

Falling Asleep Three Stories Up Tim Carson
Acts 20:7-14 July 1, 2018

Perhaps we've all been there before: Driving late at night and dosing off at the wheel; nodding off in a warm classroom after lunch; falling asleep in the easy chair watching television. First we get drowsy; our attention drifts, and before you know it, here's dream land!

This story in the book of Acts is legendary – Paul is concluding his tour of Asia Minor and has spent nearly a week in Troas. It's his last night before he leaves in the morning and the Christian Sabbath and he wants it to count. He is meeting with a house church in a cheap apartment on the third story. As the evening goes late a young man, Eutychus, whose name means "lucky," is sitting in a window and quietly doses off. Unfortunately for him he tumbles out of the window and falls three stories to the ground below. The whole company rushes down. When Paul took him in his arms he exclaimed that the young man was not dead, but living. Like a few other scenes in Jesus' life the dead live.

We hear next that Paul goes back upstairs and "breaks bread," they celebrated the Lord's Supper in the middle of the night. After that we hear that Paul talked until daybreak. My.

It really depends who you are as to how you react to this story. If you're a regular pew-sitter and have dosed off during church before then this story makes perfect sense. Worship late into the night? Endless preaching, even from an apostle like Paul? Of course sleepy. There's empathy there.

Those of us who stand on the other side of the pulpit might resort to quoting the words of Jesus to his slumbering disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane. "Could you have not stayed awake with me for even one hour?" (Mt 26:40) Or we quote the parable of the ten bridesmaids. "Ten were there but only five stayed awake with enough oil for their lamps. The other five fell asleep so that when the bridegroom came they were unprepared." (Mt 25:1-13) The preacher drones on, "Remember the five..."

So regardless, everyone can point fingers at some reason for falling asleep in church.

Or we can understand this as a very human story – a story about human limits, no matter how lucky we are, no matter who’s preaching.

Of course, there is another way to interpret the story of late night communion and falling out of windows. It may be a surprising story we hadn’t seen coming.

What if this sleep of Eutychus is not a negative thing at all, not simply a human foible we have to overcome? What if this story of nighttime worship, breaking bread by candlelight, the good news preached, is really about transformation? What if sleep represents going into a much deeper place, like a trance, like prayer, like dream time?

And most importantly – in this story – what if the falling and rising of this young man is a metaphor for death and resurrection? What if this is the story is really one of dying and rising, Gospel transformation? Everything of consequence happens in an upper room at a midnight supper.

In that sense, “Falling for you” takes on a whole new meaning.

What if this is really falling for God, the Spirit pushing us out of the nest to where we need to go?

Maybe Eutychus was ready to fall. And maybe God was ready to catch. It wasn’t a fall from grace; it was a *fall into grace*.

Imagine: Just after Paul leaves Eutychus on the first floor, exclaiming that he is alive, he returns upstairs, breaks the bread, and says, “This is my body, broken for you.” He has plunged into sacred sleep, falling into the arms of God, reborn, transformed.

I find it interesting that many dream interpreters believe that in dreams falling represents an aspect of death. In our story that is exactly what happens; falling and dying are the same thing. That would also happen if this story was a dream. But dying to what? Falling is letting go of control.

And so we hear the words of Paul from elsewhere:

“I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live. Yet not I, but Christ in me.” (Galatians 2:20)

Falling, dying, rising, transforming.

Are you familiar with Richard Rohr's book, *Falling Upward*? Basically Rohr describes the way in which we create the container of life first and then spend the rest of our time letting go of it, falling as it were. For example you spend your whole life working to get the picture window and about time you do you realize that life isn't about picture windows. You fall upwards, letting go of what once seemed important so you can receive what's really important. Like a dream you fly, fall, soar, drop to a new place – like Eutychus did, a form of death and rebirth. It happens to all of us in all kinds of different ways.

Most of the time in the spiritual life we encourage people to stay awake, attentive and alert; on the lookout for the moving of God, the cues which we need to heed and follow. But in this story we are alerted to the insistent movement of the spirit that is beyond our control and rationality, receiving the gifts of God in the night, among stirring words and the breaking of bread.

And then, when the traffic director of the brain has nodded off and relinquished control for at least a little while, we may receive the mercy and grace of falling in order to rise. Or, as Richard Rohr puts it, falling upward.

To be clear, I'm not suggesting any backward dive out of a third story window. And neither am I suggesting sleep during sermons. But I am saying that what God does with us is often shrouded with mystery, beyond our control, and what seems like falling is often a new kind of flying.

Is that why after Eutychus was pronounced alive on arrival Paul ran up the stairs and broke the bread and gave thanks? Because life and death and new life are one in the same and Jesus is always in the middle of it.