Acts: On Falling Asleep in Church
Acts 20:1-16

As we resume our journey through Acts, Paul is about to depart from Ephesus after 3 years of very successful ministry. Let’s pick up the story as we read Acts 20:1-16.

I’m sure some of you are wondering, “Now what’s Jim going to do with this story?” I want you to know that I have been wondering the same thing all week long! As you can see, most of this thought unit is a classic example of a travelogue. Beginning with vs. 1-6, Luke simply reports where Paul went, how long he stayed, and who traveled with him.

After the uproar ceased, Paul sent for the disciples, and after encouraging them, he said farewell and departed for Macedonia. When he had gone through those regions and had given them much encouragement, he came to Greece. There he spent three months, and when a plot was made against him by the Jews as he was about to set sail for Syria, he decided to return through Macedonia.

The only drama in those six verse comes from a passing comment that there was a plot formed against Paul by the Grecian Jews when he was about to get on a boat to Syria, but Luke doesn’t even unpack that for us. He simply records that Paul caught wind of the plot, so he chose to back track up through Macedonia in order to avoid those who were trying to kill him.

Now…what’s the point? Here’s the point. Countless college professors, bloggers, authors, and Hollywood personalities love to say that the Bible is nothing more than “myth and legend.” Our text this morning challenges that theory. Cleary, the almost routine reportage that we find here in the first six verses sounds nothing like myth or legend. In fact, these verses are a bit boring…right? Listen, writers of ancient myth and legends did not include boring travelogues. Mythical journeys always featured exciting adventures and imaginative sea creatures or great battles. However, here in Acts 20, we see none of that. Instead, we hear about actual times, places and people. Luke doesn’t tell us which cities Paul visits in Macedonia and Greece because he assumes we already know those details from what has taken place previously in Acts (show map: https://www.google.com/url?sa=i&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=images&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0ahUKEwigm9vV69_YAhVJEawKKhdp_AF8QiRwIBw&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.biblestudy.org%2Fmaps%2Fapostle-paul-third-missionary-journey-map.html&psig=AOvVaw1s-udYURnVRhewwlttqtC&ust=1516307460023766): Clearly Paul is going to visit the churches in Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea; he’s going to sail down to Athens and Corinth and check on the believers in those cities. And then he intends to catch a ship over here to Syria.
However, when Paul catches wind of the plot to kill him on the ship to Syria, he decides to hike back through Macedonia, and he takes along seven of his friends as travelling companions and bodyguards. These seven men are specifically named, and we know what cities they hail from: Sopater the Berean, son of Pyrrhus (from Berea); Aristarchus and Secundus from Thessalonica; Gaius from Derbe; Timothy from Lystra; along with the Asian disciples—Tychicus and Trophimus. If you were to read ancient myths and legends, you would observe that specific names and places of birth are rarely if ever provided, but we have seen such specific reportage all throughout Acts.

In vss. 5-6 Luke records that most of the travelling companions catch a boat from Philippi to Troas, but Paul and Luke stay behind to observe the Festival of Unleavened Bread...then they sail to Troas and meet up with the others, where Luke reports that they stayed for seven days. Again...boring travelogue. Detailed? Yes. Specific times, names and places? Yes. Exciting, dramatic, or in any way mythical? No...it’s entirely too boring to be mythical...which means it’s reasonable to assume all of these details are true. Listen friends: there is a reason why millions of very intelligent, well-read people throughout history have accepted the Bible to be historically accurate...it’s because of boring passages like this one in Acts...Acts fits no other genre than historical reportage.

Now, what comes next is also the kind of story that you would likely never dream up, and it’s so funny/tragic/awkward that it shouts “truth” rather than myth or legend.

Beginning with vs. 7 we read, “On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul talked with them, intending to depart on the next day, and he prolonged his speech until midnight. There were many lamps in the upper room where we were gathered. And a young man named Eutychus, sitting at the window, sank into a deep sleep as Paul talked still longer…”

Let’s stop there for a moment. The reference to this house in Troas comes up again later in one of Paul’s letters. Paul will later write Timothy (2 Timothy 4:13), likely from his imprisonment in Rome, asking him to drop by the house of Carpus in Troas to pick up the old robe he had left there by accident. So in all likelihood, this story in Acts 20 takes place in the spacious home of Carpus from Troas. Notice also that the ancient Christians gathered in a home to break bread on the first day of the week. Why? Because it was the first day of the week that the tomb was discovered to be empty...this is how we came to have church on Sundays...from the very earliest practices of the ancient church as recorded here in Acts 20. Now, what we don’t know is whether Luke is using the Jewish concept of days or the Roman concept of days. Remember that the Jewish day began at sunset and concluded at sunset 24 hours later. So, in the Jewish mindset, the first day of the week began at about 6 p.m. on what we would call Saturday night. The
Roman concept of a day went from sunrise to sunrise, so it would be more like what we are accustomed to with the first day of the week beginning early on Sunday morning.

