

Reaching out for joy

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[0 : 00] Well, if you've been here a while, then you will remember this slide. We spent some time thinking about Acts, back end of last year, I think. And we learnt how God, Jesus particularly, left his followers with a mission, which was to build the kingdom of good news.

But he didn't leave them alone. He left them with his spirit to help and empower and guide them. And we're coming back to Acts, and we're seeing particularly that we are his witnesses in that job, that we have a place in that plan as well.

And that Jesus' Holy Spirit is for us too. Before we do that, shall we just pray? Let's just pray together, shall we? Lord God, we thank you that your church is in your hands. Our hearts are in your hands.

We thank you for your truth. We thank you that it is clearly set out in the Bible for anybody to read. We thank you that your offer of salvation is free.

Lord, we pray that as we try to read and understand your word this morning, that you would help us. Because we know, Lord, that this isn't just a rational or philosophical thing or a decision of the will.

[1 : 15] This is a spiritual business. So we need your spirit's help. Please would you fill us with your Holy Spirit so that we understand your truth and find joy through it.

In Jesus' name, Amen. Amen. Why are we as Christians always talking about sharing the good news? You've heard plenty of it this morning, haven't you?

Especially when you think about all the bad press around Christians who are like that, you know, who are always going around sharing the good news. You ever been called a backwards Bible basher? I've been called that.

What about the chat in the news about extreme right evangelicals? There's plenty of that about as well, isn't there? So why?

Why do we insist on telling people this good news? Well, you'll remember this slide from the last sermon in the Acts series.

[2 : 14] If you do, you'll remember the significance of this number. That is the number of people in the world who have not heard the good news.

That's one reason, isn't it? People who have not had the opportunity to hear this hope from God.

That's one reason we want to share the good news. How does the hymn put it?

Unnumbered souls are dying and pass into the night. None of us want to see that, do we? But let's make it more personal.

Why should I share the good news, though? Why should I do that? Because as far as I can see, a lot of the time, actually, if I choose to do that, sharing the message of Christ, it will probably just make my life worse.

That's how we can be tempted to think, isn't it? I might lose friends. My family might think I'm weird.

If I bring this into the workplace, what's going to happen to my career?

[3 : 16] If I try and live that out? If I tell my neighbours, am I going to start getting funny looks as I go down the street? If I have a conversation in the playground and it's overheard, am I going to be that weird Christian kid forevermore?

We don't tell people, do we? Because we're scared. We are. We're scared. That's okay. The Lord knows that we're scared.

The Lord knows that, and that's partly why he's given us this passage today, to help us understand the why of sharing the good news, and what we should be saying as well.

And the reason we should do this is actually a bit unexpected. Just go to the end of the passage that we were reading. Chapter 13, verse 52. It's like flicking to the last bit of the novel, isn't it?

Finding out the punchline. And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit. The reason we do this is because we want to be filled with joy.

[4 : 18] That's a bit unexpected, isn't it? When we reach out with the good news, we are filled with the joy of Jesus, and we're able to share it with others.

This verse also helps us a little bit remember the context, because if you know about the book of Acts, if you've been paying attention in the last series, you'll know that Acts is the story of how Jesus builds his church, the kingdom of good news, by his Holy Spirit, through us as his witnesses. That's what's happening here, isn't it? And here's the Holy Spirit filling the disciples in verse 52. We need the Spirit. That was the whole point of what we were saying about the first bit of this chapter. So the first thing we need to know is that if we don't have the Spirit, we shouldn't start. Pray that you will be filled with the Spirit, because he's the power. Do you pray for that?

Where are we in the story? Well, you'll remember as well, if you've been paying attention in Acts, that Jesus says right at the beginning, I want you to be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth.

[5 : 26] And you'll remember the last talk that we did. We're at a turning point. We've done Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria. Now we're at the ends of the earth. Everywhere from here outwards. And of course, that's where we come in.

We're in this story at that point, because we are carrying out Jesus' mission to share the good news to the ends of the earth. We want to share hope and joy, don't we?

But we've referred to this too. Don't we also want a world that has peace in it? War just makes our bones ache.

