

The Green Hill Presbyterian Church
Sunday, May 10, 2026 – Table Copy

SILENT PREPARATION: The LORD exists forever; your word is firmly fixed in heaven. Your faithfulness endures to all generations; you have established the earth, and it stands fast. By your appointment they stand today, for all things are your servants.

– Psalm 119:89-91

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

Today – on our worship calendar – is the Sixth Sunday of Easter. Our Scripture readings focus on the gracious implications of the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, and on our call to spread that Good News.

PRAYER OF INVOCATION (*Unison*)

O God, let the sound of praising you be heard among us today, and in all the places of your dominion. We believe you are present with us – even when we cannot feel or see or hear you as we would like. We thank you for those times when you have caught our attention, and we ask for one of those times today. Shake us out of our complacency and our cherished iniquities; hold us in your steadfast love and call forth within us an awareness of all your blessings. Stimulate among us an eagerness to live as you intend, for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

now

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Abiding God, who came to us in Jesus Christ, and will not leave us orphaned: Reclaim us now as we experience the Scriptures. Call us once again to your truth, that we might renew our commitment, and be empowered for faithful service. Use our hands to do the work you have called us to do. Use our caring to build community. And use our lives to provide irresistible witness to your gracious will. Amen.

FIRST SCRIPTURE READING 1 Peter 3:13-22

Our first reading comes from Peter's first letter. As we come to our passage, Peter has been offering a variety of admonitions – concerning living a Christian life....

Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good?

But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed.

Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated,
but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord.

Always be ready to make your defense to anyone
who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you,
yet do it with gentleness and respect.

Maintain a good conscience so that, when you are maligned,
those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame.

For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God's will,
than to suffer for doing evil.

For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous,
in order to bring you to God.

He was put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit,
in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison,
who in former times did not obey,
when God waited patiently in the days of Noah,
during the building of the ark,
in which a few, that is, eight lives, were saved through water.

And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you –
not as a removal of dirt from the body –
but as an appeal to God for a good conscience,
through the resurrection of Jesus Christ,
who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God,
with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him

SECOND SCRIPTURE READING Acts 17:16-34 See legal-size handout

SERMON “Embracing – and Employing – Effective Evangelism”

For a number of years,
the **United States** has been experiencing
declining participation in institutional religion.

Present company excluded, of course.....

In any event, many of us are rightly concerned
about the fate of people walking away from *religion*;
or – much more importantly –
walking away from the *relationship* God offers us in Jesus Christ.

But – since we are here – desiring to worship God –
and eager to give thanks for God’s amazing grace –
how do we effectively explain those blessings to others?

To explore that question in more detail,
let’s draw from the first text we read today –
from the **First Letter of Peter**.

And – to begin – let’s explore two related aspects:

First, why gratitude is so deeply embedded in our Christian values.

And – second – why our hope is infinitely deeper than mere optimism.

So – returning to our text – Peter writes:

“Always be ready to make your defense –
to anyone who demands from you an accounting –
for the hope that is in you,
yet do it with gentleness, and respect.”

Here – as our **Women’s Bible Study** often acknowledges –
it is sometimes helpful to read scripture
using a variety of different translations.

If – for instance – we read the translation of **I Peter 3:15**
by Christian Orthodox scholar **David Bentley Hart**,
we find this:

*“But in your hearts, hallow the Anointed as Lord,
ready always to offer a defense to everyone who asks you
for an account of the hope within you.”*

Or, here's the way **J.B. Phillips** phrases, it in the translation he did –
back in the 1940s and '50s –
for young people in his church in England:

*“Be ready at any time to give a quiet and reverent
answer to any man who wants a reason
for the hope that you have within you.”*

Today, no doubt, **Phillips** would change “man” to “person” –
or – to reflect the original **Greek** even more accurately –
to “*everyone who asks ...*”

Finally, here's how **Eugene Peterson** renders that verse –
in his paraphrase of the Bible called *The Message*:

*“Be ready to speak up – and tell anyone who asks –
why you're living the way you are,
and always with the utmost courtesy.”*

But – in every case – whether the translation comes
from the original **Hebrew, Greek, or Aramaic** –
we must always remember that
every translation is also an interpretation.

Also – in every case – our hope should be proclaimed without arrogance.

Yes, “*always with the utmost courtesy,*” as **Peterson** puts it.

Or give “*a quiet and reverent answer,*” as **Phillips** translates it.

But what would *you* – personally –
say to people *who ask why* you go to church,
or, why you are a Christian?

On one occasion, a pastor was sitting next to a stranger – on an airplane –
when the stranger asked the pastor what he did for a living.

And the pastor – not wanting to get into a debate –
said he was in the “fire insurance business....”

