

Sermon 62, Encouragement in the Church, Acts 20:1-12

Proposition: The church is encouraged by the apostles' teaching and fellowship, the breaking of bread, and the resurrection.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, Luke famously told us in Acts 2:42 that they continued in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, the breaking of bread, and the prayers. That same fourfold foundation of the church recurs in the text before us this morning. We have the apostle's teaching; we see fellowship, the breaking of bread, and — the resurrection. The parallels between this incident and the crossing of the Red Sea are archetypal and profound. Israel, as prototype of her Lord, died and rose again at the Red Sea. Eutychus died and rose again after Easter and before Pentecost. Luke is showing us how to encourage the community of the resurrection.

Why did Luke swap in resurrection for prayer? Because the life of the risen Lord Jesus is what powers and encourages the church. Eutychus was, in a certain sense, actually killed by the apostle's teaching and fellowship and the breaking of bread. But even that couldn't stop the disciples' encouragement, for it is founded on the power of the God who raises the dead. Thus, Luke brackets this passage with references to the encouragement, and in between, he tells us about the apostle's teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and the resurrection.

I. Encouragement through Apostolic Words, vv. 1-2

As we have noted many times in the past, a theme that brackets a text, that comes at the beginning and at the end, tells us to read that text in light of that theme, or through that lens. The theme of encouragement is what this text is about. Luke uses a word that means not only "encourage," but also "exhort" and "urge." Paul, we could say, put heart into the disciples. He verbally built them up and gave them the guts to carry on with serving the Lord. He did this through his verbal teaching as well as through fellowship and the breaking of bread. Luke begins by telling us about the great apostle's verbal teaching.

A. Parting Exhortations, v. 1

Verbal teaching is the hallmark of Paul. He set a great example, of course, as we have seen already and as we'll see later in this chapter. But even here, as he's leaving, he doesn't just say "Goodbye, friends. May God be with you all." He urges them, exhorts them, encourages them (depending on how you want to translate the verb) even at the moment of his departure. Riot in Ephesus may have silenced and sidelined him for a time, but as soon as the riot has quieted down, Paul is back in action.

So this is the first phase of encouragement or exhortation. It begins (and often ends) just here — by saying something that helps the people you're talking to obey the Lord in whatever way they can. This, brothers and sisters, is something that every one of us can do, Apostle or not.

B. Many Encouraging Words, v. 2

But not only did Paul encourage people even in the act of saying goodbye; he also encouraged them throughout Macedonia. He visited Thessalonica, Berea, and Philippi again, presumably — the three churches he had founded in Macedonia. And there, he didn't just say "Bye. Keep walking in the grace of God." He used many words. Now, we pastors are often rather notorious for all the words we say. But we have good biblical reason for it! If one hundred words are encouraging, one thousand words are ten times as encouraging! As I search my manuscript here, which contains all my sermons since we looked at Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5, I see that I have written 124,00 words of encouragement, urging you to continue in the grace of God, on this book alone. This is one sermon series out of the many I've preached to you. Clearly, the encouragement that one single congregation gets runs into the millions of words! That is not something Luke was afraid of. Though his own book is a model of economy, indeed, is incredibly short compared to your typical book, he was familiar with Peter, Paul, and Jesus. He knew how much they talked, and how much encouragement the people of God needed.

II. Encouragement through Fellowship, vv. 3-11

But it was not only through words of teaching and farewell that Paul encouraged the disciples. He encouraged them through fellowship. What is more encouraging than getting together with your fellow saints? If you want a real downer, spend the day with worldly people and listen to them curse and swear and complain. Let their filth wash all over you. Feel the exhaustion of it. Or, get together with the saints. Feel the relaxation, the joy, the happiness of God's people as it washes over you. There is a major difference between one and the other, as we all know!

A. Seven Team Members, vv. 4-5

Luke, thus, tells us about Paul's seven team members in this section. Who were these men? Well, Luke doesn't tell us. From Paul's letters we can gather that they were probably representatives of the churches of Macedonia, Achaia, and Asia whom Paul had gathered to help him carry the large monetary gift he was gathering for the Jerusalem church. Yes, Paul considered it right for the Gentile church to donate in order to support the Jerusalem church, which was extremely poor and to which the Gentiles owed their salvation. You can read all about it in 2 Corinthians 8-9 and Romans 15 — letters written during this period of Paul's ministry. But though the idea of a gift to another church fits well with Luke's theme that believers rule money, rather than vice versa, he does not bring it up here because he is talking about encouragement. He is saying that there is nothing that encourages a Christian like a team of fellow Christians who work with him for the kingdom! Paul's seven teammates, from various places, are united in their desire to serve God and bless the church with him.

