

If you were hoping to hear the flowery version of how the Asbury Revival was “oh so magical, and enchanting and simply the most exquisite experience” I’m afraid you asked the wrong girl to speak today.

My mother taught me to tell the truth, and the whole truth at that, so now may God help me to relay the experience as accurately as possible.

For those of you who don’t know, my name is Ava Klein, and I am a sophomore at a tiny school called Asbury University, located in the small town of Wilmore Kentucky, just outside of Lexington.

And for those who haven’t heard, Asbury recently experienced a “Revival”. A never-ending worship that lasted for 12 days. I’ve been asked to recount my personal testimony to this event.

I chose this school for its equine program, where I now pursue my passion for horses every day. Asbury was also a Christian school, the location was amazing, out of state but not too far from home, A small student-to-faculty ratio, with only about 1,600 students, and professors who invite you over for dinner. Not to mention the fact that the town contains two traffic lights, a subway, a dollar store, and a Chinese restaurant. To get to anything else, the Walmart, target, or mall it’s a fifteen-minute drive through horse and cattle farms. It was perfect!

At my school, which is Methodist based but open to all denominations, we have chapel three times a week, at 10 am on Monday Wednesday, and Friday. They are required, but only a certain amount for the semester, we get something called FLEX points for every chapel, bible study, or extra worship event we attend, and we have to earn about 32 in order to “pass.” Our chapel building, like all our buildings, is named after someone important by the name of Hughes. Who he was, no clue, but often we refer to our chapel space simply as Hughes.

And truthfully, chapel can be quite annoying. During the first several weeks as a freshman, I was so happy to get to worship throughout the week, but as the months wore on, and to this day, fatigue has set in. Worship is rather simplistic, we sing a couple of songs, either with the band or hymns accompanied by piano, and then sit for a guest speaker, who believes they are at one of those mass conversion events. I always pity them, up there on the stage giving their all, preaching like they are speaking to new

converts when most of Asbury's student body has been faithful to God since we were children.

Safe to say, it's easy for us to check out, especially when the speakers say they are "so humbled to be here today" which we've learned roughly translates to "please buy my new book."

I wish I could say that Wednesday was any different. But truthfully, for me, it wasn't. Not at first.

On February 8th, 2023 chapel began as normal. The band was good, and the speaker took the stage to begin his message. He was a returning speaker, a fan favorite by the name of Zach Meerkeeps. He was a young man, coached our soccer team, and was a relatable, compassionate, God-fearing man.

I wish I could tell you his words enchanted me and I became so enrapt in his message. For others, this was true. If I had been paying attention I might have experienced that too.

But I was so tired.

Long hours at the barn, classes, homework. My brain was drifting in and out of focus, and hearing how much Jesus loves me for the fifteenth time that month didn't seem to take priority of my cerebral cortex.

So chapel ended, and I shuffled out to lunch with most of the student body, to go about our day.

But some students, stayed, and kept worshipping.

This was nothing new, sometimes people stayed a couple of minutes later, and sang one more song before moving on.

But as the hours went on, the texts and the Instagram posts began.

"You need to get to Hughes!"

"Something amazing is happening , in Hughes!"

"If you're not in Hughes what are you doing?"

I'm going to class. I have to work closing the barn tonight. What are you doing? Must be nice for the rest of you to hang up your responsibilities, but I'm here on a merit-based scholarship.

Me and my friend Hannah set to our job of closing up the equine center, which takes about an hour of tidying up, locking, and turning off the lights. The whole time, our phones are blowing up, and so was our patience.

Sorry, we can't attend your fun little party, we have work.

So we went back to campus, and went to the Bistro, our campus Panera-like alternative to the cafe, that stayed open late.

A handful of my equine friends were there, and me and Hannah joined them.

And so began to discussion. Half were for it, saying it was a "revival." Now we'd had "revivals" before, pre-mediated organized worship events. This certainly wasn't that.

The other half, myself included, were delicately criticizing it saying to be wary of "religious furver."

Despite the fact that I was tired, and smelled like a horse, I was persuaded to go, at least for a little while, just to see what was going on. I walked towards Hughes with a sour expression, annoyed that I'd been talked into this. I was tired, sore, and all around just about done with preachy Jesus talk.

And then I walked in the door.

I can't seem to find the words for the peace that settled over me, as it wasn't peace. It was elation, it was joy. You could feel the energy of the people who'd been filling up this space with praise for God. My soreness, my tiredness, and every bitter thought I had were replaced with a wide beaming smile.

