

*The Pain of Saying Goodbye*  
Acts 20:7-12, 17-38  
November 7, 2010  
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Paul's sermon has rambled on a little too long. It's an occupational hazard, after all. A young man named Eutychus—whose name literally means lucky—is listening. Sometime around midnight, Eutychus begins to feel drowsy. His head nods back and forth. Pretty soon he's sound asleep. That's a problem because Eutychus is sitting on a window sill. He ends up tumbling out the third-story window and down to the ground. The congregation gasps. They fear the worst: Eutychus is dead.

Paul rushes to his side, I suppose feeling somewhat responsible for this calamity. When he pulls Eutychus close, he can tell that he's still breathing. It's a miracle. Paul and the others let out a huge sigh of relief. Once the excitement settles down, they head back upstairs and break bread together. And then Paul—not to be deterred by a little calamity—picks up the sermon right where he left off. And would you believe, he keeps on preaching until dawn.

Now, don't get nervous. We're not going to be pulling any all-nighters around here. But what this curious little story from Acts does is remind us fragile life can be. There are plenty of folks who haven't been as "lucky" as Eutychus. This past year, in fact, we have said goodbye to twenty-five of them here at Zumbro. We could tell lots of stories about them. Did you know that one of those we said goodbye to was Mrs. Minnesota in 1959? One worked as a nurse's aide at Methodist and St. Mary's for 42 years. One was an avid bird watcher. One was a world-renown radiologist at Mayo. One was a 98-year-old grandmother who enjoyed woodcarving. One was a 23-year-old graduate of Century High School. One of them didn't have a family, only a church family. We could go on and on. So many lives, so many stories. When we start putting names and faces to our losses, life can feel very fragile indeed. We miss these people. It's hard to say goodbye.

We see a similar sadness as Paul prepares to say goodbye to his congregation in Ephesus. Paul has been their pastor for a little over two years. It's the longest he's stayed in any one place. He's grown rather fond of them. But now it's time to move on. Paul has dreams of someday taking the gospel to Rome, and even to Spain.

In his farewell speech to the Ephesians, Paul hints of dark days to come. He sees himself following in Jesus' footsteps. Like Jesus, he feels compelled to go to Jerusalem. Like

Jesus, he will endure trials and face imprisonment. And like Jesus, he's less concerned with preserving his own life than in finishing his work well.

This farewell scene gets played out in city after city. As people say their goodbyes to Paul, there's much they don't understand of the world to come. They're afraid for Paul. They beg him not to go to Jerusalem. They warn him about possible plots against his life. They want reassurance that Paul is going to be safe.

Don't we do something similar when saying goodbye to our loved ones. Even though there is much we don't understand of the world to come, we want to be assured that they're going to be safe.

A parishioner in a former congregation was looking for such reassurance. His name was Dick. A year earlier he has lost his wife Marilyn to pancreatic cancer. In the weeks and months to come, Dick visited the cemetery regularly. He was lonely, so he spent time talking to Marilyn. One day his feelings welled up inside. He said to her: "Marilyn, I need some sort of sign that you're in a better place." Not long afterward, as Dick tells it, the sky around him became dazzling white. The light was so bright that Dick had to close his eyes. Then, just as quickly as it came, it was gone and things were back to normal. Except things weren't quite the same as before, because Dick had been assured that Marilyn was okay.

Signs like this are tremendously comforting but, let's be honest, very rare. We hope and pray that our loved ones are in a better place, but there are so many questions left unanswered: Where *are* they exactly? Can they hear us? Are they happy?

In the midst of these questions, we are forced to pick up the pieces and go on. We grieve. We try to keep busy. The weeks drag into months, and the months drag into years. We find ourselves getting discouraged at times. The challenge is to keep believing in God's future when we don't have any proof that all this stuff is true.

Paul prepares the Christians in Ephesus for the day when he will be gone. He tells them plainly that they will experience tough times. They will have more than their share of discouragement. False teachers will come in. Like savage wolves, they will threaten the flock and try to lead people astray. Paul reminds them of what happened to Eutychus: They need to "stay awake." They need to keep believing in God's future even though they don't have any proof that all this stuff is true.

Paul often compares the Christian life to running a race. As he nears the end of his life, he writes to a young coworker named Timothy: “The time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith.” Paul has spent a lifetime running this race. It’s not just any race he’s been running, though, it’s a relay race. Paul has followed in the footsteps of Jesus who passed on the baton to him. When Paul leaves Ephesus, he’ll be passing on the baton to them. They, in turn, will pass it on to others.

The book of Hebrews takes this image a step further. It describes those who have run the race and gone on before us as a “great cloud of witnesses.” They’re like a giant cheering squad. They have filled the stadium to watch us. The baton is in our hands. They’re encouraging us on toward the finish line. When we get weary, they urge us to run as faithfully as we can and to keep our eyes on the prize.

I love this image. We need the support of the great cloud of witnesses. We need their encouragement to run the race faithfully and to finish our work well.

A note of caution is in order, however. As we remember a 98-year-old grandmother and a radiologist and a birdwatcher and others, there’s a certain amount of pressure in lifting up the saints. It’s so easy for us to compare ourselves to them and to feel as if we don’t measure up. We wonder: What if we don’t run as faithfully as they did? What if we don’t finish well?

A friend of mine named Greg was asking these questions. He was asking them particularly about his brother, Danny, who had recently died. Greg and Danny had grown up in Laverne, Minnesota. Danny was a bright kid with all the potential in the world. Over the years he’d done some positive things with his gifts, especially working in sound production in the world of advertising. But Danny also had his share of struggles. He had a drinking problem. He had borrowed money from his parents, lots of money, and never paid it back.

One day Danny was out in his garage doing some puttering. He was listening to the baseball game on the radio. And most likely he was drinking. His wife Laura came out to check on him. She said, “Danny, you don’t look so good.”

Danny brushed it off, “I’m fine.”

Laura pushed, “Maybe I should call 911.”

“Oh no, don’t do that.”

A little later Laura came out and invited Danny in for supper. He said he’d be right in. But instead of going to the kitchen, he went downstairs to the basement and fell asleep in the

guestroom. By the time Laura woke him, he was disoriented. She thought he was drunk. She put her foot down: “You’re going to AA tomorrow and that’s all there is to it.”

The only response Danny could muster was, “I feel so ashamed.”

Laura had to go check on their daughter. And by the time she got back downstairs, Danny was dead. Forty-eight-years old and his life had come to an end.

Greg told me this story with tears in his eyes. He shared that there were plenty of times when Danny messed up. But there were plenty of good times too. Greg felt bad that Danny had reached the end with so little left but shame. Greg paused for a moment in his story. Then he added: “You know what I think? I think Jesus was there to meet him. His arms were open wide. He was saying, ‘Come on home, Danny, I’m not ashamed of you.’”

On All Saints Sunday we remember and honor those who have gone before us in the faith. These people didn’t live perfect lives. Like the rest of us, they had their share of shame and struggle. But in the end, it didn’t matter. They had been made new in the cross of Jesus. And now they have taken their place around the great throne of God.

Life is fragile, there’s no doubt about it. It hurts to say goodbye, whether it’s Paul in Ephesus or loved ones here at Zumbro. In the midst of our pain, we keep trusting in God’s good future because it’s the only hope we really have. Like Paul, we do our best to keep running the race. The baton has been passed to us. And here’s the good news: somehow, somewhere the great cloud of witnesses is cheering us on. AMEN.