Do you feel like that? The more we hear, the more our bones ache. So why would we risk conflict over faith too? Why would we go out there knowing that some people will disagree with this? It's a simple reason. Because there is no peace without justice. There is no true and lasting peace without justice. That's true in the Ukraine.

[6 : 24] And it's true in the Ukraine because it's true in our hearts as human beings. There is no peace without justice. We need someone. We need good news.

Good news that brings about justice and makes peace between human beings and between us and God. There's another reason to reach out. Reach out with a message of justice and joy and hope and peace.

Here's what's going on this morning before we hit the meat of it. We can share Jesus' joy by knowing and telling the good news and leaving the rest to God. We can share Jesus' joy by knowing and telling the good news and leaving the rest to God.

Okay, let's start at the beginning of the story. Knowing the good news. Paul and the dream team, minus one. Did you notice that at the beginning? They barely set off and somebody's already left the team.

They set off on their mission to share the good news and they arrive at their destination and they go into the local community centre and they're asked to speak. And Paul stands up. And what do you immediately notice about it when Paul stands up?

[7 : 34] He seems to know exactly what to say. Doesn't he? This amazing discourse just comes out. And it sounds strangely familiar.

We'll come back to that. And he knows it so well. It's almost like, it's almost like he's thought about it in advance, isn't it? It's almost like he's told it to himself over and over to make sure that it's in his heart.

And it's like he's thought about it in advance. How would I explain this to someone? And that really is point one. Know the good news. Spend time thinking about it.

Write it down. What happened? What happened when you heard the good news, when Jesus called you? How would you explain it? What would you say? In fact, Paul follows almost exactly the pattern that Stephen and Peter did earlier in the book of Acts.

So if you were to read back to Stephen's speech when he's being stoned and Peter's speech at the very beginning, this is exactly the same pattern. It goes like this.

[8 : 41] The historical fact of what God has done in history, God's hand behind it all, and its meaning for us. That is the simple pattern of how the gospel is explained.

What has happened in history, God's hand behind that, and its meaning for us, his plan through Jesus. Stephen said it, Peter said it, Paul said it.

Here's our second point. The gospel doesn't change. The gospel, the good news, does not change. It doesn't depend on the times. It doesn't depend on the person who's saying it. It doesn't depend on the people who are listening to it.

It doesn't depend on the culture. It doesn't depend on the prevailing views. It depends on the action of God through Christ in history, which is fixed.

So we don't change it. We don't change who God is. We don't change what sin is. We don't change what Jesus did. And if we do, we might be witnesses, but we're not his witnesses.

[9 : 45] What is it about? Let's look at verses 23 to 25. From this man's descendants, that's David's descendants, God has brought to Israel the Saviour, Jesus.

Before the coming of Jesus, John preached repentance and baptism to all the people of Israel. And as John was completing his work, he said, who do you suppose I am? Do you see what Paul does? He points to Jesus. He says, just like John pointed to Jesus, that's what I'm doing too. It's about Jesus. It's about the fact that he is the Saviour.

It's about the fact that Jesus fulfills God's promises to send a rescuer to get us out of this mess.

Know the good news. Now, what is the big deal about Jesus?

What is it that he has done in history or that has happened to him in history that we really need to get straight and tell people about? Well, if you look at verses 30 to 37 and you think, what is the thing that is mentioned here the most?

[10 : 49] You will come up with one word and that is the resurrection. Now, I don't know about you, but if I think about sharing the good news with somebody, I don't actually naturally think I'll start with the resurrection.

Do you? Seems like maybe the least believable bit of the whole story. But Paul definitely does. Gets mentioned four times in those few verses. And Paul has patterned himself on Peter, who does the same thing, and Stephen, who did the same thing.

Tim Keller is really helpful here. He says that the resurrection matters so much because it is both fact and fulfilment. And he says, think about conversations you have with people, if you have them, when they say, I don't want to be a Christian or I'm not interested in Christianity.

What they say is things like this. I don't really like Christianity because it teaches this. Or, I don't really want to be a Christian because I don't like this bit of the Bible.

Or, Christians believe this and I find that offensive. That's the kind of thing we hear, or we would hear, if we were brave enough. That's what we worry about, isn't it? You'll get that reaction from people.

