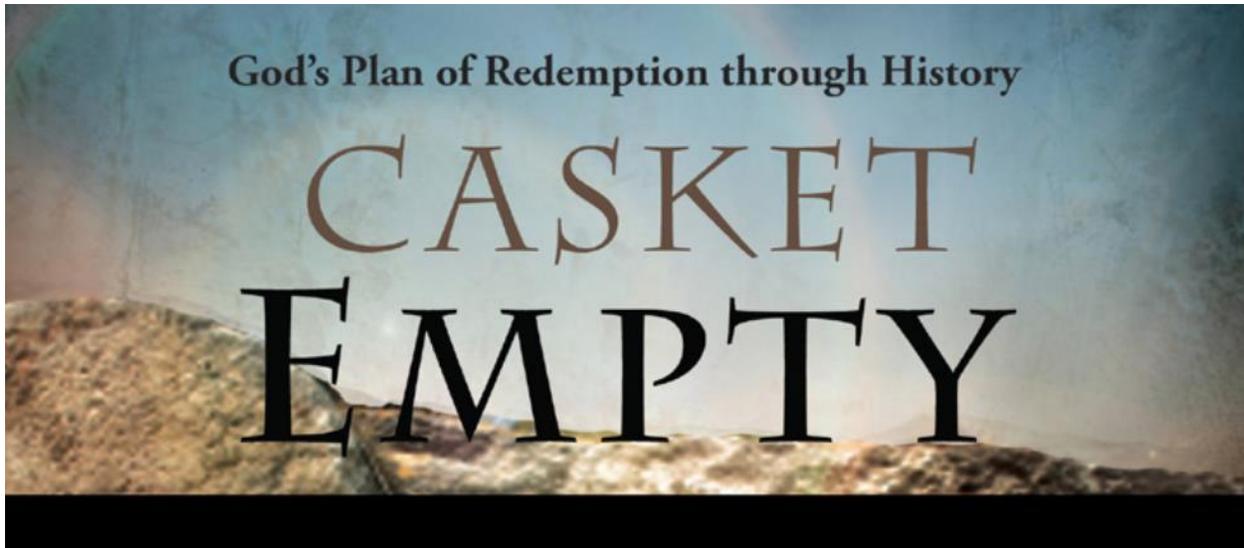
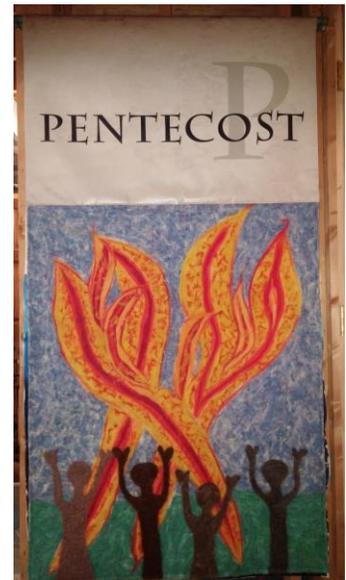


***P is for Pentecost***  
CASKET EMPTY Sermon Series  
Kenwood Baptist Church  
Pastor David Palmer  
April 22, 2018

**TEXT: Acts 21:1-17**



Good morning, beloved. It is a joy to be in God's house together. This morning, we complete the period of Pentecost in our year-long study of God's Word to see the big picture. The Pentecost banner that was done by Vicki Swallen reminds us of the Holy Spirit, God's empowering presence, who fills us and commissions us as His witnesses throughout the earth. Last Sunday, we looked at the beginning of Paul's missionary life in Acts 13 as Paul and Barnabas were sent out from the church at Antioch. In Luke's narrative in the Book of Acts, Acts 13-20 describe for us the missionary journeys of Paul as he reached further and further into the earth with the Good News of Jesus Christ. This morning, we look at the second or last portion of Acts which deals with the journey back to Jerusalem that leads to Paul's imprisonment. Yet, God in His wisdom and sovereignty uses both the missionary journeys and imprisonment as opportunities for the defense and confirmation of the gospel.



I want to introduce you to a word that you may know. It's the word *apology*. When you think of the word *apology*, what comes to your mind? When was the last time you made an apology?

