

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene
Sunday, September 4, 2022
10am

Text: Acts 20:1-12 (NRSVUE)

[prayer]

Today we conclude our summer worship series, Faces of Our Faith. Over the last nine Sundays we have heard bold and untold stories of faith from Scripture. These stories have inspired us, and they have challenged us. They have given us new insights into what it means to be a person of faith. And they have encouraged us to reflect on our own faith journeys – the people, places, and experiences that have shaped how we relate to God.

A lot of jokes have been made about today's Scripture lesson. Here is the first recorded example of a preacher literally boring a young person to death! I once heard someone remark that a preacher should never be offended if someone falls asleep during a sermon, because sleep is holy, too. That sounds to me like a nice pastoral way to soothe a preacher's ego. I can't always promise a short sermon, but I do promise that if you feel the need to take a nap while I am preaching, I will not yell your name from the pulpit. Thankfully there are no third-story windows in this building for you to fall out of.

All jokes about the dangers of long-winded preaching aside, today's Scripture passage is a powerful lesson about how to be the church. Who is the church for? What is the church's purpose? These are the bold questions that arise when we dig into the strange story of Eutychus.

A couple years ago I attended the Festival of Homiletics. (Homiletics is just a fancy word for preaching.) Every year the festival features a lineup of accomplished preachers. These are preacher's preachers – people who have doctorates in homiletics and preach from some of the most historic pulpits in the world. I heard a lot of inspired preaching that festival week, but one sermon stuck in my mind. It was delivered by a clergywoman from Colorado who was pastoring a small church that met in a barn. Her sermon delivery was modest, but her message changed the way I think about church. This is what she said:

“Don't just preach to the people in your pews. Preach to the gaps in your pews. Preach to the people who are not there.”

Preach to the people who are not there.

Boy does that challenge me! It's not exactly what I was taught in seminary. In my preaching classes we talked about bearing the Word of God into the congregation...and the congregation was defined as the people assembled in the church building on Sunday morning. But we live in a society where people are less and less likely to come to church. This is a trend that does not show any signs of reversing. Is the Word of God only for the people who come to worship? If the pandemic has taught us anything, it is that our definition of what church looks like must expand. The Word of God is more than just Holy Scripture – the Word of God is, in fact, Jesus Christ himself, and Jesus offers his body and blood for every person, whether they are part of our worshiping community or not. Which was exactly that preacher's point. If a church truly believes that Jesus is for every person, then what a church does on Sunday morning needs to serve the people who are not in church just as much as it serves those of us who are.

Now that's some good theology, but what does that look like in practice? Today's Scripture lesson gives us some idea.

This is the first story in the New Testament where a church gathering is described in some detail. It outlines three key features of the church in Troas:

- They met at night.
- They shared a meal.
- They interpreted Scripture together.

First, the church met at night. Most churches today meet on Sunday mornings. But the early church had a very clear mission. Their mission was to continue the work of Jesus. And Jesus was concerned about making God accessible to people that the religious establishment had ignored and excluded – people on the margins of society. The church at Troas met at night because that was when the poor and slave laborers had a break from their work. That was the only time of day that they were available. The meeting described in our Scripture lesson likely began around 9pm and extended well past midnight to accommodate the schedule of the working class.

Second, the church at Troas shared a meal together. There were a lot of rules then about who could eat with whom. The early church was all about breaking those rules. Gentiles ate next to Jews, men next to women, slaves next to their masters, and the poor next to the rich. The Lord's Supper as we practice it today was part of their gathering, but it came at the end of what the early church called a Love Feast – the ancient equivalent of the potluck. And for the poor and enslaved, that meal was often the only food they got to eat all day. The church's practice of sharing a meal together served two purposes: It broke down social barriers between different classes of people AND it helped feed hungry people in the community.

