-fearing Greeks and prominent women. However, just as at Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the Jews who did not believe the gospel were angry

over the Gentiles' response to Paul's message, and they stirred up a riot. Their plan was to bring Paul and Silas before the assembly of citizens, called politarchs, on a charge that they were disturbing the *Pax Romana*, the peace of Rome. They said these men were proclaiming an illegal religion and advocating another king in opposition to Caesar. When the mob could not find the missionaries, they dragged a man named Jason and some other Christians before the government officials.

The evidence for the charges was scanty, and Paul and Silas couldn't be found. Therefore, they required Jason and the others to put up a bond, and they extracted a pledge from them that Paul and Silas would leave town as soon as possible and not return. It was probably this legal ban which Paul saw as Satan preventing him from returning to Thessalonica in 1 Thessalonians 2:18. As soon as it was night, the believers sent Paul and Silas away to the city of Berea.

Here we see a person who took a risk. Jason, a Diaspora Jew who became one of Paul's first converts in Thessalonica, got involved. Many commentators suggest that Jason was actually hiding Paul and Silas and perhaps sheltered them from the authorities. Because of this he was dragged before the city officials by a mob, and he had to post bond and pledge that Paul and Silas would leave the city and not return. Presumably, his commitment to Christ cost him in other ways, and perhaps he suffered socially and financially in the community.

We live in a day when people don't want to get involved. Perhaps you recall the woman in New York City who was beaten, robbed and killed several years ago while 182 people looked on and did nothing. There is something in us these days that wants to keep to ourselves, stay detached, we don't want to get involved. But our calling in Christ will not allow us that luxury. We are called to engagement and action; we are called to risk, just like Jason.

Are you willing to risk for the Lord? Do you step out in faith and take chances for Christ? Some women in our church took a risk and went to visit female inmates in a Texas prison, and their lives have been marked forever. Others in our congregation took a risk in helping a Liberian family come to this country as refugees, and they got involved. Still others have moved out of their comfort zones by traveling to Kazakhstan to teach servant-leadership classes with Dan and Lars and Maria. What about you? What does your commitment to Christ cost you? How are you taking a risk for God?

Bob was a man in my former church who was in a small group with me. One day he shared with us as a matter of prayer that a business opportunity had come his way at work in which a potential client, whose business was pornography, wanted to use the high tech services of his company. He faced the difficult choice of standing for his morals and losing an account, which would disappoint his boss, or compromising his convictions for the almighty dollar and win the approval of his superiors. As a Christian, he chose to stand for what was right and run the risk of misunderstanding and rejection. God honored his stand, and things worked out well for him. But even if it didn't, he said he was prepared to do the right thing regardless. Would you be willing to make that hard choice if you were faced with the same situation?

Perhaps Christ is simply calling you to trust Him with your finances and risk during these tough economic times. Maybe He wants you to go on a mission trip like our friends who are going to Zambia or those who have just returned from Nicaragua or to Kazakhstan. The man in our passage, Jason, took a risk, and God honored him for his faith. What about you? Where does God want you to risk today?

II. A People Who Searched The Scriptures.

After Paul and Silas, together with Timothy, were smuggled out of Thessalonica, they traveled 50 miles southwest to Berea. It was a city in the foothills of the Olympian mountain range south of the Macedonian plain. Berea was actually of little importance historically or politically, although it had a large population during NT times.

When they arrived there, Paul and Silas once again followed their custom of sharing the gospel with the Jews first, and they went to the synagogue. Luke describes these people as having a more noble character than the Thessalonians. They received the message with eagerness, and they examined the Scriptures daily to see if what Paul said was true.

When I was growing up in Atlanta at the North Avenue Presbyterian Church, there was an adult Sunday School class called the Berean Class. It was named for these people in this passage, and that class wanted to model out the same eagerness to study the Word of God. They wanted to study the Scriptures and learn what the Lord had to say.

I urge you to do the same. Measure anything you hear me say, or anyone who preaches or teaches in this church, against the truth of Scripture. If you ever find us saying something that doesn't ring true with the Bible, reject it. God's Word is the only infallible rule in matters of faith and practice, and it should be the standard by which we measure anything anyone ever says in this pulpit. Here we see that the people of Berea were men and women who searched for truth, and they measured the words of Paul against the words of Scripture. What a marvelous testimony to these people.

