

Alive!

Acts 20:1–12

February 24, 2001

“On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul talked with them, intending to depart on the morrow; and he prolonged his speech until midnight.” What a sermon! That is absolutely amazing. No, he did not start at eleven o’clock in the morning. The first day of the week would have been a work day. It appears that they gathered in the evening, with many lights in the upper room, intending to share the Lord’s Supper before Paul departed from them. Still, it was an extraordinary outpouring of the gospel, a heartfelt sharing of Jesus Christ, a detailed exposition of the good news, and a wonderful teaching of the scripture, all in the power of the Holy Spirit, that allowed him to go on and on, hour after hour, right up to midnight.

And that is not the half of it. For after midnight, they finally broke bread and ate, celebrating the Lord’s Supper, and then Paul kept talking with them for a long time, even unto daybreak! He preached to them all night long! Can you imagine? So it was that the church at Troas drew its life from the gospel of Jesus Christ and from the Lord’s Supper. These were the gifts which Paul had to give to them. These were worth staying up for all night long. Without these, there would have been no church. So it is that the church of Jesus Christ around the world today continues to draw its life from the gospel and from the sacrament of communion. For here it is that we meet our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

We do have to note that in the midst of this preaching marathon, shortly before the Lord’s supper, there was, of course, that one moment of unpleasantness just after midnight. Poor Eutychus could not take it any longer. Maybe he had worked hard all day long. Or maybe he had played hard all day long. It does not say. At any rate, he fell asleep against his will—no one would go to sleep in an open window on purpose, when there was a good floor on which to lie, or a wall or corner against which to lean—and the sleep overwhelmed him, so that he fell down from the third floor and was dead. It was horrible. How could God allow this? Why would God let this young man die, especially while he was sitting in church listening to the Apostle Paul?

Our questions are not answered here, at least not these questions, not in the way that we ask them. Then, in our haste, we begin to make light of the whole thing. Congregations will argue that this story is a warning against preachers preaching for too long a time. Ministers will argue that this is a warning against congregants falling asleep during sermons of any length. But both of these miss the point. The story does not end with the death of Eutychus. It begins with his sleep. It moves to his death. That is where most stories end. But this story ends with him being made alive again. The one who had been dead was made alive again. This is the point of it all. And this raises even more questions. How did Paul do that? How did God do that? What did Eutychus do with his new life? But these are not answered, either. So, what is answered? What is said? What is the point of this strange story?

When “Paul went down and bent over him, and embracing him said, ‘Do not be alarmed, for his life is in him,’” it does not mean that he was denying the reality that Eutychus had died and was dead. To say this would be to discount the entire story. Our author has already told us that Eutychus was dead. This is a simple statement of fact. What, then, is the point of Paul’s words? The point here is the same as with all of Paul’s words: the gospel of Jesus Christ. The

power of God is greater than the power of death. God is the source of all life. Despite the attacks of sin, death, and evil, God is for life, and God will give life and establish life, both here and in the world to come. To God be the glory! That is what Paul meant.

“Do not be alarmed, for his life is in him.” The words echo every angelic visitation recorded in the scriptures. “Do not be afraid.” “Fear not.” They even sound like the words of Christ, “Let not your hearts be troubled.” Here they take on a dual meaning. The most immediate is not to be afraid in the face of this death. That is not insignificant in and of itself. But the next level of meaning, without which the first makes no sense at all, is not to be afraid in the presence of God, not to be afraid in the presence of the agents of God, and not to be afraid in the presence of the power of God, the life-giving, death-ending, eye-opening, earth-shattering power of God.

“Do not be alarmed, for his life is in him.” Do not be afraid of death or of the God and Father of Jesus Christ, for God restores life. God creates life. God loves life. God does not easily yield life to death. Instead, God reclaims life, regives life, reconstitutes life, recreates life, and even resurrects life beyond death. This is the gospel. This is the point, the content, and the meaning of the words of Paul. What he says is nothing other than pure gospel. God gives life.

“Do not be alarmed, for his life is in him.” We should be clear that this was not a resurrection. Eutychus was not raised into the life yet to come. Instead, he was restored to this life. It was as if he were resuscitated, though it is more than that. He was truly dead. Then he was brought back to this life. At one level, this act established, or at least reaffirmed, the authority of Paul’s preaching. How else do you think he kept on preaching for the second half of the night? A death at midnight would have broken up the service. A death at midnight would have broken up the church. But a death turned around into a new life meant that the night was just beginning. There was even more good news to tell. And the church was just beginning. Had there been any question about who Paul was, about the authority of his apostleship, and about the authenticity or legitimacy of his preaching? Those questions all went away. “They,” presumably the family, “took the lad away alive, and were not a little comforted.” Having stared death in the face, they had encountered a greater power. This sealed the authority of Paul.

