

"Lesser Known People of the New Testament"
"Eutychus"

One of my favorite stories in the New Testament is the story of Eutychus. The setting is Troas, a large coastal city in what is modern day Turkey. Christians have gathered on Sunday night to break bread. The guest preacher is the Apostle Paul. He's booked a reservation on a ship to leave the next day. The story begins in Acts, chapter 20. Luke writes: "On the first day of the week we came together to break bread. Paul spoke to the people and, because he intended to leave the next day, kept on talking until midnight" (Acts 20:7). I guess Paul had a lot to say before he left, because he got long-winded!

One of the persons there was Eutychus. "Seated in a window was a young man named Eutychus" (Acts 20:9a). It says he was a young man. Apparently he's sitting on an open window ledge. I suspect the room was crowded. Maybe he wanted to catch some fresh air (it does say there were many lamps in the room – these were oil lamps, and that probably made the room hot and stuffy).

Maybe he was "half-in, half-out". You know, maybe he wasn't thrilled with being there. He could at least look down on the street to see if anything was happening outside. In the Mount Pocono church I served there was a tiny balcony at the back of the sanctuary, kind of hidden. Kids sat up there. They weren't always overly attentive to what was going on in the service. I was just glad they were there! (Adults probably would have liked to sit up there but didn't have the nerve).

So it's hot and stuffy. No air conditioning! I've served churches that had no air conditioning. Most do today, but not years ago. I remember some of those hot summer Sunday mornings, or if you had an event at the church in the evening (like Vacation Bible School). It was hot!

It was getting late – really late. Paul kept talking and talking. It was midnight. The longer Paul preached, the more drowsy Eutychus became. His eyes got so heavy. It says he "was sinking into a deep sleep" (verse 9).

Do people fall asleep in church today? Tell me about it! In my home church we had this man who just about every Sunday fell asleep during the worship service. We kids used to get a kick out of that! Poor Lloyd wasn't the brightest candle in the candelabra – but he gave us kids something to joke about. I was sure once I became a pastor no one would fall asleep in church on my watch!

In my first appointment, there was a really nice family in the church that had 2 young boys. One day the wife asked me if I noticed if her husband fell asleep during the worship service. I really hadn't. She said he had some sort of disease that caused him to doze off. She told me her one son takes a rubber band to church, and zaps him if he sees his dad starting to snooze! A man came to his pastor and asked the pastor if he could suggest a prayer, or prayers, he might pray when he first sat down in his seat before the service. The pastor knew this guy tended to doze, so he said to the man, "Well, in your case, I'd suggest the prayer, "Now I lay me down to sleep..."!"

Thankfully, most of us don't literally fall asleep in church, but we can be asleep in other ways: mentally, spiritually. We can be lethargic, rather lifeless. Why is that?

Well, sometimes we're just physically weary. That's the case with Eutychus. It was hot, and very late. He just conked out. I admire people who work all Saturday night, or work really late Saturday night, and still come to church on Sunday morning. Of course, if you've been out partying late Saturday night that's a different story!

Then, I think some of us are half-asleep in our churches because church is boring! Kids are known to say, "Church is boring." I'll bet a lot of adults feel the same but are less prone to verbalize it! One of my favorite paintings is a picture of Jesus, sitting in the front row of a church service, *asleep!*

Some preaching is boring! Sermons are boring! In defense of preachers - it's hard to preach week after week and make it interesting and informative. Peoples' attention spans are shorter. Expectations are higher – some compare us to TV preachers and ministries and their hi-tech styles of communication. However, not all sermons are boring! One year at Annual Conference a black woman bishop preached for about an hour – and it seemed like 5 minutes. Other preachers drone on in a 10 minute homily and it seems like 3 years!

Sometimes we are half asleep in church because the rest of the worship experience is irrelevant, or trivial, or poorly planned and carried out. Worship leaders are unenthused. Music is out of sync with the kind of music the congregation listens to. And besides the worship service, the church just doesn't connect with what's going on in the world, and in their own community. We can fall asleep in church because the church is boring.

But sometimes it isn't the church's fault when people are half asleep – it's on us! We're half asleep in church because that's the quality of our soul. We're not very spiritual – maybe we don't even know the Lord. We come to worship on a Sunday morning and haven't even opened the Bible all week. If we prayed at all, it was a quick prayer on the go. We did nothing to nurture our inner spirit and relationship with God. It isn't always the church's fault if church seems boring. Maybe we're the ones who are boring!

Eutychus "was sinking into a deep sleep". And then it happened: he fell out the window. "When he was sound asleep he fell to the ground from the third story and was picked up dead" (Acts 20:9b). Imagine how horrible that must have been! Paul is talking away. And then there's this thump. There's stirring in the back of the room, muffled voices, then someone yells out: "Eutychus fell out the window." "Oh no, dear God!" There's panic as people rush out down the stairs and onto the street. Someone is overheard screaming, "I think he's dead!"