[12 : 01] But, the good news that Jesus died and rose again is a question of fact.

That's at the heart of this. Actually, the Christian message, Christianity, is not a shopping list of lifestyle choices and moral positions, is it? That is not what it is about.

It's not even primarily an idea or a code of conduct. It is a historical fact. Jesus rose. And that is either true or it's not true.

Either Jesus really lived and died and rose again, in which case, it doesn't matter whether you don't like Christianity or not. It's just true. Or, he didn't.

And there's not really any point in what we're doing here except maybe learning how to be nice. So, we tell people, Jesus didn't just die for you and me.

[13 : 06] He rose. Have you investigated that? Have you thought about that? If you want to do that, of course, Jesus is the evidence.

Perfect opportunity. If you're thinking, I'm not going to be there for that, grab one of those on your way out. There's a link to some of the evidence for Jesus' resurrection that you can follow.

Why does the resurrection matter so much? What's the significance of that? Let's look at verses 38 and 39. It matters because of this. Therefore, because of the resurrection, my friends, I want you to know that through Jesus, the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you.

Through him, everyone who believes is set free from every sin. A justification that you are not able to obtain under the law of Moses.

The significance of Jesus' resurrection is that we can be forgiven our wrongs. That we can be justified in the eyes of God. Declared innocent forever and not in a way that you can ever earn by being nice.

[14 : 15] Catholics take note. And, in a world where we want peace, here is the basis for it. Jesus dies to take the consequences of our sin.

He makes peace between us and God. And that is a just peace that will last. And that is the basis for peace everywhere. All true peace.

Know the good news. That's what we're saying here, isn't it? I want to tell you the story of this man whose picture you probably have noticed. He's a man called Hiroo Onada.

He's a Japanese lieutenant who fought in the Second World War. And he was dropped off by his forces on the Philippine island of Lubang. Where he stayed from 1945 for almost 30 years.

Fighting a war that had already been won. He was dropped off there and he was told, your orders are no surrender. 1945.

[15:22] That's lots of our hearts before we come to the Lord Jesus. No way. I'm not surrendering my life to God. Just thinking about all those bits in the Bible that I don't like, the moral positions, the lifestyle choices. No way.

I'm not surrendering. Not even if the resurrection is a fact. Regular leaflet drops to Lieutenant Onada over the next decades followed, telling him that Japan had surrendered to the Allies and the war was already over.

He thought, it's propaganda. Just like lots of us in the world do when we hear the Christian message. Oh, it's just a bunch of religious propaganda, isn't it? What a tragic waste.

Onada was defeated, wasn't he? And he didn't even know it. And his failure to surrender to the truth resulted in fatalities in the Philippines and lifelong regret for himself.

And he finally surrendered only when his retired commanding officer was flown to Lubang Island to stand him down from conflict.

[16:28] in 1974. And friends, this was us before the Lord Jesus fighting a war we are never going to win with God just to be our own bosses, our own saviors.

That war has already been won by Jesus. He is unkillable. He is alive. He is raised. And of course, he won that war for the sake of peace.

A peace in which we can share. And what we need to do is surrender and accept that pardon and peace. And if we don't, what are we doing? We're just continuing to endanger others and ourselves, wasting our years in a pointless struggle against the truth like Lieutenant Onada.

but if we accept that Jesus has already won that war then all of those years can be redeemed in God's gracious plan.

Isn't that amazing? That's the good news that we need to know. Secondly, we need to tell the good news. Do you remember the key verse for Acts? Acts chapter 1, verse 8, the one we've been talking about.

[17:47] Jesus says, you are to be my witnesses and that comes back here. Did you notice? Verse 26, fellow children of Abraham and you God-fearing Gentiles, it is to us that this message of salvation has been sent.

A little bit further down, for many days, verse 31, Jesus was seen by those who traveled with him from Galilee to Jerusalem. They are now his witnesses to his people. And then again, verse 47, I have made you a light for the Gentiles.

Jesus says, if we are his followers, his children, then we are his witnesses and that the power comes from the Holy Spirit to carry out that duty of being a witness.