B. Gathering for All-Night Fellowship, vv. 6-12

Well, as we saw two times ago, Paul has determined to, like Jesus, travel to Jerusalem. Paul leaves Philippi and sails back across to Troas on the coast of Asia, and there he stays for a week. Though he is anxious to get on to Jerusalem, he's not so hurried but that he can stop and wait with God's people. If you think seven Christians are encouraging, imagine how encouraging a whole church can be!

Thus, don't miss it: Luke is showing us that the Christians remained in the apostles' teaching and fellowship. They graphically illustrate that here, by staying up all night just to be with each other and to listen to Paul.

How important to your faith is gathering together? Pretty important, obviously, because you're here. That's as it should be. Gathering was important to Jesus and the apostles. It is important throughout the Bible, because it is preeminently together that we come into God's presence. The Troadian Christians were dedicated enough to gathering to encourage each other, and to hear Paul, that they didn't mind staying up all night long. As we all know, to stay up one night is to borrow from the next day. It's typically not very productive in terms of creative work, because you can do more rested than non-rested. But nothing beats the sheer closeness of staying up all night talking to beloved friends, nothing. When you've been through that together, you've got a memory. You've got something in common in addition to your existing friendship and whatever drew you together before.

III. Encouragement through Sunday Worship, v. 7

For the disciples in Troas, of course, that thing was the desire to worship God together. They loved not just one another, but specifically the act of gathering for worship.

A. The Breaking of Bread

The thing they came together to do, Luke tells us, was to break bread. They gathered on the first day of the week — just as we do, in imitation of them. Why did they gather on the first day of the week? Luke does not say specifically — or better, he shows rather than tells. They gathered on resurrection day because they were a group that gathered to celebrate the resurrection of God's Son. They showed their belief in the resurrection by having Eutychus rise from the dead on the same day that the Lord Jesus rose from the dead.

1. Fellowship Meal

Well, this breaking of bread corresponds to two things we do in the modern church. The first is what we call the fellowship meal. They ate together, pure and simple. It was a communal meal, a potluck or a love feast or whatever you wish to call it. We do this on the first Sunday of every month after morning worship, and to those families who don't attend, all I can say is "You're missing out." The early church derived much encouragement from this practice, and so do we.

2. The Lord's Supper

But the second thing that God's people did when they broke bread together in those days was what we have separated out into its own ritual time, and which we call "the Lord's Supper." Now, to the imaginations of sermon-hardened Christians such as ourselves, it is hard to picture how one would go about merging the Lord's Supper with the potluck. But to the best of our knowledge, that is exactly how it was done that night in Troas, and for decades or centuries afterwards.

What is the Lord's Supper? It is a sacrament, a visible sign of the truth that Jesus died in our place and that we live by His sacrifice. The Supper is the sacrificial meal of the new covenant. It is the feast on the passover Lamb, the Lamb of God. By eating it, we receive Christ, feasting on His sacrifice for us, being spiritually nourished.

B. Long Sermon

But in addition to the potluck and Lord's Supper, they had a long sermon. The sermon was so long that they were there all night until dawn.

Now, this was the last sermon they were going to get from Paul, and naturally they wanted to hear more of it. But still, wow. There are those who say that a long sermon is not part of traditional Christian worship, and that a complicated liturgy is most important, with perhaps a short homily. Nonsense. That's not how Paul did things!

C. Many Lamps

Luke tells us another detail that has been the occasion of much comment, namely, that there were many lamps in the room. Now, what is the point of recording this detail? Some say that the statement is designed to help us understand why Eutychus fell asleep. Others say that it was to tell us that the congregation brought lamps along with them because there were no streetlights in ancient Troas. Others say that Luke just wants us to visualize the worship service.

But I think there are two points that we can take away — two theological points.

1. Worship Is Not Entertainment

The first is that church is not a theatrical performance or a concert. At some kinds of events, what happens? The house lights are turned down so that all attention is focused on the stage and what's happening there. Brothers and sisters, that should never be done in the church. Our churches are well-lit because the main event is not on the stage; it is all through the room. You are not here to watch me worship God by preaching to you. We are all here together to worship God, and though some have to be up front they are not more important or more worshipful than the rest. Rather, they are just up front to guide everyone through the worship that we are all performing together. That's why the house lights stay up. That's why churches should have lots of light fixtures and lots of light bulbs. The interior is not supposed to be dim; it is supposed to be radiant.

