



# SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

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"Sleeping in Church" - Acts 20:7-16

The Rev. Dr. Tim Shaw

**T**his is one of my favorite stories in the entire New Testament. The fact that this crazy little story is included in the Book of Acts is amazing to me. This story, about a guy who falls asleep in church, lends credibility to the rest of the Book of Acts. If, Luke, the writer of the Book of Acts, includes a story about a young guy who falls asleep in church and then falls out the third floor window, I can trust the rest of what he tells me in his book. The only reason someone would include the story of an exhausted young man who fell asleep in church as the great Apostle Paul talked on and on and on and on and then falls out of a window, is because it actually happened!

One of the reasons I love this story is because it's a cautionary tale of sorts, for guys like me who have the tendency—let's be honest here—to go on and on and on. Can I get an "Amen!"?

I have a lot of compassion for the young man who dozed off in church. I've fallen asleep in church. It's never happened in this church but I've nodded off in other churches. Now, I wasn't out for ten minutes, snoring like a buzz saw. It was just a quick lapse into unconsciousness. I closed my eyes just for a second and then something inside of me knew that I was not supposed to be sleeping and I quickly snapped out of it.

Have you had this experience?  
Have you dozed off in public?

While I was on a trip around the world with some friends of mine, we made a stop in St. Petersburg, Russia. What a fascinating city! For nearly 200 years, St. Petersburg was the imperial capital of Russia. It's still considered the cultural capital of Russia. The Hermitage, one of the great museums in the world, is there. Sergei Rachmaninoff, one of Russia's greatest composers studied there. The arts thrive in St. Petersburg.

On this trip around the world, our little group decided that we should take in some high culture, so we attend a classical concert while we were in this magnificent city. We decided to go to a concert that included the works of a composer by the name of Gustav Mahler.

I remember that the auditorium seemed unnecessarily warm and stuffy. I should have known we were in trouble. The music was slow and ponderous. As the concert dragged on and on, out of the corner of my eye I watched one of my friends start to fall asleep.

First, my friend's head started to droop. As her head fell to about shoulder height, she suddenly regained consciousness.

She glanced side to side and concluded that no one had seen what she'd done. She was wrong about that. I'd seen it.

Measure after measure the music plodded along. Her head dropped past her shoulders until her head was almost in her lap. She was now fully asleep. Mahler was now background music to the real drama unfolding next to me. Her head hovered above her lap for quite awhile. In retrospect, the kind thing to do would have been to wake her up but I was unsure what would have happened if I nudged her. So, I thought I'd just let her take a nap.

Here we were, a group of friends sitting together in the third row center of the theater and one of us was asleep. Her return to consciousness was dramatic. It was the kind of wake up call we've all experienced when we sit up in bed fearing we've slept through our alarm and are now late for work. It was the biggest head nod recovery I have ever seen. I'm surprised the conductor didn't turn around and glare at us.

In this week's text we meet a young guy by the name of Eutychus. His name means "Lucky". I don't really believe in luck but Eutychus lives up to his name in this story. This poor young man falls asleep in church and everyone notices.

**L**ook at what Luke tells us about what led up to this guy's fall from the third floor window.

Luke tells us that it was the evening of the first day of the week. That's Sunday evening and that means it had been a day of work for this young guy. Everyone in the Apostle Paul's Bible study that night had worked all day long. They were tired. Many of the people in the church were probably slaves and it's a pretty good chance that the man in the window was himself a slave. He'd worked hard all day long to please his earthly master.

Here's a guaranteed prescription for sleeping in church. First, the text says that before Paul's class, they ate a meal together. Second, they had a pastor who had a lot on his mind. Full stomachs plus a pastor who had every intention of saying everything he had on his mind equals trouble. The text tells us that the Apostle Paul was on a tight schedule. He was going to leave town in the morning, so he decided he'd talk on and on until he had told them everything he wanted these new Christians to know. He started after dinner and talked until midnight.

Added to this dangerous combination of plates of pasta, plus a passionate pastor, is the fact that inside the meeting room there were torches burning to give them light. In addition to giving off light those torches gave off heat. The room was probably packed with people. All of that tells me that it was warm and stuffy, which is probably why Eutychus decided to sit in the window.

Here's the first way you could apply this text to your life. Don't sit in the window on the third floor if you've worked all day, eaten a big

meal, and have a pastor who has a lot on his or her mind. Have you ever wondered why we keep this sanctuary so cold? Well, now you know. It's for your own safety!