Paul is one of those witnesses, isn't he? He's identified himself as a witness and what does he do? He says what he has seen and what he has heard and what he knows. Have you met Jesus?

Have you seen his work in your life? Then you're a witness and you can say what you see. In fact, we must say what we can see. Here's what you want to try and say if you get an opportunity to be a witness.

[18:57] You can say, I met a man who changed my life in this book. He died for me but he's alive again and I know that because he showed me my heart and then he forgave me and he set me free from everything bad that was in there and then he took everything that was good that was in there and he made it better and now I know what it is to be truly human and to be safe forever in the family of God and so can you.

Come and meet him. How do I tell people that? He probably hasn't escaped your notice that Paul was preaching wasn't he? Quite a long sermon. Maybe you're thinking this one's quite a long sermon.

He's preaching, I'm preaching. It doesn't mean you have to. In fact, most of us won't, will we? That's not what it means to be a witness necessarily but the way that Paul shares the good news here that

we can learn from.

What does Paul do? Well, he goes to where people are. He goes to the synagogue where people are and where they're likely to be interested in listening and he recognises who the listeners are. He speaks to Jewish people about Jewish things in this history. That's what we're to do. We're not to be foghorns, just public broadcast.

[20 : 13] We're to be friends. We're to go to where we know there is interest and we are to speak to people recognising who they are and we're to tell them it's good news, verse 32.

We tell you the good news. We have good news. We have good news to share in a bad news age. Don't we? And we make it personal because the next verse, verse 33, he has fulfilled these promises for us, his children.

It's not a history lesson. It is a message of personal salvation. And we can use history.

There was plenty of history in Paul's sermon, wasn't there? You might be thinking, I'm not a history student. But we can all think about how things have become the way that they are, can't we? So here's how you do that.

You see somebody doing something kind and you say, isn't it interesting how much we value kindness in our society and our time? Because it wasn't always that way and in fact it isn't that way in other cultures.

[21 : 21] Have you ever thought about why that is? I've been thinking about that recently. I've been reading this book, *The Air We Breathe*. Would you like to read it with me? There you go.

You go from history to outreach. Maybe you've never met Jesus in your life. Guess what?

You're surrounded by people who have. They've met the man who claimed to be God in the pages of the Bible. The man who died on a cross and who his followers say was raised again.

And who went from being a Jewish nearly nobody who died on a cross to being someone who's worshipped as God by over a billion people today. Isn't that worth a look?

Isn't that worth thinking about? Remember the two opportunities to do that right here. You may be wondering who this man is. He's a man called Samuel Hoare.

[22 : 23] And he was a lawyer. You're probably not surprised looking at his face. He's a lawyer. He's a lawyer back in the 19th century. And he was once representing a defendant in a case, a criminal case.

And he turned to the jury and he said, the facts in this case are so obvious and evident to all that I will not insult your intelligence by pointing them out to you.

That was his case. What happened? The jury went out to deliberate and they came back within five minutes and they returned a guilty verdict. And Hoare said, how has this happened?

How have you come to a guilty verdict? The facts were so evident to you. And the foreman says to him, well, we all agree that you're such an able advocate that if there had been anything to say in this man's defence, you would have said it.

And since you didn't, we brought in a guilty verdict. Silence has lost the case. And it's the same with the good news, folks, to some extent.

[23 : 29] If we say nothing, those who need to hear the good news will simply conclude that salvation is not important enough for us to talk about. And they will rule against.

So we need to tell the good news, don't we? There is a truth that can set people free and restore their innocence.

If only it can be told that Jesus died on the cross for us and was raised. How can we not speak up? And if you're not a believer here today, if there's evidence that could set a condemned person free, would you not want that to be made publicly available?

It is. Just want to invite you for a moment to reflect. someone asked you, what is the big deal with Jesus anyway?

And why do you think what you think about Jesus? What would you answer? Have you answered that question for yourself, first of all?

[24 : 39] Maybe you haven't. And if you have, are you ready to answer someone else if they asked you that question? And if you feel you're not ready, I'd love you to think in concrete terms, when am I going to spend time answering that question and being ready to answer it if somebody else asks me?

If I just take 30 seconds to reflect on those questions. Thank you. So we're to know the good news and tell the good news, but thirdly, we're to leave the rest to God.

