

Many people in Marin pride themselves on being anti-religious. The catchphrase is, *spiritual, but not religious*. The people of Athens were equally proud, only they were *religious, but not spiritual*. The religious-er, the better-er. They placed idols everywhere – idols to this god, and idols to that god. In fact, the Athenians erected more idols than they had gods – just in case they missed one – *to an unknown god*. Religious, but not spiritual. Paul is so savvy that he turns their excessive religiosity to his advantage. “*I happen to know the God you’ve missed,*” he tells them, “*and this God is the god.*” *This God trumps all the rest.* Now – you can see immediately that Paul is not being literal. He doesn’t *really* believe in other gods – But had he been literal – had he trashed their so-called gods – he would have missed this great opportunity. But he didn’t. Instead, he borrowed their own prejudices, so he could help them. Eminently adaptable, which is contrary to many peoples’ view of Paul these days – Many people think Paul was inflexible. But he obviously wasn’t. In fact, Paul’s writings tell us that Paul re-interpreted the Holy Scripture he had grown-up with – he found new meaning in it after he discovered faith. And if I were to name one of the biggest challenges of American Christianity, it would be this: We can’t seem to strike the right balance between taking Scripture literally – on the one hand – and denuding Scripture of any *real* meaning, on the other. Typically, when people take Scripture literally, they substitute faith in God for faith in the written word. It is far easier to rely on words you can see than on a God you cannot see. But God calls us into a living faith with him, or her – not the written word. Moreover, Scripture itself resists..... resists literal interpretation. Within the four corners of its pages it presents conflicting and competing concepts and facts: Two distinct creation stories, two distinct Christmas stories, multiple answers to the question of what it means to be saved. On the other hand – many so-called “*educated*” people dismiss Scripture as merely historic. To them, Scripture has no 21st century relevance. Perhaps Scripture meant something once, but we’ve evolved, and those days are past. But I’d say, this is a lazy-man approach to Scripture – For Scripture won’t reveal its treasures to anyone not willing to wrestle with it. Scripture requires faith to be holy...Requires persistence. Indeed, Scripture is inspired by God – but it is not *easy*. But when you wrestle with Scripture, God will emerge from the page. Jewish Rabbi Levinas put it this way – you have to *rub the page until it bleeds*.

Paul didn’t take the people of Athens literally, he didn’t take his own tradition literally, and that is how he was able to free these people from meaningless idols. But Paul also understood transformation – he was in the *transformation* business. Transformation. Like Jesus’ resurrection, which Jay Parini claims was not the Great Resuscitation; it was **Great Transformation**. Parini continues, *I don’t accept the black-and-white thinking that goes along with needing to regard the gospels as literally true. These stories offer a form of mythical thinking that is*

not only true, but especially true. **Epecially true** – distinguishing truth from mere fact.

*Jesus is all about love. Today – the one who keeps my commandments is the one who loves me – And what is keeping the commandments? Love with *all* your heart. One writer asked of another, *Tell me about all your heart. Tell me about all your mind. Tell me about all your soul.* But I would ask, how do love without transformation of heart? This is what I think about when I think of Earth and Altar. Transformation. It would be easy to reduce Earth and Altar to a mere love of nature, or gardening. Hiking on Mt. Tam, or gardening in rich, black soil all noble exercises – And exercises will help you tap into Earth and Altar, but Earth and Altar is about rubbing the page until it bleeds. It is about transformation. About – to borrow from Ghandi – being the change you want to see in the world. We have all these computers and tablets and smartphones; we have FaceBook and Twitter, and Instagram. And yet, people feel *inordinately disconnected* from one another. We have access to all the world's knowledge - Google and Yahoo ...Wikipedia and WebMD. I can research historic weather trends and reliably...find Wednesday's forecast..All this knowledge, yet a dearth of wisdom. We can fly to remote parts of the world – places that only a generation ago were impossible to reach. And yet, we couldn't possibly find ourselves farther from God. So – when I talk about Earth and Altar – please don't reduce the concept to a mere garden or hike. Rather, think of transformation. How **can you** and I become more connected to others? How *can* we live better lives, with deeper meaning? How can we *find God*? It is all paradox – that to *really* connect, you must disconnect. Adding more time to an already busy schedule does nothing whereas taking a day to do nothing will add years of meaning to your soul. Do good, be good, and become hopeful. And speaking of doing good, we've installed the new St. Stephen's Outreach Garden as a transformation vehicle – to help us connect – with earth and spirit and God, but also connect to others – to people in need, as we grow produce to give to those who are hungry. So let's remember – Paul invited the Athenians not to dry religion or mere words on a page, but to transformation, and a living faith, one rooted in a deeper way, a new and more hopeful way. It is the way of love.