Would that be an effective approach?

There are – of course – some expressions of **Christianity**,
expressions that are focused – *almost entirely* – on personal salvation,
and, on the fear of hell – as a motivator.

But – the reality is – that we can be so concerned about the afterlife –
in one place, or another –
that we can misspend the life we have now!

Or – as someone has said –
we can be *so heavenly minded* that we are *no earthly good!*

Those are some of the considerations that Peter was addressing;
especially, when Peter says that you must always
be ready to account “for the hope that is in you.”

That’s another way of saying that –
when you commit to being a **follower of Christ** –
you also commit yourself to some level of **theological literacy**.

And – to be sure – a level of theological literacy is essential –
in explaining your faith – and the resultant hope – to others.

But – relax – you need not go to seminary.

You don’t have to take university-level classes in comparative religion.

You don’t need to restrict your reading to books about theology.

But – on the other hand – it is unlikely that your faith will flower fully –
or help lead you to a flourishing life –
if you can’t explain – with some clarity –
why you are part of the church,
or why you identify yourself a Christian.

The bottom-line question – then – is:

Who will believe us if we cannot explain our hope?

The 20th century theologian – **Jürgen Moltmann** –
once told the story of overhearing a conversation –
between a **Muslim**, and a **Christian**.

The **Muslim** asked the **Christian** why she believed in *three gods* –
instead of the *one true god*, whose name – in **Arabic** – is **Allah**.

The Christian protested that she didn't believe in three different gods,
but, in only one God.

“If so,” said the Muslim,
“explain what you Christians call the Holy Trinity to me.”

Moltmann said the Christian – in response –
hemmed, and hawed, and started, and stopped –
until – finally – the Muslim shook his head, and walked away.

Moltmann – then – told the audience that interfaith dialogue
is a good and useful practice;
but, only if the participants have a basic understanding
of their own faith –
and can – as Peter urges, explain the hope that is in them.

That certainly does not mean we must be able to explain
the entire **history of Christianity**.

Or, that we must be able to wax eloquent about the “*hypostatic union*” –
that being the term theologians use –
when **Christian creeds** declare that **Jesus** was – *at the same time* –
both fully human, and fully divine.

But it does mean we are to be theologically literate enough
to explain some basic things to others.

For example, that **Christ** *is not* **Jesus' last name**.

And, that the word “in-car-nation” *is not* talking about
how many automobiles clog America's highways.

And, it means we should know that **Christianity**
is not about what German martyr – **Dietrich Bonhoeffer** –
called “*cheap grace.*”

That is to say that – even though we are endlessly forgiven –
we must allow that grace to change us – in some way – for the better.

The grace of God through Christ Jesus – although freely given –
was not – and is not – cheap, at all.

As **Peter** put it – when Christ suffered on the cross –
it was the suffering of “*the righteous for the unrighteous,*
in order to bring [us] to God.”

And – when [we] are brought to God, [we] become altogether new!

Furthermore, this messianic suffering
was not an event limited to **ancient Israel.**

Rather, this was a cosmic event in human history –
which is why Catholic theologian **Richard Rohr**
calls **Jesus** the “*universal Christ.*”

Here, recall **Paul** – in **Romans Chapter 8:**
*The whole creation groans in expectation of the revealing
of the children of God....*

Other religions also make specific claims – or statements of belief –
that are basic to them.

Our belief – in the *central importance* of the birth, ministry,
crucifixion, and resurrection of **Jesus of Nazareth** –
is – *uniquely* – one of those claims.

And, so, we would do well to pay attention to **Peter’s advice** –
to be able – and ready –
to say something understandable – and useful –
about *the hope that is in us* because of Christ.

That is certainly not to say that we must be overly seriously – or boring – about it.

Rather, we should be glad – and even excited – to tell others about our hope.

After all, what we're sharing is the gospel – which means “good news.”

Indeed – in recent years – even the final story, on the “NBC Nightly News” – is called “*Good News Tonight*.”

And – whoever is anchoring – inevitably – breaks into a smile, and their eyes brighten – when they introduce that last, upbeat story.

Even so, we also should smile – and show bright eyes – when we tell people about the many ways Jesus Christ offers good news.

And – also – *we must be clear* about what we mean – when we use the word “*hope*.”

To begin, we don't mean mere optimism.

Optimism is kind of a lifeless hope – like when the Phillies go off to an 11 and 19 start to their season.

Or, when you hope that the package – that you've been waiting for – will finally get delivered today.

In contrast, **Christian hope** is far different from optimism, in both scope *and* content.

Earlier, I quoted the renown theologian – **Jürgen Moltmann**.

One of his books is called Theology of Hope, and – in it – he focuses on what theologians call *eschatology*.