2. Jesus Is the Light of the World, Even at Night

And that, in turn, brings up the further reality that Jesus is the light of the world. Why does Luke mention that the room was full of lamps? To recall to our minds that Jesus is the light. The church is well-lit because it is the place where Christ is present! The first occurrence of the word for "lamp" here is in Genesis 15, where the "burning lamp" passed through between the pieces of animals — signifying that God was making a covenant with Abram. God represents Himself by a lamp in the pages of Genesis, and I think Luke is clearly referencing that event. The next reference to "lamps" is in the LXX translation of the word for "lightning" in Exodus 20. So in two of the most crucial events in redemptive history, the covenant with Abraham and the giving of the law, God signified His presence by appearing as a lamp. Clearly, then, Luke is not just saying "There were lights in the room" because he remembers what it looked like. He wants us to say "Aha! The light of the world was there in that room."

IV. Encouragement through Resurrection, vv. 9-12

But though the apostle's teaching, fellowship, and the breaking of bread all provide encouragement to the people of God, nothing provides it like the power of resurrection.

A. Back to the Upper Room, v. 9

Luke tells us that this resurrection happened because they were meeting in an upper room — on the third floor of a building.

1. Worship in an Apartment Building

Now, the commentators tell us that private homes, then as now, were hardly likely to have three stories. Your typical single-family home in Roman Asia had just one story, and possibly a walk-out basement if it were built into a steep hill. But a building with three stories would have been an apartment building, presumably like apartments today, with a common room available somewhere for tenant use. We stayed in a tall apartment building in St. Louis last year at General Assembly. The entire top floor of the building was dedicated to common rooms for tenant use. So I envision something like this, crowded to bursting so that Eutychus had to sit on the windowsill because there were no other chairs!

Brothers and sisters, was this church less vibrant because it lacked its own space? Did Paul talk to them about a fundraising drive so that they could stop meeting in an apartment building's common room? Of course he didn't. He had better news to proclaim.

2. Worshiping Like the Early Church!

Also, for the people present, this would have felt like a throwback, a return to the early church! We think of these worshippers in Troas some 20-25 years after the death of Jesus as definitely early church. They thought of themselves as far removed from the early days, in fact, as part of a mature movement. They had no idea, obviously. But their meeting in an upper room, such as the one where Jesus appeared to the disciples after the resurrection, is part of Luke's style of storytelling. Jesus was among the disciples who met in that upper room. And He is among these disciples who meet in this upper room. He is not far; He is not gone. He is still present with His church, whether in Jerusalem, Troas, or Gillette. He is still working, saving, and enlightening.

B. Darkness & Death, Daybreak & Resurrection, vv. 9-11

Notice, then, what happens. One commentator — actually, one of my favorites who almost always has good insights into the text — literally commented that here, Luke's sense of drama deserts him and his narrative of the resurrection of Eutychus is all muddled. Brothers and sisters, that commentator needs to bone up on his archetypes. Notice what Luke has masterfully associated here: Darkness and death, on the one hand, and daybreak and resurrection, on the other. Notice the hour at which Eutychus falls to his death: Midnight. Maybe it's always darkest just before dawn. But the zenith of the Sun's power is at noon; the zenith of the power of darkness is at midnight. Clearly, there is no time of day more symbolic than high midnight, the hour when the night is farthest from day on either end. The power of darkness makes its move, and the result is the death of a servant of Christ. He falls with a sickening crunch. The service is interrupted, and surely some form of minor chaos emerges! But Paul embraces him like Elijah and Elisha raising the dead, and then announces that his life is in him. But then the service resumes, and we aren't told that they took the boy away alive until morning. Why? Because the power of light to vanquish darkness, as it does every sunrise, has been demonstrated during the night by Paul, who shines the light of Christ and conquers the power of darkness. Death is beaten. Night is driven away. The light of the world has come, and the power of midnight, the power of death, cannot endure. Just as Israel crossed the Red Sea through the darkness and climbed onto the far shore at the hour of dawn, heading east on a resurrection morning, so does the new Israel which is the church.

C. Paul Departs for Jerusalem, v. 11

Notice, too, that Luke has woven a separate plotline inextricably with the story of Eutychus's death and resurrection. That plotline is Paul's journey plans. Why? Not because the journey is so important that even the death of a boy during the night can't compete with it. Rather, because the journey is part of the same story as the death and resurrection.