However, we note that there was not a unanimous response to the gospel by the Bereans. As in Thessalonica, there was a division. Many of the Jews believed as did also a number of prominent Greek men and women. But when the Jews in Thessalonica learned that Paul was in Berea, they traveled there too, and they stirred up the Jewish community against him. This time the believers did not wait for another public confrontation, and immediately they sent Paul to the coast, while Silas and Timothy remained at Berea for the time being. The people who escorted Paul took him to Athens, perhaps by sea, a voyage of more than 300 miles. Then they left with instructions for Silas and Timothy to join him as soon as possible.

While many of the Bereans searched the Scriptures and tested the words of Paul, the passage says that not all of them accepted the gospel as true, and many did not come to faith in Christ. As in Thessalonica there was a division. It is a sad reality that many who study the Bible only look for it to confirm what they already believe. As Christians, we do not have the luxury of picking and choosing the parts of the Bible we will believe and accept. We must take Scripture as a whole. When an element of the Bible offends our sensibilities, it should challenge us to understand it, to reconcile ourselves to it, and to correlate it with the larger testimony of Scripture. We cannot scissor our way through the Bible like Thomas Jefferson did, when he attempted to cut out the miracles of Jesus and preserve only the ethical teachings of our Lord in the NT. We are not to place ourselves above Scripture and sit in judgment over it. Rather, we should place ourselves under the authority of the Word of God and let it stand in judgment over us.

When we do, we will be like the tree in Psalm 1 where it says, *"Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the Lord and on His law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers"* (Ps. 1:1-3).

When I was in Greece several years ago, our group from the church I served visited Berea. We saw the synagogue there, and we viewed the frescos of Paul. We also saw an enormous tree planted by a stream which reminded us of this psalm. By this tree as the water rushed below us, my friend David shared a devotion on Psalm 1 and reflected on the depth of the tree's roots and the nourishment it received by the stream. It was a powerful moment to reflect on our lives and examine how we might become more intentional in our own study of the Word of God.

III. Disciples Who Turned the World Upside Down.

I want you to notice one more thing that appears in this text. In verse 6 we read, "*These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here.*" The Revised Standard Version translation renders this verse, "*They have turned the world upside down, and now have come here.*" This is what is at the heart of the book of Acts, it's the heart of Pentecost, and it is at the heart of being a missional church. I believe the power of the gospel can turn the world upside down, or, to put it another way, right side up.

There was once a little boy who was asked in Sunday School if he could name the last book of the Bible. He thought for a moment and then answered, "Revolutions!" That little boy was not too far off the mark. There is a revolutionary nature to the Gospel, and it will of necessity bring change to individual lives and to the world. When you have had an encounter with the risen Christ, you cannot go on living the way you did before. The Lord has a way of turning your world upside down, and life can never be the same again. There is a revolutionary nature to the message of Jesus.

In 1982, when George H.W. Bush was Vice President, he represented the United States at the funeral of former Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev. The elder Bush said he was deeply moved by a silent protest carried out by Brezhnev's widow during the funeral. This was before the Berlin Wall had come down, and this was before the Soviet Union had been dismantled. Communism was still in full control, and a belief in God was against state policy.

Mrs. Brezhnev stood motionless by the coffin until seconds before it was closed. Then, just as the soldiers touched the lid, Brezhnev's wife performed an act of great courage and hope. She reached down and made the sign of the cross on her husband's chest. There in the citadel of secular, atheistic power, the wife of the man who had run it all hoped that her husband was wrong. She hoped there was another life, and that that life was best represented by Jesus who died on the cross. It was her hope that this same Jesus might have mercy on her husband who had died.ⁱ

How revolutionary is your life? How open are you to allowing the Lord to lead you to do risky things? Are you willing to step out in faith for Christ? What is He calling you to do? What kind of radical change does God want for your life? That's something for all of us to ponder in the coming week. Amen.

ⁱCited in Gary Thomas, "Wise Christians Clip Obituaries," *Christianity Today*, Oct. 3, 1994, p. 26.