

Paul in Athens – 5th Sunday of Easter
May 3, 2026

Pastor Kristin Schultz
All Saints ABQ

Grace and peace to you in God our creator and in our risen Lord Jesus



Two years ago, as part of my sabbatical travel, my family visited Athens – and while we were there,

we climbed the modest hill identified as the Aereopagus, or Mars Hill.

It was amazing to stand on that hill where Paul stood 2000 years ago, imagining how much has changed since Paul's time – and how much has stayed the same.

Our lifestyle, especially communication a transportation and the use of technology, would be completely new and amazing to Paul and his contemporaries.

But our basic human longings – our need for connection and security and purpose – have not changed.



In Paul's time, the city of Athens was a hub for the intellectual and cultural elite of the Roman empire.

Athens was a city teeming with writers and historians, philosophers and poets, geographers and artists, architects and physicians and lawyers.

If you were looking for something ancient, edgy, profound, exotic, different, or intellectually stimulating, Athens was the place to be.

And remember, this was before internet, before radio and television, before even the printing press.

So in order to share and hear these new ideas, people gathered in person, and one of the key places they gathered was the Aereopagus – “where Athenians and foreigners would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new”

Paul comes to Athens alone,

having been driven out of Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea.

Imprisonment and beatings such as we read about last week have not deterred him; once in Athens, he immediately visits the synagogues,

where he begins to tell the story and good news of Jesus.

He also speaks about Jesus in the marketplace,

where some philosophers hear him and are intrigued.

So they bring him, and his new ideas, to the Aereopagus, so others can hear him.

All through his travels, when Paul visits a new place,
 he begins his preaching and teaching in the local synagogue.
There, he shares a history and a faith.
He can speak to the people from their own scripture and tradition,
 emphasizing how Jesus has fulfilled their promises and hopes.



At the Areopagus, Paul takes a different approach.

He is speaking to pagans – but he still finds common ground, common language,
to connect with them.

He commends them for their religiosity,
 pointing to a particular monument he has seen
 dedicated “to an unknown god”

I know that God, Paul tells them.

It is God the Creator, the one who gives and sustains all life.

What’s more, Paul says, God has created all the peoples of the earth
 to search for God, to seek to know God.

That is the longing of every human heart, the source of all religious devotion.

Yet, Paul says, this God is never far from us.

Quoting a Greek philosopher and a poet, Paul says that

 God is the one in whom we live and move and have our being,
 and that we are all God’s offspring.

Centuries later, Saint Augustine will say something similar when he says
 that all human hearts are restless until they rest in God.

Paul is a practiced and talented orator,
 and up to this point he holds his audience rapt.

We can imagine the people all around, nodding their heads as they listen.

Then Paul tells them that God is now asking all people to repent –
 to turn to God, away from the idols they have worshiped –
 because one who has been sent from God and resurrected from the dead
 is coming to judge the earth.

The Athenians wanted to “hear something new,”
 but Paul loses many of them with the idea of resurrection.

The account in Acts tells us,

*When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed, but others said,
“We will hear you again about this.”³³ At that point Paul left them.³⁴ But some
of them joined him and became believers, including Dionysius the Areopagite
and a woman named Damaris and others with them.*

Unlike some of the great evangelism successes the book of Acts describes,
Paul's sermon in Athens has modest results.

But some decide to follow – among them Dionysius and Damaris.

Dionysius is venerated by a saint among Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christians,
and there is tradition saying that Dionysius was the first bishop in Athens
(I've noticed a pattern here, of the earliest followers of Jesus
being given the title of Bishop by the later church)

It is also noteworthy, when women in the bible are so often overlooked and unnamed,
that this is the third woman named in this chapter of Acts
as an early follower of Jesus.



When Paul comes to Athens, he is distressed by the idols he finds
everywhere,

and moved to invite the people to look not to idols,
but to the one God, who is near us and can be known by us
and gives us all we need.

We no longer build temples to Athena and Zeus and Hera and Hermes
and all the other gods in the Greek and Roman pantheon;
but that doesn't mean we don't have our own idols.

We, too, are often drawn to the next new thing –
the newest phone, the newest diet or fitness plan,
the newest kitchen devices we've never need but now cannot do without.

We try to fill the need inside us with things, with never-ending news and information;
or we distract ourselves with an endless variety of entertainment
or we fill our days with work to tell us who we are.

None of these things is bad, but none can fill our restlessness,
or tell us who we are, or give us meaning.

There are other idols that are more dangerous.

Looking for security in military power or white supremacy.

Seeking identity in a political party or agenda.

Promoting Christian nationalism, with its claims that God is on our side,
against God's beloved children around the world.



The idols are different, but Paul's message remains the same.

God, who creates and sustains the world, is near to us.

God creates us to find our security and our identity in relationship with God.

God creates us to find meaning in connection with and service to our neighbor,
rather than dominance and power.

God is the one in whom we live and move and have our being –
the one we have been created to seek out all our lives.

Our lives are rooted in God,

who names us beloved and calls us to live in love.

In the name of our risen Lord Jesus;

Amen