

## ***Wide Asleep***

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship with Communion  
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT  
August 7, 2016  
Text: Acts 20:7-12

Today's story from the Book of Acts is one often overlooked and under-appreciated. I'm not sure why that is because it's pretty darn interesting. It's also very reminiscent of how things of the church still today. On the surface it seems like an odd little story. Scholars haven't focused on it too much but to be fair who wants to spend time on a story where a boy falls out a window because a sermon by a patriarch of the church just never ends? But that's exactly why this is such an important for us to consider in our church on this August morning! Why? Well, for one thing, it sounds vaguely familiar.

What??? We've never had a child fall out a window here! We've had our problems but that's never been one of them! And let's not forget that the sanctuary is on the ground floor so it wouldn't be that far to fall... But that's not what I'm talking about anyway. What I'm talking about is falling asleep in church. That is a universal experience. I know people are here who have fallen asleep in church before. At least two of them are in my own family, without naming names of course. And guess what – it's okay. Really. You're tired and the sermon just goes on and on. Your eyelids get heavier and heavier and you just doze off. Maybe

it's because the pastor's voice is so soothing. Maybe it's because the sermon is just too difficult to follow, or just plain boring. Maybe it's because you're just too darn tired and this is the first time you've stayed this still all week. Whatever the reason, it's a very human response – and it's okay. This is one preacher who's not at all offended when people doze off. I'm just glad you're getting some rest....

Paul, I think had the same sort of reaction. He stops talking and runs down three stories to where the boy is theoretically sprawled on the ground. Paul goes to the boy, takes him in his arms and says, “do not be alarmed for his life is in him!” Then Paul goes back upstairs and has something to eat before continuing on with his conversation until dawn. He barely loses his rhythm, or so it seems. On the surface this seems like a story about an accident which happens in churches all the time. Someone faints or falls and everything stops until word is sent that the person is okay. Then, depending on the situation, the service either continues on as planned or comes to a quick conclusion. We've had things like that happen here. We can almost envision the scene being described – a too warm room, a boy perched on a windowsill to catch a cool breeze, the speaker droning on and on, the boy slowly nods off and falls out the window. Folks rush to him, find out he's okay and things go on.

But do they? Is that all this story is – an odd little anecdote that implies Paul has the power to resurrect the dead?

Anna Carter Florence, a professor of preaching and an author, thinks not. For her, this story is a powerful encouragement to pastors and to churches to reflect carefully on who they are and how that is or is not connected to who God needs them to be. She articulates three key points for pastors and churches she sees in this story. First, she tells pastors to take note that when this happened Paul stopped preaching – finally! She observes that far too often when pastors get cranked up in a sermon they go on, and on, and on losing track of whether or not the congregation is still tuned in. And what's the point if they're not.

Florence also makes an interesting observation about one aspect of this story which is especially relevant to churches today, churches just like ours. She notes that the boy – youth or older child – is perched in a window – on the periphery of what's happening. If he was a worship leader or a musician or a deacon, he would have been seated someplace else, unlikely to be at risk for falling out a window, or walking out a door. She also notes that if the sermon was not something the boy could relate to, it's no surprise he would fall – out a window or away from the church.

Florence also seems great significance in how Paul responds to the boy after the fall. She notes that the Greek verb used to

describe how Paul approaches the boy is only used a few other times in the New Testament and one is to describe how the father of the prodigal son runs to embrace this son whom he had thought was dead but was alive again. Florence calls this the grace of being found again and believes this is the point of the whole story. This boy no one was paying attention to, including Paul, falls out a window causing Paul to stop what he had thought was important in order to run to the boy to embrace him. It can be argued, therefore, that this story is an invitation to us to consider what it is that we are missing in what we consider important which is allowing youth and adults to drift away from the church, and from God. In other words, what do we need to do differently to keep people from falling away from us and from this church?

Florence also raises a third very interesting question about this text. She wonders why it is so ambiguous about whether or not the boy was raised from dead by Paul or whether he was just dazed by the fall. The text is very vague as is Paul himself. He doesn't respond dramatically when he holds the boy's limp body, saying something like, "Eutychus I say to you arise!" Nope he just holds him and then tells everyone – "it's okay, he's alive." You'd think if it was indeed a miraculous resurrection at Paul's hand, he would have made a bigger deal about it. But he didn't. So we don't know. Was the boy dead and Paul brought him back to life or was he just dazed and Paul offered him, and his family, the

comfort they needed to deal with a frightening moment. We just don't know. That's intentional, Anna Carter Florence argues, because the whole point of the story is not a miracle of resurrection. Instead the point of the story is the miracle of the grace of being found once more. This boy literally fell away from the church. Paul stopped what he was doing that he thought was important to go and find the boy. And that's exactly what we in the church are called to do. We need to stay focused on the grace of being found again by God, to experience that grace for ourselves and to bring it to everyone we know. We need to reach out to those folks who drift away from the church, knowing that they may or may not ever come back. That's their choice and whether or not they do come back is really not the point. Our reaching out to them, and to others who have been rejected by other churches and other people, that's what we're supposed be to doing. We need to know who's falling, why they're falling and what we can do to help. And guess what, we may find out there's nothing we can do to help. But there just might be, and that's the point.

So as we head back into our lives beyond the doors of our church this morning, I hope we will take the story of Eutychus with us. In a real way, Eutychus shakes us out of being wide asleep without even knowing it. We don't know what we don't know if we only focus on what the church has always done and how the

church has always been. Tradition is good, yes. It anchors us, providing the foundation for the future we are striving for. But it can't become the entirety of who we are. We must be the people God needs us to be for all the Eutychus's in our lives who are teetering on the brink of falling out and falling away from church, from family, from life. We must respond to everyone we encounter with that grace of being found again, no matter who we are or who they are or where any of us have been on our journey to God through life.

Oh, before I forget, you know that funny ending of the story when Paul goes back inside to break bread and have something to eat? Sounds funny, right? Kid falls out a window and Paul deals with the aftermath by eating? Well, not exactly. The breaking of bread means that Paul and the entire company of people he was with stopped at that moment to share in the breaking of bread and the drinking of the cup at Christ's Table. They had Communion together to celebrate once again with thanksgiving that the one who had been lost had been found again – out a window, on a cross, escaped from a tomb. Doesn't matter. New life, new beginnings, new hope, found again by the God who loves us beyond all reason – that's what matters. Always. Amen.