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Acts 19:1-41
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Paul Goes to Ephesus

One of the things I love about Italy is that you never know what you're going to find when you walk into an old church. Italy is filled with religious relics—pieces of the past preserved because they are connected to saints or holy people. And people believe that if you can just see them, touch them or even just get close to them that they have spiritual power to heal you. Like some things we hear about in today's scripture. And in Italy, some of these relics are pretty strange.

In Padua, for example, you can see the tongue of St. Anthony from the 12th century. Yes, his actual tongue, preserved in a beautiful golden reliquary. Apparently St. Anthony was an excellent preacher and when he died, his body decomposed but his tongue did not. So they preserved it in a golden case the shape of his head and put it on display. I wanted to show you a picture of it this morning, but refrained, because it is just too horrifying to see.

In Milan, there is a bent nail believed to be one of the nails that held Jesus on the cross. Once a year the nail is brought down from 40 meters above the altar and displayed for 40 hours for the public to see and be blessed.

In Naples, there is a vial containing what is traditionally believed to be the blood of the 3rd century bishop and martyr, St. Januarius. Several times a year, people gather to see whether his blood will liquefy. If it does, that means good luck for Naples. If it does not then, well, I suppose you move to the country.

And in Florence, you can see the middle finger of what supposedly belonged to 16th century Italian astronomer, scientist, and mathematician, Galileo. Now I don't exactly why its just his middle finger, but I wonder if it gives us a window into what Galileo thought about relics. Hmm.

Now, I'm not here to make fun of relics. There is something deeply human about wanting tangible objects we can see, touch, and keep. Souvenirs from a favorite vacation, for example. Has anyone ever collected starfish or sand dollars from the beach, only to find them weeks later by their wonderful aroma? We like tangible reminders of things.

But when it comes to religion, there's a danger. Sometimes we can become more interested in the thing that reminds us of God than in God himself. And that's exactly the issue we find in Acts 19 as Paul arrives in Ephesus after Corinth.

Ephesus was a booming metropolis in Asia minor or modern day Turkey that was filled with religion. Temples, gods, magic, spiritual practices—you name it. And because of the amount of money that flowed into the Temple for the goddess

of Artemus, it was major financial hub as well. And into that world comes the Apostle Paul preaching about Jesus. Not another object. Not another ritual. Not another magic formula.

Jesus. And the question for us is simple: Is Jesus alive in our lives today, or has he become a religious relic that we safely tuck away and only pull out when it suits us?

Please join me as we read from Acts 19:1-21 and we see for ourselves what happens next.

19 While Apol′los was at Corinth, Paul passed through the upper country and
came to Ephesus. There he found some disciples. **2** And he said to them, “Did you
receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” And they said, “No, we have never
even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.” **3** And he said, “Into what then were you
baptized?” They said, “Into John’s baptism.” **4** And Paul said, “John baptized with
the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come
after him, that is, Jesus.” **5** On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the
Lord Jesus. **6** And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Spirit came
on them; and they spoke with tongues and prophesied. **7** There were about twelve
of them in all.

8 And he entered the synagogue and for three months spoke boldly, arguing
and pleading about the kingdom of God; **9** but when some were stubborn and
disbelieved, speaking evil of the Way before the congregation, he withdrew from
them, taking the disciples with him, and argued daily in the hall of Tyran′nus.
10 This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of
the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.

11 And God did extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, **12** so that
handkerchiefs or aprons were carried away from his body to the sick, and diseases
left them and the evil spirits came out of them.

13 Then some of the itinerant Jewish exorcists undertook to pronounce the
name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, “I adjure you by the
Jesus whom Paul preaches.” **14** Seven sons of a Jewish high priest named Sceva
were doing this. **15** But the evil spirit answered them, “Jesus I know, and Paul I
know; but who are you?” **16** And the man in whom the evil spirit was leaped on
them, beat all of them, and overpowered them, so that they fled out of that house
naked and wounded. **17** And this became known to all residents of Ephesus, both
Jews and Greeks; and fear fell upon them all; and the name of the Lord Jesus was
extolled. **18** Many also of those who were now believers came, confessing and
divulging their practices. **19** And a number of those who practiced magic arts
brought their scrolls together and burned them in the sight of all; and they counted

the value of them and found it came to fifty thousand pieces of silver. **20** So the word of the Lord grew and prevailed mightily.

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination.

"Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers," the Apostle Paul asked upon arrival in Ephesus. And they said, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit."

These were good people. Faithful people. Religious people. People who had been baptized, trying their best to follow God. But they had only heard part of the story. John the Baptist had prepared them for Jesus, but they hadn't yet encountered Jesus. So Paul told them about him They were baptized in Jesus' name, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and everything changed.

There's a warning here for some of us longtime Christians. Because it is possible to know a lot about Jesus without actually knowing Jesus. We can know the stories. We can know the Bible. We can know the hymns. We can even know how church works. And we can still miss having a life changing encounter with Jesus Christ.