Worship at Asbury was always "non-denominational", but frankly I think the term "non-denominational" has become a denomination in itself, ironically enough.

But this was truly, completely, not of any denomination. There was a crowd of about fifteen on the stage half with guitars, some with drum boxes, or other instruments, while the other half held up phones with lyrics and chords.

And all around the space, people sang. Some sat and prayed, others lifted their hands up, and some just rocked. But it was the first time I truly felt no expectation on how to worship.

I am one of approximately five Lutherans at Asbury. I have met one of the others, but as I jokingly say to my friends all the time, "everyone put your hands up!" means this.

But for when worship gets really loud and passionate, I've been to camp Timber-Lee, I know what to do! Throw your hands up in the air, be loud and expressive like you're at a rock concert, and don't be a stick in the mud!

This was different. My hands went up on their own accord, and I didn't get tired, or embarrassed. Never have I felt God's spirit so strongly.

Asbury students were there, students from the University of Kentucky, and other nearby schools had come, all to worship together. It was the proof that we students needed, to show Christ was alive in us, as we've been deemed the laziest generation, glued to our phones. The only people with their phones out were the older adults, recording us to post on Facebook like a cute kitten video.

So this was the rhythm of revival, a lot of singing, and then a speaker would get up to either deliver a short message or lead a prayer. I'd only been in there a few minutes when Zach took the mic and told us to go to the walls, place our hands on the walls of Hughes, and we were going to pray for healing out in the world. So we all pressed against the walls, forming a complete perimeter, and I was squished with my friends as we prayed for healing, for political peace, for environmental relief, and for churches across the world. It was beautiful. No fear of covid, or touching a stranger.

And then we went back to our spots, and Zach led the next part of the prayer. Staff and other leaders stood in front of the stage at the altar, and Zach told us that if we wanted to come forward for prayer for healing for ourselves, we could.

I broke down, and began to sob, tightly holding myself in an attempt to hold myself up.

You see when I was about thirteen I had a mild riding accident. I wasn't hurt, not really, other than my knee, which I continued to have problems with ever since. Because of my knee issues, I would often have to resort to limping, when my knee or my hip would hitch and I'd have to hobble around. The limping resulted in my developing a minor curvature in my lower spine, which turned into scoliosis.

This had been my greatest pain, as my joints ached and cracked and debilitated me from a healthy teenager to an agonizing old crown. At least that's how it felt. There was no cure, only coping. And me being able to tell if it was going to rain by a twinge in my knee.

And I was crying then, not just because of the pain in my back, which was growing stronger since I had been standing for so long, but because of a conversation I had had about three weeks prior.

I was on the phone with my um “good friend” Luke Johnson. And I was crying to him because of the pain. Sitting, standing, laying, icy-hot, aspirin, nothing could bring me any relief other than when I eventually fell asleep.

And I was crying because my faith had backed me into a corner. We had always prayed for healing, through the doctors. So while I knew that God could do anything, I said to Luke “Even if I ran full force to the alter, and fell on my face, and sobbed and begged and pleaded for God to heal my spine, it wouldn’t work because I wouldn’t believe that he would.”

Do you see the trap I was in?

So there I am, given the perfect opportunity to prove myself wrong, and I was too scared.

How could I approach the alter, and whisper to a stranger the way my back was twisted, and the pain it caused me? How could I ask for healing, when so many others deserve it more than me? How could I face the disappointment when it wouldn’t work?

So I cried, I sobbed horribly, and had to sit down.

My dear friend, Adrianna was to my right, and she sat with me, put her arms around me, and just began to pray. She said, “Lord, I don’t know what Ava is going through, but she is so loved, and so kind, I just ask that you help her Lord, heal her of whatever she needs.”

Which of course only made me cry harder. I then prayed for her, and we both hugged each other tightly, sobbing and rocking in our seats.

We composed ourselves, smiled, wiped out our eyes, and stood up, ready to resume singing.

And I gasped. My eyes bugged out of my head, as my hand reached around behind me in disbelief.

I feel bad for whoever was behind me, as I felt down my spine over my sweater then my shirt, until finally I practically pulled it up to press my fingers down my vertebrae because I refused to believe it.

My spine was straight. For the first time since I was fifteen.

I, of course, began to shout, my jaw to the floor, I told Adrianna and we both started crying again, as she has many times had to watch me hobble about and wince as I picked things up.