When we make an apology in English, it's usually saying, "sorry." It's a lost art in our society. You may not have seen it happen very often. But, an *apology* is when you give the reason for something. In English, we say, "I'm sorry," but *apology* is actually a Greek word: *apologia*. An *apologia* is a defense, and it is what is offered in a law court. It is to give the reason or



explanation for something. Tonight, we have the opportunity of hosting Vince and Jo Vitale. They are, by God's calling, apologists. That doesn't mean they walk around the planet earth saying they're sorry for faith in Jesus Christ. It means, instead, that they give a defense or explanation for the faith that they have in Christ. When we

think of apologetics as the study of making this formal apology or reasoned explanation for Christian faith, there are a number of key questions that must be answered. The top five apologetic questions are these:

**#1 Does God exist?** Even in our world today, 89% of people still say God exists. He's out there somewhere, somehow, someway.

**#2 Is God's good?** This is a question that must be answered in consult with the whole counsel of Scripture.

**#3 Is the Bible trustworthy?** As we've spoken here many times, the Bible is the best-attested work of the ancient world, but many people don't know this and are unconvinced because they haven't been exposed to the evidence.

**#4 Did Jesus rise from the dead?** This is the central event of Christianity, indeed of all of history, and it is the death and resurrection of Christ that holds the CASKET EMPTY series together, and, as we'll see this morning, it is the central piece of Paul's apologetic.

**#5 What is the gospel?** We are able to answer the gospel, the content of the Good News, in light of the resurrection of Jesus.

These five questions are questions that we must be equipped and empowered and ready to answer. Wouldn't it be great if we had in Scripture a modeling of how to answer these key questions, how to make an apology, a defense, of Christian faith? In fact, this is what we have in Acts 21-28.

I want to look this morning at the scene of Paul the apostle making this public apology or defense to the world of his day, which, though, it is separated by twenty centuries, is really not that different from the world of our own. We see skeptics, we see people in positions of political power, we see zealous religious people opposed to Paul's preaching, and we see people living with that great mantra: "I just want to do whatever I want to do with my own life and body." Does that sound familiar?

Acts 21 narrates Paul's journey to Jerusalem. It was a journey filled with hope; it was a journey in which Paul came bearing gifts. He carried with him a large offering that was collected from the churches. It was an offering that was collected to be given to those in need in the church in Jerusalem as a gesture of unity. Paul also brought with him eight men representing each area of his ministry life and the success of the missionary labors. He came to Jerusalem with great hope that both the men and the offering would be received, and at the end of the passage that we just heard, Paul and the men are received by the believers in Jerusalem. Yet, this moment sets in motion a whirlwind of events as Paul goes up to worship God in the temple and he is arrested in the temple. He is accused in the temple of defiling the sanctuary by bringing foreigners into God's house, and this whirlwind of events begins a series of opportunities for Paul to make a defense. Keep your Bible open, and I am going to try to do something that maybe should not be attempted. I am going to try to take us through the last seven chapters of Acts.

With your Bible open, I will go through these chapters, not verse by verse, but I want us to see and highlight this morning question number four, because I believe question four, "Did Jesus rise from the dead?" is actually the most important question of these five. Jaroslav Pelikan, a professor at Yale University in Church History, died recently and on his deathbed, he had these dying words. He said, "If Jesus really rose from the dead, then nothing else matters," and then he added, "If Jesus did not rise from the dead, then nothing matters at all." You see, friends, question four, I believe, is the most important one of all, because if we can answer question four, it brings in its train the Good News in the answer to question five. As we will see, Paul's defense, his apology for faith in Christ hinges on the veracity of Jesus' resurrection. In fact, Paul would later write to the Corinthian church that if Jesus has not been risen from the dead, people should feel sorry for us for having believed in Him. So, let's look at this series of apologies, or these defense speeches that Paul makes.