The question isn't simply, "Do we believe in Jesus?" Many of the world's religions believe that Jesus was a prophet from God.

The question is: "Have we personally encountered Jesus ourselves and is He changing us through the power of his Holy Spirit from the inside out?"

Luke tells us about the impact that Jesus had on some traveling Jewish exorcists in Ephesus. They saw Paul casting out evil spirits in Jesus' name and thought they'd discovered a useful trick to make their own ministries thrive. So they tried it themselves: "In the name of Jesus, who Paul proclaims, I command you to come out!"

The evil spirit responded: "Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are you?" And then the evil spirit attacked them and sent them running, naked and bleeding. It's one of the strangest and yet funniest stories in the Bible.

But the point is serious. They thought Jesus was a formula that they could manipulate for their personal benefit. You know, say the right words. Do the right ritual. Get the right result. But folks, that's magic. Not faith.

And sometimes we treat God the same way. "If I just pray hard enough…" "If I just go to church…" "If I just do the right things…" "If I just have enough faith…" Then God will give me what I want.

But Jesus isn't a formula. Jesus isn't a vending machine. Jesus is a real live person who wants to have a relationship with us. We can not manipulate Jesus. We follow Jesus. And when we follow him, we say, "He is Lord of our lives. We are not."

Then something remarkable happened in our story. People who had practiced magic saw this spiritual butt whooping of the exorcists and brought their magic scrolls together…worth over fifty thousand drachmas or $650,000 in today's currency…and destroyed them. They didn't just say, "Jesus is better." The Spirit of Jesus radically led them to change their lives.

And Luke summed it all up, saying, "So the word of the Lord grew and prevailed mightily."

That's the pattern we see over and over again throughout the Book of Acts… which is the story of the Church's beginning. Paul shows up in a new place. Starts off preaching in the local synagogue. Debates Jesus the Messiah with the Jews. Some believe. Most do not. And he is driven out of the synagogue to preach Jesus to the Gentile or unbelievers. And through Paul's preaching, people encounter Jesus. They receive the Holy Spirit. They repent. They let go of their lives. And the gospel spreads. You see when Jesus becomes real, something deep down in our hearts changes.

And that's where this story hits close to home. We may not have $650,000 worth of magic books. But we all have things we hold onto because they make us feel safe and secure. Our money. Our reputations. Our politics. Our traditions. Our routines. Our need to be right. Our tendency to control things. Our carefully constructed image of ourselves.

None of these things is necessarily bad. But any good thing in our lives can become a substitute for God. And an idol we worship.

We can even turn Jesus into a relic. We can admire him. We can sing songs about him. We can put him on a cross around our neck. We can put him on a bumper sticker. We can talk about him on Sunday. But then we never actually follow him on Monday.

I know because I lived that disconnected life up until my early teens when a high school friend challenged me about who Jesus was in my life? And I didn't have an answer. That was when my relationship with Jesus became real. Ever since and slowly over time, Jesus has been changing me.

My friends, if Jesus is alive, he is a force to be reckoned with. Because living things change us. Jesus gets into all of the areas I mentioned above where we feel safe and secure and changes us from the inside out to become more like him.

More loving. More joyful. More peaceful. More patient. More kind. More good. More faithful. More gentle. More self-controlled.[1] More generous. More forgiving. More hopeful. Everything that Jesus was, is and always will be.

Now, Italy is filled with reminders of Christianity's past—churches, cathedrals, paintings, sculptures, relics, and ruins. Christianity has left its mark on

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[1] Galatians 5:22

history. But Acts 19 reminds us that Christianity is meant to leave its mark on us today.

The gospel is not merely, "Look at what God did once."

It is: "Look at what God is doing now."

The same Jesus who met Paul and transformed Ephesus is still alive. The same Holy Spirit is still at work. The same gospel can still transform us today.

But if Jesus is alive, then he cannot remain a relic in our lives. He cannot be admired but ignored. Displayed but not obeyed. Remembered but not followed.

We do not need more religious objects or a more impressive museum of Christian memories. We need the living Jesus—not merely the Jesus we learned about as children, not merely the Jesus of our favorite Bible stories, and not merely the Jesus claimed by our cultural or political tribe. We need the Jesus who calls us to repent, surrender, and follow him.

So here is the question: What is one step Jesus is asking us to take today as we follow him? Maybe it's finding a church where we can surround ourselves with other Jesus following people. Maybe it's letting go of resentment and seeking forgiveness. Maybe it's no longer thinking of ourselves more highly than we ought. Maybe it's letting go of control. Maybe it's letting go of that thing that binds us. Maybe it's something nobody else knows about.

Don't leave whatever it is as an idea.

Take one step.

Make the phone call. Show up. Apologize. Forgive. Ask for help. Let it go.

The Ephesians burned what had controlled them.

And then Luke says: "The word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed."

So let's hear the Word. Let's receive the Spirit. And let's put down whatever keeps us from following Jesus.

Because Jesus is not a relic. He is alive. And He is worthy of more than our admiration. He is worthy of our lives.

Amen.