1. Heading East at Sunrise

The first move I want you to see is that, like Israel crossing the Red Sea, heading east into the sunrise, so Paul's first move as well is to head for Jerusalem, to move back toward the east at

sunrise. Israel came out of the night and the waters of chaos that symbolize death, heading toward Jerusalem and the mountain of God there. The new Israel, the church, comes out of the night of death in the resurrection of Eutychus and heads in the person of Paul toward the mountain of God once more.

2. Heading to Confront Death in Resurrection Power, vv. 3, 23-24

Of course, Paul is not just going to Jerusalem. Specifically, he is confronting death in resurrection power, just as Jesus did. Paul is going to win, even if his body is killed. Luke has already told us of a Jewish plot that forced the apostle to change his plans. Why mention it? Because Paul is heading for the homeland of all Jewish plots — Judea. Indeed, as he himself tells the Ephesian elders, he doesn't know exactly what will happen in Jerusalem, but it's definitely going to be chains and imprisonment — those things at the very least, we might add. After all the Jewish plots to which Paul has been subjected, surely death is still on the table.

The same is true for us. Like Israel of old, we come by God's resurrection power through the death of the Red Sea and climb out onto the far shore, only to face death's other kingdom — the desert. That is Paul here. He has conquered death for Eutychus, but he still must face it for himself. You have been raised with Christ, but you must nonetheless face your own mortality. You know the resurrection power of the Son of God at work in your life, driving out sin and making you holy, giving you eternal life here and now. But you also know the reality of persecution, and the ever-present threat of violence against Christians wielded by the state and various other anti-Christian groups. But what does Paul say about that? He is ready to let his life go. He doesn't count it as valuable to himself. His only goal is to finish the ministry he has received from the Lord Jesus.

Why doesn't Paul fear death? Because he walks in the power of the resurrected Lord. Why didn't Moses fear the sand? Because the God who brought them through the Red Sea could bring them through the desert of Sinai. Brothers and sisters, that is still true. The God who rescued you from sin, darkness, and the Devil's power, is the God who can and will rescue you from anything and everything else.

3. Communion, Lord's Supper, Post-Resurrection Meal

That truth is underscored by the final part of worship. Luke told us that they gathered with the purpose of breaking bread — but that the meal did not actually happen until after Eutychus died and had been raised. Again the text parallels the Red Sea narrative. After the Israelites cross the sea in Exodus 14, they praise God in Exodus 15, and then are given manna from heaven in Exodus 16. What comes after resurrection? Eucharist. Thanksgiving meal. Post-resurrection celebration. I think the best way to put it is this: "He's alive. Let's eat." Brothers and sisters, we proclaim the Lord's death every time we eat His Supper — but we wouldn't bother to eat it unless He had been raised.

D. Not a Little Encouraged, v. 12

How does the church get encouraged? By listening to the apostle's teaching, yes. By fellowshiping with one another, yes. By breaking bread together — for sure. But above all of these realities stands the resurrection of the Son of God, which powerfully worked in Eutychus to

bring him out of the night of death into the morning of life. That resurrection is yours, brothers and sisters. Not every Christian is going to be physically raised immediately after death. But every Christian is already spiritually alive, and every Christian is going to be physically raised in God's good time, at the last day.

Brothers and sisters, you have something better than manna. You have a resurrection greater than the one that Israel experienced at Passover and the Red Sea. Paul was willing to go to Jerusalem and confront death, because he was clothed with resurrection power. Guess what? So are you. You need not fear the grave. You need the apostle's teaching and fellowship, the breaking of bread, and the resurrection. With these, how can you not be encouraged? He is yours, and you are His, and you will rise from the dead. How do we know that? Because He sits at the Father's right hand, alive. So will you.

Be comforted. Be urged and exhorted to walk with this one who can and did conquer death. Go with Him to death. If that means a comfortable hospice after 95 years on this earth, go with Him there. If it means martyrdom on live TV, go with Him there. If it means giving up your pet sin this week, go with Him there. If it means fleeing youthful lusts, go with Him there.

Jesus is alive, and because He lives, you will live also. So eat the Lord's Supper, your manna in the wilderness. You've come through the Red Sea. You've lived through long sermons and all-nighters. Life is at work in you, and death can't win. It's night, but dawn is coming, and the powers of darkness are on the run. The Kingdom is real. It can't be otherwise, because Jesus lives. Amen.