[This is another term that has become familiar to our **Women's Bible Study**.]

This **Greek word** refers to the study – or contemplation – of the end times,
or how history will finally resolve itself –
or – more accurately – be resolved by **God**.

Moltmann writes this:

“From first to last – and not merely in the epilogue,
Christianity *is* eschatology, is hope,
[is] forward looking and forward moving,
and – therefore –
[is] always revolutionizing – and transforming – the present.”

That kind of hope, he writes,

“is not one element of Christianity, but it is ...
the key in which everything in it is set,
the glow that suffuses everything here
in the dawn of an expected new day.”

And in another book – The Source of Life – **Moltmann** adds this:

“Out of hope for eternal life,
love for this vulnerable and mortal life is born afresh ...
The love – founded on hope –
is the strongest medicine against the spreading sickness
of resignation ...
Our cry from the depths is a sign of life — a sign of divine life.”

Put another way, our hope in Christ gives us everything we need;
that is, to live a thriving, generative, loving life – here, and now.

All of this is why **Peter** challenges us to explain our hope.

And – at the end of the day – it is the hope in the God of everyone,
a God who created us all in the divine image,
and, a God who loved us enough to die for us.

So, *how could we want to be silent* about such good news?

And, *why would we want to be illiterate about it* –
so that we would not be able to give what **J.B. Phillips** called a
“quiet and reverent” account of that hope?

Indeed, this is what we were born to do.

This is why Jesus came – as God incarnate.

This is, why he loved us – all the way to the cross,
and why he loved us beyond his resurrection –
all the way to this very hour.

All if this is so that we may have life – and have it more abundantly.

But – before we conclude our reflections this morning –
let’s look briefly at an interesting – and biblical –
example of how to – effectively – share our hope.

In other words, how to effectively evangelize; that is,
to share the good news of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ.

And – for this example – we turn to the **Book of Acts**.

To begin, we should note that many Bibles entitle this book
“**The Acts of the Apostles.**”

But – more accurately – it should be called “**The Acts of the Holy Spirit!**”

That is to say, the work – and the power – of the **Holy Spirit**
are evident throughout – from beginning to end!

So, let’s be especially aware of the activity of the **Holy Spirit** –
as we turn to our passage from the **Book of Acts**. [*Bulletin Insert...*]

To begin, a bit of background may be helpful:

The **First Readings** – for the **Sundays** between **Easter** and **Pentecost** –
are taken from the **Book of Acts** –
in *all three years* of the **Lectionary Cycle**.

And – if the weekly **Gospel readings** provide the **What, Where, Why, and How**
of *God's gracious Good News* – the **Book of Acts** provides the **So What**.

That is to say – over the three years of the cycle –
these readings provide considerable coverage
of this “journal” of the **History of the Early Church**.

Our text for this morning features **Paul's** – famous –
“Sermon on the Unknown God.”

But, it also includes verses which both *precede* – and *follow* –
the **lectionary passage proper** – which is **vv. 22-31**.

So doing frames the sermon itself with essential information:
Both its **Athenian setting** (vv. 16-21) –
and the **Athenians' subsequent reactions** (vv. 32-34).

As indicated by the marginal notes,
Paul's speech consists of **three movements** –
each of which comprises a logical step in **Paul's model approach**
to *reaching out* to those within a *particular cultural context*.

At the **center of Paul's argument** (vv. 24-28)
is his *exposition of the attributes* of the “knowable” God.

And, the attributes of the knowable God are in distinct contrast
to the limitations of the idols which filled the city (vv. 16, 23).

We should also note that – in **Paul's first sermon**, recorded in **Acts** –
he preaches to the **Jews**,
in the synagogue at **Antioch of Pisidia** (13:26-41).

There, he is on familiar ground –
speaking to *people who know* the **Old Testament**.

And – there – beginning with the exodus,
he summarizes Israelite history through **David**;
then, he speaks of **Jesus**, and the resurrection –
as the fulfillment of **God's promises**.

That sermon speaks directly to the context of the listeners.

But – in **Athens** – he finds himself facing an *altogether different* crowd.

He observes that the **Greeks** pay homage to a whole panoply –
of gods, and goddesses.

And, they believe that these deities flit in and out of human affairs;
meddling in people's lives –
sometimes helpfully, sometimes harmfully.

Furthermore, these – ostensibly-divine –
beings operated with no sense of morality.

They could be as mean and petty – as any human being.

And, Paul also knows that belief –
in the traditional pantheon of divine beings – was waning.

Indeed, many Greeks regarded it more as mythology, than religion.

Skepticism was rife – particularly among learned people –
for whom sophistication – and skepticism – were the primary virtues.

So, how should Paul effectively evangelize them?