I think this story makes the most sense when we assume that Luke is referring to days in the Jewish perspective. That would mean that they gather at the Carpus residence for dinner, worship, and fellowship at about 6 p.m. That logic would explain why Paul’s talk goes on till midnight, following a large dinner and a great time of worship.

Now, remember that Paul was the “spiritual father” to all of these men and all of the churches in the region, and he’s about to leave on his long-anticipated trip to Jerusalem. As such, we can probably assume that many people came from a great distance to share this meal and be taught by the great apostle Paul. This was a huge occasion, and now that the disciples have Paul for these last few precious hours, they don’t want the night to end. And of course, Paul is happy to accommodate them, because Paul is a preacher, and that’s what preachers do! There is always much to teach, much to share, stories to be told, people to be encouraged, and so Paul keeps going, and going, and going. I hope you picked up on the good natured ribbing that Luke is giving Paul here. First Luke writes in vs. 7 “Paul talked with them”, and then “Paul prolonged his speech till midnight” and then two verses later states, “And Paul talked still longer…” And then a few verses later Luke writes, “he conversed with them a long while.”

Are you picking up on the theme here? Luke is totally giving Paul a hard time about the fact that he just kept talking all night long! You know, there is actually a great hymn of the church that comes from this scripture. I thought we could pause here for a moment and sing that together! (play recording of “You Talk Too Much” starting at :13 to :30---https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2GOYYbiEul0).

Now, I know I’m asking for some serious ridicule following this message, but that’s OK! We have to laugh at ourselves sometimes, and I think this story is included here as a moment of comic relief that still brings glory to God!

However, the story goes from funny to tragic in a hurry…as life often does. Let’s pick up the story in vs. 8, “There were many lamps in the upper room where we were gathered. And a young man named Eutychus, sitting at the window, sank into a deep sleep as Paul talked still longer. And being overcome by sleep, he fell down from the third story and was taken up dead.”

The term Luke employs for “young man” suggests the boy was likely between the ages of 8-14, so he may well have been the son of Carpus, the homeowner. Luke also reports that there were many torches lit for light in that room, so we are left to conclude that it got very warm in the room. We already know that everyone had a full belly…and Luke has made it perfectly clear that Paul’s sermon ran long…really long. So all of those factors contribute to a tragic accident when
poor Eutychus literally falls asleep and then falls headlong, three stories down, and is found dead.

I know this seems weird to say, but I cannot tell you how many times I have been part of a great spiritual moment when all of a sudden something tragic or disturbing interrupts what was being said. This story rings true in my experience, and it can be incredibly disheartening. However, on this occasion, God has other plans. Let’s pick up the story in vs. 10, “But Paul went down and bent over him, and taking him in his arms, said, ‘Do not be alarmed, for his life is in him.’ And when Paul had gone up and had broken bread and eaten, he conversed with them a long while, until daybreak, and so departed. And they took the youth away alive, and were not a little comforted.”

Now…I know what you’re thinking. Many of you are thinking that the boy didn’t actually die. You’re thinking that the people assumed he was dead when he was actually still alive. Hey…let’s face it. If your kid falls out of a third story window, he’s likely not going to survive that fall, right? The ancients knew how to determine if a person was dead or not, and Luke was particularly proficient at recognizing dead people given that he was a physician. But Dr. Luke specifically writes, “He was taken up dead.” So the boy was dead when they found him on the ground, but then Paul races down and “bends over him” and “takes him in his arms.”

If you are familiar with the story of Elijah raising the widow’s son in 1 Kings 17, you might recognize this language. In Elijah’s case, he stretched himself upon the child three times and cried out to the Lord to heal the boy. Then we read in 1 Kings 17:22-24, And the LORD listened to the voice of Elijah. And the life of the child came into him again, and he revived. And Elijah took the child and brought him down from the upper chamber into the house and delivered him to his mother. And Elijah said, “See, your son lives.” And the woman said to Elijah, “Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the LORD in your mouth is truth.”

I suspect, in some way, Luke includes this almost embarrassing story in Acts 20 because it serves the same purpose as the healing story by Elijah in 1 Kings 17. The authority of Paul’s teaching is validated through the powerful signs and wonders that God performs through Paul, including the revival of one who had been pronounced dead. Jesus revived several people from the dead in his earthly ministry as a sign of His authority as the Son of God. We see once again here in Acts 20 that the authority and power of Jesus is working through His followers. Notice: Luke doesn’t give a moral lesson or expound upon this event in the least. On the contrary, once the boy is pronounced as “alive,” Luke reports that Paul goes back upstairs, has a bite to eat, and continues teaching for several more hours. Nothing about that story or the way it is told sounds one stitch like ancient myth or legend. Luke simply reports what happened.
Luke concludes this thought unit with more boring travelogue. We read in vss. 13-16: But going ahead to the ship, we set sail for Assos, intending to take Paul aboard there, for so he had arranged, intending himself to go by land. And when he met us at Assos, we took him on board and went to Mitylene. And sailing from there we came the following day opposite Chios; the next day we touched at Samos; and the day after that we went to Miletus. (show map).