My amazement only continued as we proceeded to praise, and I could feel my muscles, and my other bones pull and shape back, reverting to their correct position. When I put my backpack back on, I had to adjust the straps so that it sat on my shoulders correctly.

I called my parents, I called Luke, and I rejoiced.

I went back to my room in total disbelief.

Worship continued through the night.

Thursday came, marking the 24 hours. I went about my day, enjoying my rejuvenated body, and then my afternoon class was canceled, and we were told, go to revival.

So I got to sit in Hughes, with the afternoon sun coming through the stained glass windows, and enjoy peaceful worship with some of my friends I don't get to spend time with often.

People from the community began to trickle in, alumni and travelers from out of state. After so long of feeling like Christianity was a dying religion, the evidence could not be more contrary. God was alive and well.

I wish I could say it ended there, that my skepticism was evaporated, and all was well.

But then Friday morning I walked out of my room to go to class, and there was a man and his teenage son, standing in my hall, on facetime with the boy's mother, who use to live in my dormitory.

That's great, I live here now, get out.

And it only got worse from there.

Suddenly, there were crowds, and lines of people waiting to get into Hughes. Rain or shine they stood. Every hotel, motel, and air BnB within a forty-minute radius was booked. The dollar store was empty. Subway ran out of bread.

The state fire marshal had to enforce putting up a barricade, only allowing so many in Hughes, because the 80-year-old balcony was begging to sway under the weight of all the people.

So now our lawn was decorated with food trucks, porter potties, and a massive Led screen broadcasting live feed from within Hughes to the people waiting outside. There was no room for the students. Almost overnight, Asbury had become a tourist attraction. We were deemed “Woodstock for Christians”

My fear grew immeasurably. To some of my quite small-town private school friends, this was the most wondrous thing! So many people here to worship God.

My brain was trained differently, having lived so close to Chicago. My brain went “HERE IS A BUNCH OF CHRISTIANS, IN ONE ROOM, WITH NO SECURITY, JUST IN CASE YOU DON’T LIKE THAT SORT OF THING!” I avoided Hughes, in fear.

Quickly the faculty had to move protective measures in place. Limiting how many people could be in Hughes at a time, no bags allowed in, officers at every door and undercover officers inside. They reserved a section just for students, and we could only get in through the back door where we could show our ID. My first experience of trying to get into a club. The Jesus club.

Classes were canceled, events postponed, or just done away with all altogether.

Some guests were lovely, talking with us, and praying over us.

Some were awful, thinking we owed them something and invading our space like we were zoo animals to be observed.

The parking lots and streets overflowed.

And the division among the students was agonizing. Half were happy for all the people coming to find God, the other half were in a panicked state yelling “Leave, please, just leave”

I was somewhere in the middle, but I was angry. What had been ours, and good, and pure was now taken from us, and tearing us apart.

People were ruining it. And how was I supposed to be happy? When I see my friend who forced herself to stay in Hughes all night, utterly exhausted, when I see people scared and angry, when I have to hurry to the cafe so they don’t run out of food, when my university is getting slammed on Social Media?

The final straw for me came one week and three days after Revival began, it was a Saturday. The biggest day of the revival, when the tiny town of Wilmore went from a population of 6,000, including the students, to a whopping 20,000 pilgrims.

I'd been at the barn all morning, and now I had to bring my friend Samantha back to campus, drop her off, then drive out of town to fill up on Gas, and get some McDonalds for lunch for me and my friend Olivia.

And I was going to get, a Shamrock shake. Cause by God, I'd earned it.

So I drive back to campus, and the traffic on the main street has come to a near standstill. This had been normal all week. The tiny two-lane road was packed, and people darted across the road from the university to the seminary as if the cars would just magically see them and stop.

So I took a 'back road' trying to find a safe space to drop off Sam and get out of town. Not to mention one of the main roads had been blocked off entirely.

And as I'm going down this road through campus, they're are no shoulders. If you ever go down to Kentucky, be aware there is no shoulder to the road. I know what you're saying "Ava that's absurd what do you mean?" I mean the roads are narrow, the pavement ends, and there is farmer Jed's 500-year-old stone fence.

So there I am, inching my way down this road, and the line has gotten so long, it is now wrapping around campus. So there are all these people, standing there, not on the grass but on the side of the road. The side of the road that has no side of the road.

And they. Aren't. MOVING. They were totally oblivious, not noticing my Ford inching up beside them.

So I just do a little *eee eee* on my horn, just to get their attention so hopefully, they'll scooch a little to the side and let me by.

And guess what they did?