What would make the best missionary preaching?

To be sure, **Paul** could have stood in the marketplace –
and denounced this whole religious tradition.

After all, the capricious – and chaotic –
behavior of the gods and goddesses was abhorrent to anyone
who believed in the **God** of the **Old Testament**.

But – the reality is – denunciation seldom persuades.

And so, **Paul** needed an *entry point* –
an *avenue* into the **thinking of his audience**.

He needed a *foothold* – an *entry into their belief* –
from which he could begin sympathetically.

And – only then – he could open new horizons for his listeners.

As it turned out, some artisan had constructed an altar –
“to an unknown god” –
to ensure that there would not be some, additional, god –
angry at being neglected.

This – then – was the entry **Paul** needed.

So we should note both how he *moved into* their thinking,
and how he – then – *gave it a new twist*.

In the **First Movement**, Paul acknowledges the validity of their shrine.

There *is indeed* a god unknown to them.

So, then, he moves masterfully – he crosses this bridge –
from their unknown god, to the **God of the Bible**.

In the **Second Movement**, Paul goes on to describe the **True and Living God**.

To begin, this **God** *“made the world and everything in it.”*

The **Greek creation myths** were the *most complicated* – and *most bizarre* – aspect of their religion.

And now – with *adherence to their mythology waning* – the idea that there was *one creator* behind all this might well be appealing to **reflective Greeks**.

Furthermore – Paul proclaimed – true gods do not *“live in shrines made by human hands.”*

To an *already skeptical mind*, this would make sense.

Nor is this unknown god served by human hands – but *“gives to all mortals life, and breath, and all things.”*

And so – step-by-step – **Paul builds a case** for a **God** who is the **Sovereign** over all things – even the nations.

Then – lest they think that this God is unattainable – Paul affirms that – though we might search and grope for him – *“indeed, he is not far from each one of us.”*

And – to put the icing on the proverbial cake – **Paul** then quotes two lines of poetry from their own literature:

Verse 28a is attributed to **Epimenides**;
28b is from *Phaenomena* – a poem by the **Greek poet Aratus**.)

That was a masterful move – because these would have been familiar to his knowledgeable listeners.

So – *having laid that foundation* – **Paul** moves to his conclusion in the **Third Movement**.

He offers his listeners the Good News:

Such a God would know human ignorance – and imperfection –
and so, we stand in judgment – and need to repent.

But – nevertheless – that judgment will be done in righteousness,
and, by one whom God has raised from the dead!

This, of course, was – most certainly – new!

And – while some of the **Athenians** *scoffed* – others *determined to hear more...*

Well, so it was with Paul; and so it is with us, today.

Effective evangelism *begins* with knowing **our audience's context.**

It *continues* with communication –
to build bridges of understanding –
across which the **Good News** may be shared.

And, the **Good News** is then shared in an *honest* – and **winsome** – way.

But – *throughout the process* of effective evangelism –
the work of the **Holy Spirit** is vital:

The Holy Spirit *sets up the situation* –
the circumstances for us to “give an account” of our hope.

The Holy Spirit prepares the ground – for the Good Seed, soon to be sown.

The Holy Spirit gives us discernment –
when to listen, and when – and what – to say.

Finally, the Holy Spirit brings the harvest –
the Good News making all things new!

Friends, as in the case of Paul in Athens, some may scoff.

Others may wish to hear more.

And – still others – may positively respond, immediately.

But – in any, and every case – we will have fulfilled our call to share our hope!

Thanks be to God! Amen.

AFFIRMATION OF FAITH (*Unison*)

God's reconciling act in Jesus Christ is a mystery which the Scriptures describe in various ways. It is called the sacrifice of a lamb, a shepherd's life given for his sheep, atonement by a priest. Again it is the ransom of a slave, the payment of a debt, the vicarious satisfaction of a legal penalty, and victory over the powers of evil. These are expressions of a truth which remains beyond the reach of all theory in the depths of God's love for humankind. They reveal the gravity, cost, and sure achievement of God's reconciling work.

The risen Christ is the Savior for all persons. Those joined to him by faith are set right with God and commissioned to serve as his reconciling community, the church, which began with the apostles and continues through all generations. Amen.

CHARGE AND BLESSING

In chapter 15 of John's Gospel, Jesus said this:

“You are my friends if you do what I command you.

“I do not call you servants any longer,
because the servant does not know what the master is doing;
but I have called you friends,
because I have made known to you everything
that I have heard from my Father.”

As we go forth this week,
may we be facets – that is, visible re-presentations –
of the friendship of Christ,
as the Holy Spirit leads – and enables – us.

In other words: Make a friend; be a friend; bring a friend to Christ.

Let us receive the Lord's blessing.....