

## Resurrection Vision: When God Leads Off the Map

*Acts 11:1-18*

Rev. Dr. Tim Archibald

Have you ever woken up and felt like you had moved off the known map into a place that felt totally foreign and strangely unfamiliar? Our family knows a bit about this right now—but immigrants know far more about it! Still, given the last two years of COVID, any of us can feel like we're off the map and into the strange unknown.

In today's passage, the early church finds itself off the map and into the strange unknown. Before ascending into heaven Jesus commissioned his disciples to "Go and Make disciples of **all** nations—baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit." Yet when Peter puts that into practice, he is quickly led off the map into uncharted terrain.

They always say that bad news travels fast! Well tongues were wagging back in the Jerusalem church when they heard that Peter had not only gone to eat with a bunch of Italian non-Jews—but that he had stayed with them, baptized them and welcomed them into the fold. Now this may not sound like a big deal to you, but this was entirely shocking to these early followers of Jesus who were all devote Jews. Jewish food laws dictated that Jews couldn't eat pork and a whole range of other meat, effectively marking out Jews from their non-Jewish neighbours, and preventing them from eating or even associating with non-Jews. Food laws became a weapon in a war of words between Jews and Gentiles. And given the Gentile occupation of Palestine, Peter's actions probably even seemed like fraternizing with the enemy.

In moving off the map Peter has crossed a deep religious and cultural divide. Words spoken by Jesus about his own significance to the Gentiles had not captured anyone's imagination—until now. Already there had been anxieties and differing points of view within the Jerusalem church, but now a potentially more divisive split threatens to open up. The transition to full inclusion of Gentiles without requiring them to adopt Jewish ways is probably the most significant ministry transition in the first three decades of the early church. So how did Resurrection Vision allow them to navigate this?—and what is Jesus teaching us through it?

Today's passage is a key one for the Canadian church right now as we find ourselves off the map and into a totally unfamiliar ministry context. Church attendance has been dropping in Canada for decades, but mainline Protestant churches like ours have seen **monumental** declines over the past 45 years. The membership of the Presbyterian Church in Canada is now less than half of what it was at its peak in 1964—even as the Canadian population has increased by more than 70 percent. Then along comes a pandemic and suddenly declining numbers that might have been expected by 2030 are the new reality **NOW**. Doing the same old thing no longer brings the same results.

When we find ourselves off the map and the world is strangely different than we expected, we can become disoriented. When the tried-and-true solutions to our problems don't work, we can get stuck. When faced with competing values that demand a decision which will inevitably lead

to loss, we can get overwhelmed. Yet if we just keep doing things “the way we’ve always done them”—we may just end up with a Dust Bowl.

Early farmers who went west to settle Southern Alberta in the early 1900s were offered lucrative promises and vast stretches of native prairie grassland which had never seen a plow. They carved out fields; and initially there were some great harvests. Then drought hit with a vengeance. In the worst hit regions, a crop of significance was not harvested for almost 10 years. Top soil—that took 1000s of years to create—was blown away by the wind in a season. Between 1921 and 1926, 138 townships in southern Alberta, comprising over three million acres, lost more than 55% of their population. Farm abandonments in the 1920s exceeded those of the Great Depression and nearly bankrupted the new province of Alberta.

Yet it wasn’t just about the drought; droughts are part of regular cycles on the Great Plains. But most of these early settler farmers who arrived simply did things the way they’d always done them before—in Eastern well-watered areas—and expected the same outcomes. Instead they got a dust bowl. It was only when farmers realized that they had moved off the map and required new methods, that a whole new set of dry farming techniques were spawned—which continue to be successfully used in arid parts of Alberta today.