More to the point, it established the authority of the gospel of Jesus Christ. To God be the glory! Paul would never suggest that he could give life, or that he had made the young man alive again. It was not Paul’s doing. It was a sign, not nearly so much about Paul, as it was about Jesus Christ and about the good news of Jesus Christ. Of all the ways of looking at the world, of all the ways of comprehending reality, of all the ways of facing what comes at us, this one is true. This one makes sense. This one works. More than the faith of the Roman Empire in the Roman Empire, more than the faith of our economy in the dollar, more than the faith of our society in freedom, more than the faith of our military in power, more than the faith of the few in inclusivity, diversity, and pluralism, the gospel of Jesus Christ, the crucified and resurrected one, makes sense in and of itself, makes sense of the world, takes on the powers of sin, death, and evil, and wins the victory for us. To God be the glory! There, in the early days of the gospel, when it first needed to gain a hearing, this sign of new life not only lent credibility to Paul’s preaching but also, and more to the point, helped establish the very truth of the gospel itself.

The young man was alive. At a very basic level, in a very real and practical way, Eutychus was alive again. By all rights, he should have been dead. In fact, he had been dead. But then, by the grace and power of God, he was live again. “They took the lad away alive, and were not a little comforted.” The gospel of Jesus Christ is about life and about being alive. Moreover, it is about being comforted by the promise of new life.

The new life of Eutychus points to an even larger life. Clearly what this new life means is that the gospel itself is alive. That is, the gospel is not a dead letter. The gospel is not ancient words written in a book. The gospel is not an endless sermon. The gospel is the living good news of the living God, alive and active in the world today.

And it is by the power of the gospel alive that the church is alive. Eutychus is not the only one who died and was made alive that night. In the twinkling of an eye, in the time it took for a child to fall from a window to the ground, the young church at Troas died. Faith failed. Hearts broke. Breath was stolen. Life ran away. If this is what happened to the disciples of Christ, they would have nothing to do with it. But death is not the end of the story. Death does not have the last word. That is the point of the gospel. Eutychus was live. The gospel was alive. And, by the gospel, the church also was alive again. No sooner had Paul said, "His life is in him," than the church itself was reestablished, resuscitated, remade, and brought from death to life again. It is all about life!

This, of course, continues to be the case today. Sometimes we fail to remember this simple truth. Sometimes we look in all the wrong places. The church cannot draw its life from the vitality of any nation. The church cannot draw its life from the energy of any society. The church cannot draw its life from the vigor of any economy. The church cannot draw its life from the reason of any philosophy. The church cannot draw its life from the forces of biological life. The church cannot draw its life from the exclusivism of any race or class. The church cannot draw its life from the arrogance any politics. The church cannot draw its life from itself or from its members. The church cannot draw its life from anything or anyone other than its Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. He alone is the source of our life and the source of all that is good. He alone is the source of our life. Let us put aside all others and be faithful to him alone. Let us draw our life from him, not only individually, but also and especially as his church. This is what the gospel would have us do.

What is this gospel? What is the living, life-giving gospel of Jesus Christ? What did Paul preach all night long? In summary, that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. Jesus Christ is the long-promised, long-expected, long-awaited Son of God, our Lord and Savior. That was true then, and it continues to be true today. As a human being, he is like every other human being. As the Son of God, he is unlike any other human being. More than a preacher, certainly, and more than a teacher, more than a prophet, more than a healer, more than a moral example, Jesus Christ is the Son of God, God himself with us and for us.

On the basis of this sonship, Jesus Christ provides for the forgiveness of our sin. He took our sin upon himself on the cross. He paid the price for our disobedience. He paid the penalty for our sin. And by doing that, he has forgiven our sin, he has taken away our sin, he has broken down the barrier between us and God, and he has reestablished our relationship with God in this life.

More than that, more than the forgiveness of sin and the restoration of right relationship with God in this life, Jesus Christ the Son of God has provided for us to have eternal life. He died that we might be forgiven. God raised him to new life that we might live forever. This is the gospel of Jesus Christ. This is the gospel that Paul preached every day and all night long. This is still the gospel today. To God be the glory!

"On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul talked with them, intending to depart on the morrow; and he prolonged his speech until midnight... And when Paul had gone up and had broken bread and eaten, he conversed with them a long while,

until daybreak. . . . And they took the lad away alive, and were not a little comforted.” So let us, who have been dead in the spirit, be made alive again by the gospel and power of Jesus Christ.

*To God Almighty, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
be all praise, honor, and glory
now and forever! Amen.*

Dr. James C. Goodloe IV, Pastor
Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
1627 Monument Avenue
Richmond, Virginia 23220