Eutychus had worked all day long and yet he was eager to listen to Paul. He wanted to learn more about Jesus Christ and this was his chance. I like Eutychus. He's eager to grow as a follower of Christ. He's probably amazed by what he's been hearing about the real freedom of the gospel. His life has probably changed dramatically now that he knows that there is a God who is fully awake to him, completely aware of what is going on in his life. He's probably learning to trust that God has completely forgiven him for all the mistakes he's made. He wants to know more about this God who is radically different from the gods of his culture. So, after a long day at work he comes to listen to the great apostle. This was the chance of a lifetime!

Do you know what it's like to really want to be attentive to God but you're just exhausted? You really want to pay attention to what your pastor is saying but your week has been so tiring. You've driven your kids to and from school and soccer practice and piano lessons, worked a full-time job, cleaned the house, made dinners and lunches and breakfasts until you can't see straight.

You've got anxiety about what's not happening in your life OR you're anxious about what IS happening in your life. And because you are, you have no energy left by the time Sunday morning rolls around. You want to be attentive to God. Your heart is right there but you're just mentally or emotionally

exhausted. Anybody know what that's like?

That's Eutychus, sitting in the window in that hot, stuffy, crowded meeting room. And as the pastor talked on and on, Eutychus just closed his eyes for a second and fell out the third floor window.

I've had people fall asleep during my sermons. I've had people pass out while I was preaching. I remember a senior woman in Berkeley who passed out towards the end of my sermon and during the closing hymn a group of doctors in our church surrounded her and brought her back to the land of the living. As soon as the service was over I went back to check on her. I was kind of embarrassed that my sermon might have contributed to her loss of consciousness. She assured me that it wasn't my sermon but the wool suit she was wearing and the temperature of the room. That was very kind of her to say.

I wonder what Paul was feeling after he talked on and on only to have one of his young disciples fall asleep during his sermon and then fall out of the window. Three floors is a long way to fall. I was on Maui with members of my family earlier this week and one of the things we did together was to go zip lining.

We zipped on four lines at Piiholo Ranch and it was a ton of fun. As I stood on top of the first platform ready to zip the first line, I peered over the edge and estimated that it was about three stories high. As I stood there, I thought about Eutychus. Three stories is a long way to fall if you're not connected to a zip line.

**E**utychus fell asleep in church and everyone noticed. Thankfully, “Lucky” survived the fall and his friends took him home. I’ve wondered what it was like for Eutychus to tell this story later in his life. It did have a happy ending. Did he learn to laugh about it? Did he sit around with his grandchildren and tell them about the day Pastor Paul came to town and he fell asleep in church? I think God has a lot of compassion for us. His grace understands our love of sleeping. His grace understands this and still he wants to shake us and wake us up.

There’s a lot more to sleeping in church than nodding off during the pastor’s sermon. Some of us may be physically wide-awake in church but are really spiritually asleep. That’s what I want us all to think about this week and the next few weeks. Our worship of God is supposed to wake us up to God and what God is doing in the world. My friend, Mark Labberton, who is now President of Fuller Seminary, says that worship is the dangerous act of waking up to God and to the purposes of God in the world. Worship is supposed to wake us up so we can live lives that actually show that you and I are awake to God and what God cares about.

Worship is not just what we do for an hour or so on Sundays, though it includes this time of corporate worship. Our worship is fundamentally about how we live our lives in response to what God has done and is doing for us. To worship God is to increasingly live lives that reflect that we are waking up to God and God’s heart for the world; that we are beginning to care about what God cares about. And we show that we are awaking up not only by what we say we believe but how we live our lives.

One of the most dramatic periods in the history of Israel came about because the Israelites failed to live out their worship of God. The people failed to enact what they said they believed. They went through the motions of worshiping God but failed to live lives that reflected that they were awake to God.

The Old Testament prophet Micah told the people of Israel what they needed to do to show that they were indeed waking up from their spiritual slumber. He said, *“What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”* (Micah 6:8)

Those words sum up what our lives are to look like when we are truly worshiping God. We are to seek justice for the oppressed, we are to love God’s grace and live as people who have received his mercy, and we are to walk in humility before God and others. When we live like that we demonstrate that we are in the process of waking up.

In Mark Labberton’s book, *“The Dangerous Act of Worship”*, he writes, “Jesus, if anything, was and is awake. That’s the shock for those who encounter Him in the Gospels. He came to make a world of those who are awake—awake to God, to each other and to the world. Waking up is the dangerous act of worship. It’s dangerous because worship is meant to produce lives fully attentive to reality as God sees it, and that’s more than most of us want to deal with.”

