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“They escorted him to the ship” (Acts 20:38).

Acts 20:28-38; John 17:11b-19

St. Paul had early warning via the Holy Spirit that he was heading into trouble. He departed the church at Ephesus with a speech that told them of wolves coming among the sheep to destroy their faith and self-serving pretenders who would mislead them. He had done his best, now it was on to Jerusalem, where he would encounter opposition and suffering. In tears, the leaders of the church escorted him to the ship, knowing they probably would never see him again.

This passage from Acts has always stood out for me because of Paul’s faith and realism, but also because my first car was a Ford Escort, a small pine green hatchback with brown vinyl interior, low mileage, a cassette player that played my Crosby, Stills and Nash tapes on long trips for my job. It did not survive. My cassette player ate tapes, and some rambunctious younger friends left dents in the roof from standing on top of the car. But over the years I coaxed 100,000 miles from it before I had to sell it. It was my escort for many adventures, my companion on the road.

Paul's real Escort was, of course, the Holy Spirit, who saw him through two long missionary journeys and then to Jerusalem, where he was taken into custody by Roman soldiers to protect him from an angry mob. To save his neck, he appealed his case to Caesar, and this meant he was escorted to Rome to await trial and where he was likely executed during Nero's persecution.

The purpose of Acts was to show us how Jesus' promise to be with his disciples to the ends of the earth came true. Paul was only the best example of how intimate this accompaniment was. Jesus was the defining principle and driving force of Paul's existence from the time of his conversion. He learned and shared with others in his letters to the churches just what it meant to be members of the body of Christ in the world. He wrote to the Galatians: "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (2:20).

It is important for us to know as we enjoy the last, lyrical lines of John's beautiful final discourses that the next time we find the disciples will be in the Acts of the Apostles. Not the Ideas of the Apostles, or the Intentions of the Apostles, but their Acts. After the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, it was time to go to work. Their actions will speak louder than words. Now, for us, there are miles to go and the road ahead is long and filled with uncertainty. But we will have a reliable Escort to takes us where God wants us to go.

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