So which kind of farmers are we here at OPC? Are we like the ones who missed the new context and simply kept doing things the way they’d always done them? Or, are we the kind of farmer Christians who perceive that God has led us off the map into a totally different world that now requires that we discern fresh techniques of making new disciples? For churches that rise to this shift—even in such an arid cultural context, there can be new vitality and growth. Canadian Sociologist Reg Bibby describes the current state of the Canadian church as being like a forest fire where amid the charred ruins you still discover islands of towering green vitality. My dream for OPC is that we would be one of those islands of towering green vitality—where we follow the risen Jesus eagerly off the map into this new context to share with others Christ’s refreshing new life and hope! Today’s passage is entirely instructive in showing us how we can be farmers with such adaptive Resurrection Vision.

**Lesson #1 *Stick Together.*** We live in a fractured “my way or the highway” individualistic culture: “If you don’t do things my way, then I’m out of here!” By contrast, however, what we immediately notice here in Acts is that the Gospel is not about the solo efforts of one star maverick leader—but rather is about a common prayerful discernment by the leaders of the church **together**. These early Christians show us how to discern together and to stick together in unity. Notice that Peter is not defensively drawn into the criticism of the critics. There are no personal attacks. Peter retells the story from the top—of how he went to the house of a non-Jew, accepted his hospitality, ate with him and then baptized these Gentiles as full members of the church—without requiring them to become Jews in the process.

Given the intensity with which these critics pounced on Peter, one might expect a fair bit of skepticism here. I mean, a story about sheets being let down from heaven and commands to eat what had been from time immemorial forbidden to eat, and Peter hearing voices. Surely there was room here for a little doubt and eye-rolling. But in fact we hear nothing of the kind. Instead there is listening, openness and swift acceptance of Peter’s report—as Peter

shows how at every step the Spirit has led him to this off the map way. Resurrection Vision gives them a ready willingness to believe that the Holy Spirit really is behind all this. So instead of fighting, there is a praising of God for a clear expansion of the kingdom and its membership that is downright remarkable. When God leads us off the map we've got to stick together, discern together and put the leading of the Spirit first! Which leads to lesson two.

**Lesson #2** *The Real Star is the Prodding and Powerful Holy Spirit*—who makes bold promises and keeps them; this Holy One, who finds a way even in the midst of human distinctions and potential division to break down barriers and bring unity and community instead. Where there is openness, through a kind of double-vision, the Spirit leads both towards each other: Peter sees a cloth full of unclean animals and is told to eat; Cornelius sees an angel telling him to send for Peter. And when Peter begins to speak to these Gentiles the Holy Spirit falls on them—just as when the Spirit had previously fallen on these devoted Jews in Jerusalem. And the Spirit affects the unity—teaching them to embrace the adventurous task of discovering new areas of Jesus' lordship—to expect surprises and new implications of the Gospel. This does not mean an undisciplined flight of fancy or simply following the latest colourful trend—but rather continuing to penetrate the significance of the scriptural witness that Jesus is Lord. Seeking the Spirit's lead, and being open to Divine leading and prodding, is central if we are to be farmers with Resurrection Vision. Not every bright clever idea is a movement of the Spirit. But neither do we think that a brand new thing is impossible for the risen Christ. Central is knowing the difference is always being anchored in prayer, humility and a deep attention to the Word of God. God may be opening up new realities, but they are also realities that are consistent with everything Jesus said and did.

**Lesson #3** *Never Underestimate who Christ can reach through us.* Peter finally declares in Acts 10: I truly understand that God shows no partiality. God has an active concern for all humanity. A tectonic shift starts to occur here in understanding and expressing what it means to be God's people. The repentance referenced here is not merely a first step ***I make*** toward Christ, nor is it merely saying ***I'm sorry for my sins***. Repentance is the Divine gift that makes us supple and open to be turned toward truth. Repentance is the joyful human response—the turning of a life—in response to God's gracious offer of himself to us. Prodded by the Spirit, the early church learns here that God can give “the repentance that leads to life,” to anyone; even critics and hardline skeptics.

London is changing. And Oakridge can have a key ministry in this rapidly growing city. What are our unique God-given gifts as a congregation? How can God uniquely use us for good in this off the map context? With Resurrection Vision, how is God leading us to new fruitfulness?