Many of us are asleep to God’s heart for a world that is filled with injustice. We are asleep to God’s heart for the poor, the oppressed, the suffering because, to be honest, we can’t

get passed our own concerns. I’ll be the first to admit that I do a fair amount of sleepwalking through my Christian life. I can easily be consumed with my own personal vision for my life, with my private pursuits. It’s easy to conclude that I just don’t have the bandwidth to pay attention to anything that’s going on outside what is personal, close by and demanding my attention. It’s pretty easy to live a contented life inside a protective bubble defined by my own concerns, dreams and wants.

But here’s the problem. If I am really waking up to the gospel of Jesus Christ, if I’m really beginning to know God and his heart, then I have to ask myself whether the way I’m living my life reflects that I’m awake to God and his priorities. The gospel of Jesus Christ is an invitation to wake up and join others who are waking up to who God is and what he’s doing in the world around me.

When we do begin to wake up and start to look around, what we see are millions and millions of people who are living truly desperate lives. One-sixth of the world’s population lives in absolute poverty. People are malnourished. People do not have a reliable access to clean water. Over one million children every year are sold or forced into sex trafficking. Countless millions don’t know that there is a Savior who loves them and has given His own life that they might have life.

These are real people, with names and families and hopes and abilities as great as any of ours. These are people who have the same dignity that we have. They, like us, are created in God’s image. And they live in poverty.

**T**hey suffer with curable diseases or are under the oppressive control of others...and they live that way, every single day.

Listen, once again to Mark Labberton, "Some Christians and some congregations seem to have selective wakefulness. After all, we are weary, overwhelmed, insecure, internally longing for hope of our own (never mind the need for hope in the world). We don't see much beyond the edges of our own bed, whether it is culture, economics, race, denomination or class. We know and like our bed. We have made it. We are not inclined to leave it. We are entitled to it after all, since we see it as God's blessing.

"Meanwhile, those without a bed—and without a home, food, safety, water, warmth or knowledge of the Savior's love—are not seen or remembered or reached. In light of the stark reality of lost and dying humanity, forced prostitution, bonded slavery, malarial epidemics, HIV/AIDS and human life stripped of its dignity around the globe, where is the evidence that through worship our lives have actually been redefined and realigned with God's heart for justice in the world?"

So, are we sleeping in church? Are you feeling a little irritated right now that someone is trying to wake you up? Will you reach for the snooze bar once this sermon is over and head back to a land of spiritual slumber? Or will you join with those who are on a journey to wakefulness?

That journey begins when you and I can admit that we just might be spiritually asleep. We may look like we are living a vital Christian life, but in reality we are not really awake to God and God's heart for the world.

On Easter Sunday, Jesus Christ rose from the dead because it was impossible for Him to remain in the grips of death. Because He was the most fully awake person who has ever lived, He awoke from death. Because Jesus Christ was fully awake to God, because He was awake to His own relationship with God the Father and because He was awake to others—death, the ultimate sleep, could not hold Him.

He died for all of us who sleep in church and who are asleep in the marketplace, in our businesses, in our relationships, in our interactions with our communities and with the world. He died to wake us up.

Studying the Book of Acts is the spiritual equivalent of smelling salts. As we wrap up our study of this book over the next month and a half, we're going to see what it looks like to be awake to God and what God is doing in the world. We're also going to see what it looks like when powerful people want to silence those who critique the prevailing way of doing things.

After Eutychus was taken home, Paul and his friends had a midnight snack and Paul kept teaching until dawn. I love that guy. The Apostle Paul was focused. No one else probably fell asleep in church that night. In verse 13, Luke tells us that in the morning:

**Acts 20:13** *We went ahead to the ship and set sail for Assos, intending to take Paul on board there; for he had made this arrangement, intending to go by land himself. 14 - When he met us in Assos, we took him on board and went to Mitylene. 15 - We sailed from there, and on the*

*following day we arrived opposite Chios. The next day we touched at Samos, and the day after that we came to Miletus. 16 - For Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus, so that he might not have to spend time in Asia; he was eager to be in Jerusalem, if possible, on the day of Pentecost.*

The Apostle Paul himself began to wake up from his religiously induced slumber when he met Jesus Christ. He lived the life of a man who was waking up to the reality of God's presence in his own life and in the world. Get ready for Paul's wide-awake and really wild trip to Jerusalem and then his incredible journey all the way to Rome.

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*Note: The Rev. Dr. Tim Shaw is an associate pastor at First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu. Sunday sermon texts are also available at [fpchawaii.org](http://fpchawaii.org). The audio version can be downloaded from iTunes or [fpc.posterous.com](http://fpc.posterous.com). It can also be sent to you by e-mail. Request the free audio version: [fpchkoolau@gmail.com](mailto:fpchkoolau@gmail.com)*