After his arrest in the temple, Paul is taken into Roman custody to the Antonia Fortress at the northwest corner of the Temple Mount. It is a huge scene, a large public scene, and the Temple Mount was the largest public square in the ancient world. Two hundred thousand people could fit on the Temple Mount. It is a very large space, and Paul is brought up the steps to stand on top of the colonnade by the Antonia Fortress, and he is allowed to speak to his kinsman. This is Paul's first defense. Follow with me. He begins in Acts 22:1:

*"Brothers and fathers, hear the defense that I now make before you."*

The Greek text says: *"Hear now my apology; hear my defense that I now make before you."* Paul speaks to his kinsman in the Hebrew language, and narrates his own testimony in Acts 22:3-4:

*"I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated at the feet of*

*Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God as all of you are this day. I persecuted this Way to the death. . .”*

He persecuted the movement of those following Jesus, even unto death. Then he tells us the narrative of being encountered by the risen Jesus on the way to Damascus. He says in Acts 22:6-7:

*“As I was on my way and drew near to Damascus, about noon a great light from heaven suddenly shone around me. And I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’ And I answered, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ And He said to me, ‘I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting.’”*

You see, Jesus is alive! Dead people don't speak; dead people don't appear in visions to others and address them by name. Jesus speaks, the resurrected Jesus, and calls Saul to serve Him. He is led into Damascus, as he tells the story, blind by the glory of the resurrected Jesus. A Christian named Ananias lays his hands upon him and tells Paul in Acts 22:14:

*“The God of our fathers appointed you to know His will, to see the Righteous One and to hear a voice from His mouth;”*

Paul throughout his life and testimony maintained that he saw the risen Jesus. It was not a dream; it was not a vision. It was a real seeing of Jesus Christ, alive after His crucifixion. He addressed him by name and called him to serve Him. Paul narrates his testimony. The pilgrimage crowd in Jerusalem continues to rage against him, and so the Roman commander takes Paul into the barracks. He is still confused as to what the uproar is about this man. The Roman commander, whose name we discover is Claudius Lysias, desires to know what the charge is against Paul, why this man is stirring such a riot in the city. The Roman commander says: “Let me gather the high court, the Sanhedrin, the religious court, so maybe we can figure out what the big issue is,” and so Paul's second defense, his second apology, is before the religious court. His first one was before the pilgrimage crowd; the second before the Sanhedrin.

Here we see the same theme—the centrality of the resurrection of Jesus. Paul looks at the highest religious court of the land, and he testifies in Acts 23:1:

*“Brothers, I have lived my life before God in all good conscience up to this day.”*

Then he looks at the assembled religious court and says in Acts 23:6:

*“It is with respect to the hope and the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial.”*

The key issue this morning is: “Is Jesus alive or not?” I want you to feel this, because if you feel this this morning, it changes you. The key issue, Paul says, is the hope of the resurrection of the dead. The Sanhedrin is divided over this issue because, as you know, Pharisees believe in the resurrection of the dead; Sadducees do not. So there is a riot now in the court. Paul is taken

out, and the resurrected Jesus appears to him, and we read in Acts 23:11:

*“The following night the Lord stood by him and said, ‘Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about Me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome.’”*

That night, Paul learns of a plot against his life. His nephew tells him about it, and that is relayed to the Roman commander. As the narrative continues in a rapid pace, Paul then is sent up to Caesarea under armed guard. The Roman commander, Claudius Lysias, still doesn't really know the issue, the central charge. Paul's accusers are accusing him of defiling the sanctuary, of creating instability in the society. Then Claudius Lucius writes a letter to the governor Felix who has occupied the Roman governor's house in Caesarea. He says in the letter that he wanted to know what they were accusing Paul of, so he brought him down to the council. Then he says in Acts 23:29 what the key issue is:

*“I found that he was being accused about questions of their law, but charged with nothing deserving death or imprisonment.”*

The debates among Paul and his kinsman hinged on the interpretation and fulfillment of this of the Scriptures. Paul's preaching, Paul's teaching, Paul's letters are filled with quotations from the Scriptures—Psalm 16, Isaiah 25, Daniel 12, Ezekiel 37, Isaiah 49—that promise that the Coming One would suffer, die, and be raised. Paul is transferred up to Caesarea, and so we see him in his third defense, now before Felix in Caesarea. Turn with me to Acts 24.