Third, the church at Troas interpreted Scripture together. This is called community exegesis. (Exegesis is another fancy word for interpreting Scripture.) It is unlikely that Paul actually preached for three solid hours. Instead, what he was probably doing was leading a Bible study. He would present a passage from the Hebrew Bible and then explain how it pointed to Jesus. People would then ask questions and they would talk about it. While Paul had a special role in the church as chief evangelist, his voice was no more important than the other voices in the room. The community discerned the Word of God together. It was a very egalitarian form of preaching, designed to include and elevate the voices of the poor and enslaved members of the community.

When we learn about these three practices, we must be careful not to take them out of context. Because context is the whole point! The way that the church at Troas gathered is less important than understanding *why* they chose to gather in that way. The church at Troas understood their mission field. They wanted to reach people on the margins of their community, and so they chose practices of gathering that were accessible to those people. God is not calling us to be exactly like the early church. But God does ask us to pay attention to who is on the margins of *our* community: people of color, LGBTQ people, the poor, and the young. God calls us to pay attention to the gaps. Who do we see in worship on Sunday morning? Who do we not see? Is our way of being church accessible to them? What needs to change to address the gaps in our body?

Here is an honest admission from your pastor: I struggled with this sermon. I struggled because it speaks to a deep hurt that I carry about the church. I see parts of myself in both Paul and Eutychus. I hold dual identities in the church: Called to lead and equip you for ministry while also standing on the margins generationally. Only 7% of pastors in the UMC are under the age of 35.¹ Pastoring is a lonely profession, but it is even lonelier when very few of your peers share your workplace. I was born and raised a United Methodist, but most of my friends from youth group and church camp no longer attend church. In the young body of Eutychus I see an entire generation that has figuratively fallen out of the church.

But that's not all I see. I also see in this story inspiration for what it means to be the church. The church at Troas was actively preaching to the gaps. They made intentional choices that centered the needs of Eutychus. They met at a time when he could join them in fellowship. They fed him and included his perspective in the conversation. Did he fall asleep out of boredom? Maybe – that is one possible interpretation of this story. But another, equally possible, interpretation is that Eutychus fell asleep because he was tired after a long day at work and the church was a safe place where he could rest. It is beautiful to imagine the church as a sanctuary of rest for members of our community – a place where they can come and be fed and even take a nap, if that's what they need.

And when the unthinkable happened and Eutychus tragically fell out of that window, the church was there, too. They immediately rushed to his aid. Paul literally stops preaching. He interrupts the meeting and rushes downstairs. He kneels by Eutychus, gathers him up in his arms, and speaks resurrection over him. Imagine that just moments before Paul and the church were discussing the resurrection of Jesus. But when Eutychus falls out of the window, they quit talking about resurrection and they actually *do* the work of resurrection. They “take the boy away alive” and restore him to his place in the community of believers.

¹ <https://www.churchleadership.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Clergy-Age-Trends-Report-2020.pdf>

Church, this is our purpose: To share the hope of resurrection in our community by practicing resurrection. We are called to kneel next to the people on the margins, the people who have fallen away from the church, the people who think there is no place for them here, and offer them Jesus. We preach the good news of resurrection not only to ourselves in this sacred space, but beyond our building, in the community. We look for the gaps in our pews, and then we go where those people are. We strive to create sacred space for them, too, even if that means interrupting our usual ways of being church.

And though I have the privilege of bearing the Word of God to you most Sunday mornings, this work of preaching resurrection is not mine alone. It belongs to you, too! Each one of us is called to kneel next to the Eutychus' of the world and help raise them up. Practicing resurrection can be as simple as the gift of our presence in the dark places of life. And it can be as profound as offering new life and belonging to someone who thought they were dead to the world. Each one of us is called to bear the Word of God into the world and preach the good news of Jesus with our very lives.

I saved today's story for the last in our series because Eutychus is not the face of our faith; he is the face of our mission. Our task is not finished until the gaps in our body have been filled and every person has a seat at the table of God.

Amen.