Sometimes awful things happen in church services! In one church I served early in my ministry our organist was an elderly lady, probably close to 90 years old. Her name was Bessie. She was tiny, so short, that when I looked over at the organ I couldn't see her behind the organ. One Sunday in the middle of a hymn all of a sudden the organ stopped. No sound. My first thought

was, "Oh no, Bessie had a heart attack and keeled over." I cautiously walked toward the organ, and I saw her sitting there with this puzzled look on her face. She simply said, "It just stopped." The organ quit out on us!

Eutychus falls to his death during a church service! Imagine a news story today: "Child falls to death from city church balcony." But look at what happens next: "Paul went down, threw himself on the young man and put his arms around him. 'Don't be alarmed,' he said. 'He's alive!' Then he went upstairs again and broke bread and ate. After talking until daylight, he left. The people took the young man home and were greatly comforted" (Acts 20:10-12). I would think! What a testimony to the power of God and the Holy Spirit in Paul and in the early Church! The story has a happy ending!

I think the story of the Church today can have a happy ending! There are ways to lessen the chance that churches will induce people to fall asleep!

For one thing, God is always in the business of renewing and reviving the Church. History has recorded numerous times when the Church has been spiritually asleep, injured, comatose or just plain dead, and God has renewed and revitalized His Church. Just when people are ready to put the church in a coffin, close the lid and lock it, the Holy Spirit does something unexpected, often in unlikely places, and unlikely ways, and breathes new life into the Church! Hallelujah!

But there are things we can do, and must do, to keep the Eutychus's of the world from falling asleep and falling out of church windows. First of all, look in the mirror. We can ask ourselves: Is the church the problem, or am I the problem? Do I know and love Christ? Have I really been saved/converted to Christ? Am I spiritually alert and alive? Do I give as much of myself and my enthusiasm to the work and ministry of the church as I do other facets of my life? It's the old adage, maybe I'd get more out of the church if I put more into it!

Scriptures urges us to be awake and alert. Romans 13:11 says, "You know what hour it is, how it is full time now for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed." 1 Thessalonians 5:6 says, "So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake."

Then too, fewer people would sleep in in the church if churches were more relevant. Sometimes the whole church can be half asleep! It can be out of touch with what's going on in the world and the real issues people are facing. There was a book written titled *Tiptoeing Through a Revelation*. It was a book written about the church back in the turbulent 1960's. We live in a turbulent era! Social justice issues, galloping secularism, the erosion of Judeo-Christian ethics. And the church can be tiptoeing through today's revolutions. We can be cocooned in our own little enclave of church life – practicing a private "me and Jesus" faith that ignores community issues, preoccupied with committee meetings and church events and programs that no one outside the church is interested in.

When the church makes a positive difference in people's lives and in communities, there's life

and energy in the church! A church leader by the name of Thom Rainer talks about the death of cultural Christianity. He's suggesting that people no longer come to church just because it's expected, or because of any social benefits attached to it. So we can no longer just do church as usual and know that people will show up. However, we are learning today that though fewer and fewer young people are brought up in the church and coming to church, these same people may get involved in things the church is doing that help people and make a positive difference in the community. *People are less prone to fall asleep in church when the church is **relevant**.*

One more thought: People are less prone to fall asleep when the church is fun! The church? Fun? Seems like an oxymoron. Tony Campolo wrote a book called *Who Switched the Price Tags*. In it he has a section on how the church ought to be fun - not boring and lifeless. "Many of us will have to admit that the eleven o'clock hour on Sunday is not the most interesting time of the week. When our children complain they do not want to go to church because it's no fun, they draw more sympathy from us than we want to admit."

He then shares some opinions on things that help make the church a fun place: Praising and glorifying Jesus in a worship service can make the church fun. (No, you don't need loud music and smoke machines! But just being lost in "wonder, love and praise", as the hymn suggests). Giving up ourselves enthusiastically to Jesus makes life an adventure and church fun. Celebrating together, having parties in a wholesome way, makes the church fun. Enjoying each other and accepting each other as we are makes church fun. Having a place where Democrats get to know Republicans, pacifists get to know soldiers, punk-rockers get to know lovers of Bach – because we are sisters and brothers in Christ, makes the church a fun place.

I agree with Tony. And if you know him, having him around your church always made it a fun time, as well as a deeply challenging experience!

So much for Eutychus. What could have been a horrible tragedy turned out to be an energizing miracle! Paul stops his preaching, goes down, throws himself on the boy, puts his arms around him, and says, "Don't be alarmed, he's alive!"

The church can be alive too! Church doesn't have to be a place where half the people are asleep! The Spirit of Christ is in the Church, constantly prompting us to wake up, and be a church that's alive and well!

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