

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
June 25, 2017

Good News People

Acts 11:19-30

"That's the way it is." That was news anchor Walter Cronkite's sign-off line on the "CBS Evening News" from 1962-1981. But Cronkite's tag line didn't come about quickly or easily. He actually ended his very first broadcast by inviting viewers to get the details of the stories he'd reported in the next day's papers. This upset the company's management, who felt that Cronkite was sending people to read the newspapers rather than coming to him for the news. CBS News President Richard Salant met with Cronkite, who initially resisted, but eventually changed his sign-off. He came up with "That's the way it is." But even that stirred up some disagreement. According to one producer, Salant's attitude was, "'We're not telling them that's the way it is. We can't do that in 15 minutes,' which was the length of the show in those days. 'That's not the way it is.'" But Cronkite persisted, and that's the way it was from then on.¹

"That's the way it is." Or is it? With today's profusion of news sources and outlets competing for your attention, it can be hard to really get a handle on "the way it is." The newspaper in your box summarizes events this way. The radio station in your car reports circumstances somewhat differently. The website on your desktop computer gives another account of circumstances. The around-the-clock news channel on your television says it happened this way. The alert that just got pushed to your mobile device has another version of what took place. To say that we get mixed messages, often about the same events, is a great understatement.

What's more, we live in a media saturated culture where we seem to move from one bulletin, special report, or news flash to another. Nothing grabs our attention like the phrase "breaking news." And whenever this expression flashes across the screen, you can assume there are headlines on the way. That's because headlines help capture, in short form, what has happened. Headlines generate interest and invite us to come deeper into the details of the story. We need headlines. They can be very helpful. But they can also be deceptive and dangerous.

In recent years, we've seen a big rise in what's called "clickbait." It's a pejorative term for internet content that aims to get users to click on a link to go to a certain webpage. There's nothing wrong with weblinks, in and of themselves. But the problem with clickbait is that it often sacrifices quality or accuracy in order to get your attention and persuade you to pass along content through your social network. One of the ways clickbait does this is through sensationalist headlines, exaggerated summaries that give you just enough information to make you curious but then lead you into sensationalist stories that are poorly researched and untruthful. In a clickbait world, the way it appears to be may not really be the way it actually is.

In their own day and time, the early Christians were quite skilled at social networking, minus the web and clickbaiting. They didn't have all the advantages and disadvantages of cyberspace. But they did have their own version of "this is the way it is," and the Holy

Spirit enabled them to spread their gospel headlines with incredible effectiveness. In today's text from the book of Acts, Luke tells us that the Spirit was so adept as to take persecution aimed at stifling the gospel, and use it to actually spread the gospel. After Stephen's execution, the followers of Jesus fled to other neighboring regions, and took their message with them. As with so many other places in the New Testament, Luke summarizes this message as "the good news about the Lord Jesus" (v. 20).

Notice that Luke, and the other New Testament writers, don't describe the church's message as good advice, good wisdom, good theology, or good philosophy. Instead, the Christian message is good *news*. In other words, the gospel is an announcement about something that has happened. Namely, that in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah, God has come to save the world and to inaugurate his reign of justice and peace. Put another way, God has acted in Christ to reconcile us to himself and to bring about a new creation. That's not primarily a school of thought, a set of principles for finding happiness, or a formula for successful living. It's news about what God has done, how that determines life in the present, and what it opens up for the future.

We Christians have always been good news people. In one sense, it all started there at the empty tomb, the scene of God's action. That's where heavenly messengers gave us our first headline: "He is not here; he has risen!" (Luke 24:6). From there, the women who had come to visit the grave ran with the news. Of course, not everyone believed the women's reporting. In fact, the apostles themselves were highly skeptical of this breaking news. To them, it sounded like nonsense, fake news that shouldn't be trusted or spread.

We also know from Matthew's Gospel that there were attempts to plant truly fake news to compete with the good news of the resurrection. According to Matthew, the Roman soldiers who had been guarding the tomb were bribed to spread a false story claiming that the disciples had come during the night, while the soldiers were asleep, and had stolen Jesus' body. As soon as the soldiers got their money, they headed home, got on the web, and started posting clickbait using the headline, "Body Snatched from Local Cemetery!" Within hours the story was all over the web.

Thankfully, truth prevails over falsehood, in all its forms. Sometimes falsehood comes in the form of an information glut. A recent issue of *The Economist* carried an article titled, "Yes, I'd lie to you: The post-truth world." It analyzed the dishonesty that's wreaking havoc in politics, journalism, social media, and other areas of common life. According to the piece, one of the most effective ways to tell lies is by hiding the truth in a glut of information. In other words, it's hard to tell what's actually happening, or to get a handle on the way things really are, when you're drowning in distracting information. One expert quoted in the article said, "Right now, it pays to be outrageous, but not to be truthful."²

Our life as Christians, individually and together, is built on the truthfulness of the gospel. And the truthfulness of the gospel is grounded in how God has acted in the world, in time and space, in concrete historical ways, to reveal his faithful love and to accomplish our deliverance from sin and death. These things aren't just good ideas, sound dogma, solid philosophy, wise teachings, or moral virtues. All these things are important and have their place. But the gospel is way more than the sum of these things. The gospel is an announcement of what God has done, is doing, and will do through Christ. And because the gospel flows out of the action of God himself, it prevails in spite of persecution, falsehood, and every attempt to drown it out or distract the world from it.

