

# Would You Go

A Funeral Homily Expositing Acts 16:9-15

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Would you go?

It is of some importance to note that the Apostle Paul, at the time he was called in the night by God to go to Macedonia, had never even been to Europe before. What Paul carried, the redemptive hope of the resurrection of Christ, which we call the gospel, had also never been to Europe. That's a long way to go to an unknown land for message and messenger. Nonetheless, when the call came and Paul sensed that it was a call from God, he went. Would you?

I once heard the call to go and went, but worry not, it isn't as self-righteous of a story as it may seem at first.

One Sunday after a potluck lunch at First Baptist Church of Waco, my college congregation, a woman approached me in the parking lot. It was a woman I admired very much and had taken quite a liking to. A budding scholar whose company I quite enjoyed. I would tell you who she was, but if I did she might get up out of that pew over there and make her company less enjoyable. She met me on the way to the car and told me she had been invited by one of the other women to be a part of a women's leadership team to Kenya a few months down the road and she thought she would go. I tried to be happy for her, but I didn't really like the idea one bit. I was quite enjoying spending time with her, and pathetic as it may be, the thought of her absence for a couple of weeks just didn't suit.

The months went by and it was just a few weeks before she would be leaving and I was in class at the telecommunications building one day. My professor made an announcement before we started. The university was going on a mission trip to Africa. "Don't remind me," I thought. They wanted a documentary crew to tag along and make a movie about the trip. It was such short notice the university was willing to pay for half the trip, was anyone interested? Would anyone go? My missionary zeal suddenly burned within me and I signed up almost immediately. Yes, I'll go.

My following a love interest to Africa, albeit for altruistic purpose, isn't the same as the Apostle Paul venturing to an unknown world in the name of resurrection, but to be fair, the question I started with today isn't the same either, "Would *you* go?" You see, the question Paul faced isn't really possible anymore for a couple of reasons.

He was asked to take the story of Easter to a strange and distant land and there are no strange and distant lands anymore not really, not in the same way. In Paul's day to go to a strange and distant land was to commit to a long and dangerous journey almost 2,000 years before Rick Steves taught Americans how to tour Europe. Who could know what Paul would see, or meet, how well he could communicate, if he would ever return? In the age of non-stop travel to any city on the planet there just aren't those kinds of places left in the world. And thanks to technologies like Zoom, we can have a face-to-face conversation with anyone, anywhere, anytime. We can't go anywhere now where we don't already know quite a lot about them; and they know quite a lot about us.

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Note: Sermon manuscripts are written for the ear rather than the eye. If grammar or punctuation seem unconventional and the meaning unclear, try pronouncing the sentence aloud phonetically.

Paul was also initiating the communication of ideas and ways of being that no one had heard before. I don't mean to suggest that the story of resurrection has been adopted, or even that it should be adopted, globally, but it isn't an unknown quantity in many places anymore. The so called "gospel frontiers" have wrapped so far around the globe that they've met on the other side. I'm not quite suggesting that we bring all the missionaries home and declare, "mission accomplished", but I do think "Would you go?" means something different now than it did for Paul. But I still want to know, "Would you go?"

The understanding of the word, "go" began to change for us in 1974 when a man quite accustomed to "go-ing" came home. Leslie Newbigin, a British missionary arrived home after 30 years of work in India and was shocked at the state of the place. His time in India had him frequently looking into the face of poverty, suffering, and injustice. Upon returning home, he noticed the same realities were everywhere around him. There were different iterations of course, but he began to wonder and have conversations about the idea of being a missionary in his own home. From his work sprang the Gospel and Our Culture Network throughout the UK, New Zealand, and North America. By the late 80's thinkers here in the US had begun applying Newbigin's ideas specifically to the US.

One of those thinkers suggested that the United States is a place characterized by air conditioners and automatic garage doors. Huh!?! What do air conditioners and garage doors have to do with anything? Well, the connection is probably more illustrative than it is scientific, but imagine what the world was like before them. It used to be that when it got too hot or humid in the house, you had to go outside and sit on the porch for a while. Your neighbors might do the same. Before long everybody knew everybody and a true neighbor-hood was formed in every sense of the word. Now our homes have a capacity to become bubbles of isolation. To make it worse, we have the ability to walk into the garage, get in the car, raise the door, leave, come back, park, lower the door, and get out of the car. We've left the house without ever being exposed to the outside world. We don't have to talk to each other anymore. Ok, so garage doors and air conditioners are not literally the culprit, but we do live in a world that is highly individualized. We as individuals don't know our neighbors like we used to. Given the church is a sum of its parts who don't know their neighbors well, the church doesn't know it's neighbors well either. You see, to "go" has as much to do now with our neighborhoods as it does the far reaches of the world, but this has to do with much more than geography.

Yes, in bygone eras the church centralized itself geographically. That is, "church" was defined as a *place* where people came to worship, to share ideas, and to have a few meals together. While that is beginning to break down, the same thing happened with the *ideas* the church has held near and dear. The North American church in the last couple of decades has become very adept at boiling Christian ideas down to three points and a poem, or a lesson on how to live your best life now. In a sound bite world the church has set its teaching up like central points within the landscape of ideas in our world. These are places where people ideologically gather and feel at home within their beliefs and ideas, except we find that fewer and fewer people are gathering at these places and around these ideas.

If we wish to continue as stewards of this old Easter story, we're going to have to understand "going" in a different way. We're going to have to understand that "going" in our world means becoming organic within our culture. We can't afford to camp out in our homes and places of worship any more than we can camp out in the protection of the same ideas we've held for decades. That means, we have to "go" out into the world around us and become a part of it. Now I don't mean we should turn off the lights and sell the building, we still need a base of operations and a place to build community, but we have to stop measuring our success by what happens *in here*, or how many people we have *in here* and begin getting *out there*. We need to know our neighbors, not just a name and maybe a cute story about them, but what is really happening in their families. What are their hopes and fears? Even Paul's mission to Macedonia – the great and grand introduction of the gospel to Europe – began with a simple conversation. A woman name Lydia heard her story in the story Paul was telling and after she'd been baptized she insisted he stay in her home. As simply as that Easter began in Europe.

We've celebrated Easter long enough in here, we have to begin to wonder what it might look like *out* in our community. You see, our goal here is not church growth in the sense we've understood it in the past, our goal is simply to *go*.

How do we do that exactly? What will it look like? What will the difficulties be? Where do we begin? How long will it take? There are a thousand questions just like that, for which we don't yet have the answers. For now though, we're concerned with just one question.

We know now that going looks different than it did for Paul, but we know that it still has to do with journeying into the unknown. It may have to do with sacrificing what has been comfortable to us in the past. It may mean we have to learn new ways to communicate. It may be scary at times. With faith we'll realize that we can't know the answers to all those questions without first leaning into the first question. First Baptist Church of Rochester, if you were called by God into a strange, but not so distant world, "Would you go?"