So after fifteen minutes of winding my way through crowds and pushy drivers, narrowly abiding a full-on panic attack I finally drop off Sam and make it out of town.

I instantly feel so much better, much less claustrophobic. I fill up on Gas, go get my lunch. And as I'm filling up the sodas, they put my shamrock shake in its little drink holder on the counter.

I am so excited, this is everything I've ever wanted, I can not wait to drink that minty goodness and forget my worries.

I grab the drink tray, it over balances, and falls to the floor.

That was it.



I break into tears, and the poor other patrons and staff of this McDonald's were left to watch this crying girl in dirty jeans attempt to wipe up her wasted dreams with those cheap brown napkins.

A worker boy about my age was trying to get me to stop, saying "It's ok miss, I'll get it." But I couldn't hear him over my own despair.

Because how do I explain that I am not crying over a spilled milkshake, but over the overwhelming fear of the invasion on my campus?

All I could say was "I'm so sorry, I'm from Asbury..."

This poor boy looks at me and goes. "I'm so sorry miss."

So I returned to Wilmore, and parked at my friend Abianna's house, she was a commuter and we have weekly Sunday dinners cooked by her parents. She drives me back to my dorm.

Where I wanted to crawl into a ball, and never come out.

Sunday I stayed in my room, other than for dinner at Abianna's and to pick up my car, where I felt betrayed somehow. Praying the people would all just go away, and this could be over.

When you read stories from the bible, you always wonder, how could the disciples be so foolish. In Mathew, chapter 14 when Jesus feeds the 5000, the disciples ask Jesus, "do you want us to send them away? There's too many of them and we have no food."

"So feed them," Jesus replies.

Reading that story I always thought the disciples were ridiculous for doubting him. Of course, Jesus would provide, this was all in his plan. Silly geese.

So there I was, angry, bitter, tired, overwhelmed and I am asking God, why? Why us? Why me? Why now? Everyone says this is such an amazing thing and I should feel blessed, but I am scared, and I don't want them here, I want to go back to quite little Wilmore, which isn't being scrutinized and ravaged, and over-run. These people are all leeches, coming to feed on our sanctuary, they do not care for God, they only care for the hype, they are starving wolves!

John 21 verse 17

"Feed my sheep."

And then, I got it. I was Peter. I had been given the most amazing healing, not just in body but in mind and spirit. I had heard and seen so many miracles, and wonderful stories, and still I doubted. I instantly felt guilty for rejecting the crowds. I still wish I had done more to know them, to help them, to welcome them.

That Monday was the last day of revival, they shut it down after that.

Asbury was ridiculed, saying they were attempting to “stop God, control the spirit” We couldn’t have if we’d tried.

Revival was over, we were exhausted. And we gave the voyagers one final message “Go and Do likewise.” Some listened, and many didn’t. Though it wasn’t about the numbers the final estimated total of guests over the Revival? 50,000.

The chairs and tents and food trucks and porter potties stood on the lawn, abandoned. And though you felt a sigh of relief over campus, there was a sadness too, as it was over. And we as the students and staff all had the same thought:

What the HECK just happened?

The whiplash was severe. Everything went back to normal so quickly, it was almost as if Revival had never happened at all. It’s taken us a while to process what happened, we still haven’t fully.

There are only a few things I know for sure:

1. My spine is straight. By my faith, or Adrianna’s I do not know, but by the grace of God, I am young again. God is amongst us.
2. My generation does care. We are passionate, strong, and united under our love for God. Do not for one-second fear for us, for we are soldiers in the army of the Lord.
3. The Holy Spirit is alive and well, not just in Hughes, but in America, and in the world. The enemy wants you to believe you are alone, that Christianity is a dying fad, and that there is no hope. There is, I promise you. I wish I could give you all the feeling of being in that space when thousands sang praises loudly. But when I sat there and closed my eyes, I got a foretaste of what heaven will sound like. The cheering of another soul joining the family of God.
4. What happened at Asbury has changed my life, and hundreds of others’ lives forever. And it is not a one-time thing. Be bold in your faith, and in

your compassion. Think not of yourself, and who you'd like God to be, think of your neighbor, and who God sent his son to die for.

If anyone has any questions or would like to talk, I would be more than happy to chat with you after service, but I leave you with this. The house of God is always open for entry, and as Christians, our homes, and our lives, should reflect that. Open and generous. I hope to be that kind of person, showing hospitality both in my home and in my soul.

Just please, maybe stay out of my dorm. Thank you.