Sometimes the gospel even prevails in spite of the church. That's because even though we're the community sent to proclaim the message, we sometimes get in the way of the

message. Instead of spreading the news, we become the news. Our sins and failures, our disunity and divisions, our power grabs and popularity contests, end up making the headlines and in the process drown out our own headline, "Jesus Christ is Lord." The fact is, we Christians get just as involved as anyone in distributing misinformation, spreading conspiracies, and propagating fake news. Though we may have good intentions and high aspirations, we can be just as guilty of perpetuating falsehoods and inflicting pain on others. We end up damaging reputations and distracting others from the news we need to be reporting most, Christ crucified and risen.

According to Luke, as the early Christians crossed boundaries with their reporting, and began announcing to the Gentiles, "Breaking news! Jesus Christ is Lord!, lives were changed and walls came down. "The Lord's hand was with them," says Luke, "and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord" (v. 21). Many of those who were paying attention to the news repented and believed. That's because the good news has bad news built into it. The bad news of our own sinfulness and unrighteousness. In the Christian understanding of the human condition, that's the way it is. But the news doesn't stop there. The reason we call it *good* news is because there's forgiveness and restoration in Christ, not only for those who come to faith in him for the first time, but also for those of us who already know him and need to keep coming back again and again to the source of our message.

After all, when it comes to news, sources make all the difference. No matter where you turn to keep up with current events, you're likely to hear someone saying, "My sources tell me. . . ." Or, "According to anonymous sources. . . ." Or, "Sources in the government say. . . ." One man tells about a time when he and his son were coming home from the grocery store, and his son asked, "Dad, do you believe in the Bermuda Triangle?" He answered, "If you're asking me if I believe that this place exists, my answer is yes. If you're asking me if I believe all the mysterious stories about ships and planes disappearing, no: I think that's all baloney." "Well Dad," said the boy with an air of defensiveness, "I believe in it. And I bet you want to know why." "Yes, I do," he said. "Well, I was watching *Scooby Doo*. . . ." ³

I don't know where you get your news. Fox, CNN, Facebook, the local newspaper, and so on. But I do know that we're drowning in news and information. And I know that more and more people identify themselves by the source of their news and information. Maybe there's a channel you always watch, or a website that you always rely on, or a radio station that you always listen to. Or perhaps you don't watch, listen to, or read any of them, because you just end up confused about what the facts are and what the truth really is. Or maybe you've tuned out a lot of the news because the debates are so contentious. Deborah Tannen has labeled contemporary America "the Argument Culture," an atmosphere that feeds on polarization. When it comes the media's appetite for violence, she summarizes it this way: "No fight, no news." ⁴

In a "No fight, no news" atmosphere, it's crucial that we as Christians not lose sight of our identity as good news people. Remember that we trace our existence and our mission to the gospel events of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. In fact, the reason you're here in the people of God is because someone reported this news to you, just as someone had reported it to them, and so on, all the way back to those early believers who first started circulating the word in Jerusalem and beyond. From the very beginning, who we are and what we do have been defined not primarily by a body of knowledge, a system of thought, or a collection of teachings, but by news—good news—of God's saving action in Christ.

So being good news people doesn't mean that we go around blissfully ignorant of the brokenness, suffering, and pain of this present world, thinking and acting as if things really

aren't as bad as they appear. Bad news is bad news. We don't deny that. In fact, sometimes it seems like there's nothing but bad news. But in the midst of all the bad news, there's plenty of what Luke calls "evidence of the grace of God" (v. 23), primarily in the form of the church. That's how and where God is forming a community of people who are supposed to be a picture of what redemption looks like, a sign that in God's eternal purposes, bad news won't have the final word. In the meantime, what we've been given, what we believe, and what we're sent to share is indeed both good and news.

¹ Tom Watkins, "How 'That's the Way It Is' Became Cronkite's Tagline." CNN website. July 18, 2009. Accessed June 21, 2017 <<http://www.cnn.com/2009/US/07/18/cronkite.thats.the.way.it.is/>>.

² Adapted from "Yes, I'd lie to you: The post-truth world." *The Economist* (September 10, 2016). Summarized at <http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2016/december/5121916.html>.

³ David Slagle, at <http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2007/december/8121007.html>.

⁴ Tannen is quoted in Richard Lischer, *The End of Words: The Language of Reconciliation in a Culture of Violence* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005) Kindle edition.