As you can see from the map here, the journey Paul takes is from Troas to Assos, from Assos to Mitylene, then to Chios, a brief stop at Samos and then on to Miletus. All of these cities were real cities, and there is nothing here that would lead us to believe this journey did not happen exactly as Luke reports it here in Acts 20.

So…what can we take away from Acts 20:1-16?

First, let us be confident that when we are reading the New Testament, and particularly the book of Acts, we are reading some of the finest, most reliable historical reportage in all of ancient literature. There is not one historical claim or geographic reference made by Luke in the book of Acts that has been challenged or disproven throughout history. In fact, every excavation and every artifact, every discovery made by science regarding the ancient world confirms what we have read here in Acts 20 regarding the cities, ports, and travel patterns of the ancients in Macedonia, Greece, and Asia. Those who insist that the Bible is myth and legend have either not read the Bible, or they have not read ancient myths and legends. Should you read both, you would be forced to conclude that the New Testament in no way fits the genre of ancient myth and legend.

My second point is this: don’t sit in window sills.

Third, many of us who have unrestricted access to the scriptures have lost our appreciation for the Word of God. We ought to remember that in many places around the world, hearing the Word of God taught and expounded upon continues to be a rare privilege…a privilege for which many are willing to endure great hardships to enjoy.

When I place myself in that hot, stuffy upper room in Acts 20 filled with eager listeners, I can imagine myself a few weeks from now in a cramped room in India where we will be teaching and equipping over 100 barefoot church planters in Odisha. Believe it or not, the setting is very similar there. These church planters will be on buses all night long to attend the two-day training conference that we will be hosting. Many of them will be attending that first day having had little to no sleep, very little food, with their whole family in tow. They will enter into the room with joy, anticipation, and an eagerness to be taught the Word of God. We who are the teachers will have travelled many, many miles to be with them. We will be coming to teach them at the risk of being discovered and potentially arrested. We will be coming to teach them out of love and a
determination to see the gospel spread to every corner of the earth. We will start teaching about 9 a.m. in the morning, and we will teach ALL DAY and well into the evening. There will be well over 200 church planters, women’s workers and youth workers present at each one of our conferences; it will absolutely get hot and sweaty, and yet they will sit patiently to hear us teach for 8-10 hours each day. Now I know that sounds like torture for most of you, but for these men, women, and children, it’s like a 13 course meal! They literally cannot get enough of God’s Word. They are being taught so that they can teach. They are being fed so that they can go back to their villages and feed others the Bread of Life. Church, do you know that everything we just read about in Acts 20 is still very much going on to this day? This isn’t just history…it’s now.

Listen, if you struggle with being bored in church…if you find it hard to be excited about worship and the preaching of God’s Word, I need to ask you this: have you ever been spiritually awakened? Do you know what it is to be pierced by the Word of God that is sharper than a two-edged sword? Have you heard God speak directly into your heart, into your pain, into your sin, into your shame, through the WORD that he revealed in scripture? Has the light of God’s Truth every revealed your darkness? Has the grace of God’s Word ever healed your wounded soul? If you know what I’m talking about, then I doubt you struggle to stay awake in worship, because you NEED to feast upon the Word of God…you NEED to worship our Savior…you NEED to be in the company of believers…you understand Psalm 42 “As a deer pants for water, LORD, so my soul longs for you.”

Some of us are falling asleep in our faith because we have been going through the motions of being religious our whole lives, but we have never been spiritually awakened. Some of us are falling asleep in our faith because we have been lulled into apathy through the lies of our culture and our own rationalizations. Some of us are falling asleep in church because…we stayed up too late last night!

Whatever the case, Awaken church! The GOSPEL is not a game, it is not a ritual, it is not a formality, it is not a nice tradition to observe or a beneficial moral tool for raising our kids. Paul writes in Romans 1:16, “I am not ashamed of the Gospel, for it is the power of God unto salvation for all who believe!” It is the power of God…unto salvation…for all who believe. It is life or death, it is the key to our eternity, it is our hope for forgiveness, it is the source of our identity, it is the mandate from our King. If you are in doubt…if you are spiritually bored…ask God to awaken your spirit! Ask God to speak to you and then read the Bible to hear what He says! Ask God to show you your sin. Ask God to show you Jesus Christ on a cross, dying in your place so that you might be forgiven and redeemed. Ask God what He wants to accomplish with your life and take one step in obedience to whatever He tells you. Risk stepping out of your comfort zone and go on a short term mission trip. Set aside your agenda and volunteer to help kids learn how to read so that you can equip another person to encounter the Word of God. Practice the rhythms of BLESS in your neighborhood, your school, or your workplace by
praying, listening, inviting people into your home, serving others and sharing the Gospel with them. Listen: Jesus did not die on a cross for us to sleep in church. Wake up believers…our time is short, and people need the Lord. Let’s pray,