What happens in our story, in our passage, when Paul tells the good news? Did you notice? How does it land when he says unpopular things that people don't really want to believe?

Three things. First of all, there's opposition, isn't there? This part of the Bible is fairly clear about that. There will be scoffers. Paul says it up front. There will be some who says it's unbelievable, it's just fantasy.

And there will be abuse and labelling. Verse 45 and 46. People will be saying you're haters, you're intolerant, you're backwards. And there may be persecution and you may even be kicked out of places.

[26 : 11] That's what happens in verse 50. There may be loss. You may lose friends. You may lose a forum. And God's messengers have told us in advance that that is how it will be.

Do we really believe God and expect these things to come? Or do we actually, when it comes, tend to be discouraged and shocked? Because we haven't really trusted what God said.

Here's another important question. In the face of opposition, when is it okay to leave? So we don't ask that question and we're really thinking of ourselves as God, aren't we?

Basically all I need to do is stay here for long enough and eventually I will make it happen. That's God's job. We leave the rest to God, don't we? So when is it okay to leave?

When is it okay to stop reaching out? Well, verse 51, if there is abuse and persecution and people push you out of a relationship or a home or a job, it is okay to leave.

[27 : 18] Not stopping off, but leaving and leaving the rest to God. See what Paul and his friends do? They shake the dust from their feet. It's just a pictorial way of leaving the rest to God.

So there is opposition but there is also faith. People want to know more, don't they? Verse 42, massive crowds gathering, people following Paul and Barnabas saying, what's this about?

And some people will believe and they'll need to be encouraged to continue in the grace of God. But even that, God does. Look at verse 48.

When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honoured the word of the Lord and all who were appointed for eternal life believed. Arminians, take note. Human beings are acting, aren't they?

We are responsible to be his witnesses by the power of his Holy Spirit but God does the saving. We tell our story, the story of what Jesus has done in our lives and we leave the rest to God.

[28 : 29] And we can do that if we know our place in his plan. What's going on with this picture of the Washington Monument? Well, why have I put it up there? because some very unusual graffiti was found on there not too long ago when some workmen were doing renovations.

It's quite an old monument and the graffiti was from the 1800s. And what the graffiti says is this, whoever is the human instrument under God in the conversion of one soul erects a monument more lofty and enduring than this.

And you can go and see that description if you want to. Much better than building a monument to yourself through your life and your actions a legacy whatever you want to call it much better than being a monument is being an instrument.

That's what we are in God's plan his instrument. It's the spirit that changes hearts through us. It's not us. The spirit builds the church so we pray don't we?

Thirdly if we do this and we're back to verse 52 there will be joy. That is the third result of us holding out the word of life being Jesus' witnesses.

[29 : 45] There will be joy. Joy in sharing joy. Joy in sharing in Jesus' sufferings. Joy in offering joy to other people. How can that be? How can you have people reject you and abuse you and persecute you kick you out of places and still have joy?

Well, we talked about it in Philippians, didn't we? We can have that joy if our joy rests in a person whose existence, his life, is not a leap of faith or an opinion but a fact.

And if the truth about him doesn't change even if people don't agree with it or acknowledge it then we'll have joy then we'll reach out with joy then we'll be able to offer joy too.

So what is our role? Well, first we pray for help and filling of the Holy Spirit. Then we know and we tell the good news and we leave the rest to God. Let me pray.

Well, God, I thank you. I thank you so much that we have the example of your witnesses, those who saw you with physical eyes, how they went about sharing joy with other people and the joy that filled their hearts as they did that.

[31 : 09] Lord, I thank you for making it clear to us how important the resurrection is. Just pray for anybody here, Lord, who has not heard about your resurrection, does not believe in your

resurrection. I pray that they would make the time to investigate for themselves, Lord, and that you would speak to them.

I thank you, Lord, that our faith in you is not a matter of lifestyle choices or good moral values. It is based on what you have done in history and the significance of that for our lives, our eternal lives. Help us to trust you. Help us to be good students of your good news so that we will know it and tell it and help us to trust you for the rest. In Jesus' name.

Amen. Amen. Amen.