In Acts 24, the high priest, Ananias, comes down. Remember, you always come down from Jerusalem, even if you're going north. They come down to Caesarea to present an accusation. Paul's accusers are trying to prove the point that there are problems with this man. They try to stick charges that will be meaningful to Roman ears. They try to persuade the Roman governor that this man stirs up riots, that he defiles the sanctuary, and that he is a public menace. Felix then gives Paul the opportunity to speak. In Acts 24:10, we see this key term again. Paul says:

*“Knowing that for many years you have been a judge over this nation, I cheerfully make my defense.”*

Again, this is his apology, his defense for the veracity of Christian faith. Paul denies the charges of creating riots, denies the charges of defiling the sanctuary, denies the charges of creating public instability, but he focuses the issue yet again on Acts 24:14:

*“But this I confess to you, that according to the Way, which they call a sect, I worship the God of our fathers, believing everything laid down by the Law and written in the Prophets.”*

Do you believe the Scriptures? The central truth of the Scriptures for Paul is to have a hope in God that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust. We will be raised, and yet

again in Acts 24:21 he says:

*“It is with respect to the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial before you this day.”*

Felix doesn't know quite what to make of it. He is unsure how to decide. As the narrative unfolds, we hear Paul's fourth defense in a private hearing later in the chapter. As Felix, the Roman governor, and his wife, Drusilla, seek an audience with Paul privately—and this is a fascinating scene—Paul speaks to the governor about faith in Jesus Christ. He reasons with him about righteousness, self-control, and the coming judgment. For two years, Felix dialogues with Paul, hearing his preaching, Paul pleading with him about the reality of Christ, the necessity of faith in Him. You don't trust your life to someone who's not alive. Paul reasons with him that Jesus is alive, that righteousness is available through faith in Him, that we live self-controlled lives by the power of the Spirit, that we are ready for the coming judgment of God because we are in Christ. Felix, like many moderns, is unsure, unwilling, to make a decision. Like many corrupt politicians, he is just hoping to receive a bribe from Paul to release him. The Roman historian Tacitus tells us that Felix was a freed-man who then became governor and Tacitus says that Felix “had the power of a tyrant with the disposition of the slave.” That’s always dangerous. Felix dies in office, and he is replaced by a man named Festus.

As Luke tells the story, this dramatic narrative of Paul's defense, his apology for the gospel, Paul now makes a fifth defense in the narrative before Festus. He is brought in before the governor yet again. He is accused with similar accusations. Paul's reasoning again centers on the hope of Christianity: that Jesus who was dead is now alive. Festus reports the results of this initial hearing, and we hear him speaking later in Acts 25 as he is talking to Agrippa II and his sister Bernice. Agrippa II is Herod the Great's great-grandson, and Festus tells Agrippa, who is king at this time, about the nature of the charge. He is surprised, and Festus says in Acts 25:18:

*“When the accusers stood up, they brought no charge in his case of such evils as I supposed.”*

What was the central issue in the case? What was the topic on which Christianity stands or falls? We hear it through the lips of a Roman governor in Acts 25:19. Festus says:

*“Rather they had certain points of dispute with him about their own religion and about a certain Jesus, who was dead, but whom Paul asserted to be alive.”*

Do you believe that this morning? I believe that Jesus Christ is alive. I believe that He reveals Himself daily to people throughout this earth, and that the people to whom He reveals Himself, He then summons by the power of the Spirit as His witnesses in the earth. He could do it without us, and yet He gives us the greatest privilege of all to be in His service. Festus, the Roman governor says: “I couldn't believe that they were talking about issues that pertain to their own religion, but there's this one point that just kept coming up again and again and

again. They were talking about this Jesus who was dead, and Paul kept saying, 'He's alive!'" Agrippa says: "I want to hear this guy!" Festus says: "You will hear him." So, the next day they gather together, and we hear Paul make his sixth defense for in the narrative. In a beautiful room adjacent to Herod's Palace in Caesarea, Agrippa and Bernice come with great pomp and ceremony. They enter the audience hall; they bring with them the military tribunes and the prominent citizens decked out in beautiful garments. Then, in the middle of the room, comes a man dressed in rags, chained. King Agrippa looked at Paul with all these wealthy, prominent people, people with earthly power seated around him, and a man in rags and in chains in the middle of the room, and Agrippa says: "Speak for yourself." Paul stretched out his hand and made his apology, made his defense. He tells Agrippa that he is blessed to speak, grateful to make his defense this day. He testifies that he is not guilty of any of the charges falsely made against him, that even according to the strictest sect, he has lived as a Pharisee, and he draws attention to the real issue in the case yet again. In Acts 26:6-7, Paul says:

*"And now I stand here on trial because of my hope in the promise made by God to our fathers, to which our twelve tribes hope to attain, as they earnestly worship night and day. And for this hope I am accused by Jews, O king!"*

What is this hope? He tells us in Acts 26:8 that this is his hope:

*"Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?"*

He goes on to say, "I was convinced that I should do many things against Jesus. I locked up the saints. I punished them and persecuted them, but then I saw Jesus alive, and I heard His voice, and He called me to serve Him." In Acts 26, as Paul gives his testimony, he tells us here more than we hear in other places about what Jesus told him after He knocked him off of his horse. Jesus said in Acts 26:16-18:

*"But rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen Me and to those in which I will appear to you, delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in Me."*

This is the Christian mission. The resurrected Jesus sends us, and don't miss this in Acts 26:18, He sends us *"to open eyes, to turn from darkness to light, to turn from the power of Satan to God and then receive forgiveness, a place among those made holy by faith in Me."* Paul then says in Acts. 26:19-20:

*"Therefore, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, but declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout all the region of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds in*

*keeping with their repentance.”*

He goes on to say to people who have earthly power and for those who have none in Acts 26:22:

*“To this day I have had the help that comes from God, and so I stand here testifying both to small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass:”*

What did they say would come to pass? For Paul the heart of the gospel, the heart of the Scriptures, is Acts 26:23:

*“. . .that the Christ must suffer and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the [nations].”*

Paul's defense, his apology, produces diverse responses, just as the presentation of Christianity produces diverse responses today. Festus cries out with a loud voice: “Paul you are insane!” Have you ever had someone say that to you? It's really not that comforting. When you try to present your faith in Jesus and say: “What a difference He's made in my life: I've received forgiveness of sins, I've turn from Satan to God, and I've moved out from darkness into light, and I have a joy that is irrepressible, and the veracity of the Scriptures has been confirmed in my life.” It makes more and more sense when someone who works in the cubicle next to you says to you, “You're insane.” That happens. Paul says to Agrippa: “Do you believe the Scriptures? Do you believe the prophets?” Agrippa backpedals, and he says: “Paul, do you think that you can turn me into a Christian in such a short time, with just one presentation?” Paul says: “Whether short or long, I would to God that not only you, but all who hear me, might become as I am.” Do you share that longing, that “all around me might be as I am”?

Paul's seventh defense in this narrative is that after his appeal to Caesar he is sent to Rome. When he reaches the city of Rome in Acts 28, Paul is gathered with the religious leadership in the city of Rome. In Acts 28:20, at the end of the narrative, Paul says to the religious leaders among his kinsmen:

*“For this reason, therefore, I have asked to see you and speak with you, since it is because of the hope of Israel that I am wearing this chain.”*

You remember back to the fall, EXPECTATIONS, a central feature of biblical hope, is this resurrection from the dead, new life. The resurrection of the beloved Son is woven into the narrative that God who drove us out from the Garden of Eden because of our sin, who drove us out of the land because of our sin, would make provision for the forgiveness of sins and then bring us into new life. Jesus our Messiah carries the sin of the world, makes atonement for sin, and His resurrection sets in public view the reality of this new life today, available for all who believe.

Paul says: "It's for the hope of Israel that I wear this chain." Then he pleads with them from morning until evening, testifying to the kingdom and trying to convince them about Jesus from both the Law and the prophets. There, as always, we read that some were convinced, some were persuaded, but others refused to believe.

Brothers and sisters, our job is only to testify. God has the power alone to open hearts. Our job is to try to expose people to the Word of God. I have a dear friend who has adopted several children from Ethiopia. The first child that they tried to adopt, they were not able to successfully adopt. One of the parents of this young man appeared at the court the last moment, and according to the Ethiopian law, if the parent shows up, then the adoption can't be finalized. The dad showed up for the moment and then disappeared again and has remained to this day not involved in his life. But his appearance that one moment in the courtroom blocked the adoption. But, my friend continues to refer to this young man as his son. As he travels to Ethiopia—and he's made seven trips—he always makes a point to visit his son, and he tries to care for him. On his last visit, just this past month, he visited his son and his mother. His mother is a Muslim, and so his son is being raised this way. He took with him a solar-powered audio device, and he had on this solar-powered audio device the ability to play the Bible in basically any language. He asked the mother, "Would you like to hear the Word of God in your native language?" He began to play this for her and she said, "Oh, that's preaching." It was just the Bible being read. He said, "Would you like to have this?" and she said, "Yes, I would." Then she said, "You know, I really cannot care for this son. Is there anything that you could do to help support him? Is there anything you could do to help him with his education?" My friend called the headmaster of a local Christian school and asked if they had room in the school for just one more student. The headmaster said, "We do." He went back with great joy, and he said, "We have the room for my son to go to this school. It's a Christian school." The mother said, "We would be glad." He came back to the US and he called me on the phone, rejoicing. He said, "My son, my son. He is going to have the opportunity now to hear the Word of the Lord!"

Brothers and sisters, whatever role we play, we just have to expose people to the opportunity to hear the Word of the Lord, to hear the Word of Christ preached and leave the results to God. Did Jesus rise from the dead? The testimony of the apostle Paul is clear: "I heard Him; I saw Him. He commissioned me." This testimony remains true until this day.

We have the opportunity tonight to meet in an informal way with Vincent and Jo Vitale. We will hear more of their story. Vince is an intense guy. I have gotten to know him and talk with him on the phone. He's a soccer player, athletic guy, of keen intellect, and I've learned about Vince that he did not grow up in the Christian faith. Vince tells of his own story that he went to Princeton, and he was not a Christian when he showed up as a freshman. He said, "I accepted a

challenge from a friend to test my assumptions about Christianity by reading the gospels, four records of Jesus' life. I began to argue my way through them, and I would cross things out and write 'B.S.' in the margins"—which he adds did not denote great passages for Bible study! He says, "In my arrogance, I thought I was teaching God a thing or two, and yet all the while, as I read through the Gospels, I began to admire the Person of Jesus, but I just didn't think it could be true. I didn't think there could be actual evidence for Christianity. But as I kept reading, I kept seeing that far from praising blind faith, the Bible praises those who examine the evidence. So, I began to look into the evidence. I couldn't believe what I found. I couldn't believe how strong the intellectual case for the Christian faith really is. I encountered many arguments for God's existence that were compelling, but I found most compelling the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. I was astounded by how persuasive I found the evidence. I read the British philosopher of religion, Richard Swinburne, who published a University of Oxford publication called *The Resurrection of God Incarnate*, where he sets forth the evidence for Jesus' resurrection. This Oxford University philosopher concludes that it is 97% probable that Jesus rose from the dead." Vince says, "I was actually reading a defense of the resurrection when I closed the book's cover, and I knew. I knew that Jesus was the God He claimed to be, that He loved me, that He had saved me, and that He wanted me to live with Him in the days ahead. It wasn't just that my mind was persuaded; my heart was finally desiring to know Him. I was alone in my dorm, room 122 Joleen Hall. I set the book down and exclaimed out loud, 'This really happened!'"

This happened! And if this happened, if Jesus is raised from the dead, then nothing else matters! Let's live with this conviction and share in this reality. Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, we stand before You this morning desiring to know You and the power of Your resurrection. Lord, I pray for us this morning that that we would push aside secondary issues. Lord, forgive us when we've made Christianity about something other than the death and resurrection of Jesus. Lord, I pray even now that if there are some here this morning that have yet to see You, that You would open their eyes to the reality of Your Person, and Lord for those of us who have seen You, for those of us whose eyes You have opened, whose heart You have open to receive You, resurrected King, I pray that You would fill us afresh with Your Holy Spirit, and that as we move throughout the lives You've given to us, that we would be prepared to make our apology, not to say what we are sorry for faith in You, but to give a reason for why we believe. Lord, we pray that You would bless the gathering tonight, that You would move powerfully at UC tomorrow, and that, Lord, Your house would be filled tomorrow night, not just for ourselves, but for those in our lives who have not yet seen You. We pray that this would be an opportunity for some to see You for the first time. Lord Jesus, we love You. We desire to serve You and to bear witness to all that You've done. We thank You that you have entrusted

this Good News of Your death and Your resurrection to people like us. We praise You and we honor You.

In Jesus' Name, Amen.