



## Broad Street Presbyterian Church

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### “Stay Awake”

Matthew 26:36-46

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On this final Sunday of the sermon series focusing on favorite Biblical stories, Rosie Tolliver offered this introduction to the scripture reading:

The story I keep coming back to is in the garden of Gethsemane, when Jesus asks his disciples to watch with him and they fall asleep. It's not really a favorite; in fact, every time I encounter it, this story evokes lots of guilt about times when I have, either literally or figuratively, fallen asleep and let down someone I love. It's simply a story that sticks with me.

In the garden of Gethsemane Jesus says to his disciples, “Remain here and stay awake with me.” That sounds easy enough, but it turns out to be hard, really hard. Peter, James, and John remain, but they cannot stay awake. They fall asleep. They let down someone they love.

A good friend from college days asked me to officiate at her wedding in another state. I met her fiancé face-to-face for the first time at the rehearsal. He was handsome and well-mannered. After dinner I watched them interact. I felt uncomfortable when I saw some red flags, some power issues, after he'd been drinking. Do you speak up the night before a wedding after you've met someone for the first time? I didn't speak up. The wedding day dawned and all went as planned. The next day they headed out for their honeymoon and I flew back to Ohio. Life got busy and I didn't reach out. I got distracted. I fell asleep. I didn't hear from her again for another year, and when I did, she'd left him. Our lives get busy and we forget. We let down someone we love. We fall asleep.

The disciples fall asleep physically. They need coffee or Red Bull or Mountain Dew. Drinking caffeinated liquids is just one way to keep our bodies awake. We can also exercise, eat a healthy snack, drink plenty of water, talk, assume good posture, even better yet, stand – it's pretty hard to fall asleep while standing. None of it works in the garden. Peter, James, and John drift off. They disappoint the one they love. They fall asleep.

We fall asleep. Literally. It happens, at work, at home, and in class. It happens during worship. And don't think Amy and I don't notice! Actually, we really don't, and neither do your neighbors, unless you snore.

The week in Jerusalem starts on Sunday with a Palm parade. Over the next few days Jesus spends hours in the Temple embraced by crowds. He teaches by telling parables, which upset religious leaders. Soon it's Thursday and he leaves the public to be alone with his disciples, to celebrate Passover as a family in a safe house. Ominous threats linger in the air, but inside the Upper Room the thirteen eat well and enjoy wine. Only Jesus notices when Judas quietly slips out. The others follow Jesus to Gethsemane, a garden filled with olive trees.

Sun sets in the garden. Disciples sit down, leaning against short, squat trees. “Sit here while I go over there and pray.” Jesus takes Peter, James, and John with him farther into the garden. His calm and control give way to agitation. “I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me.” He steps farther into the grove of trees.

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You're outside gardening and suddenly you notice that everything goes quiet. The air stills. Even birds stop singing. The quiet is eerie; peculiar. And then a few minutes later, the air changes and a line of ominous clouds appears on the horizon. You dash in the house and narrowly miss the first fat raindrops before a downpour.

The Garden of Gethsemane is Jesus' calm before the storm. His moment before the religious, political community lashes out in fury.

In the gospels, Jesus' primary emotion is unfailing compassion. In Gethsemane he bares his soul. He pours out his sorrow to God. We see pain beyond imagining, the most agonizing moment of his life. Jesus is sad, upset, shaken.

In history some martyrs go to their deaths speaking brave words, as if it is nothing to be burned at the stake or torn by wild dogs or executed by sword. Not Jesus. Inside him is an agony so strong, so all-consuming he feels he might die. He throws himself on the ground and pours out his sorrow. "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me." I wonder how much time goes by before he finishes his sentence, "Yet not what I want but what you want." He is going to die in a head-on collision with the high priest and Rome. Death by crucifixion is a drawn-out, unrelenting agony. Jesus is so real in these moments, so entirely, fully human.

It's only normal for us to pray for release from a dreadful future. The parents of a child with a brain tumor, who know death is coming. Men and women with a neurodegenerative disease, like Parkinson's or Alzheimer's. Of course they and their families pray for release.

Jesus returns to his friends and finds them sleeping. "So, could you not stay awake with me one hour? ... The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." Jesus names his friends' desire to do as he asks and their inability to do so. It's a prayer of confession, an acknowledgement that we disappoint people we love.

The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. We know that, both physically and spiritually. We want to stay awake. We want to stay tuned in to God's ways. We have good intentions to stay alert and play our part. But we let things slip, personally and communally. When we fall asleep in our national life we miss what needs to be seen and known. For instance, scientific evidence for the warming of the climate system is unequivocal and we ignore it. That's falling asleep. Gethsemane reveals the emptiness of our best intentions, the fragility of our promises.

The church is meant to be a community that stays awake with Jesus in Gethsemane. Together we try to resist the temptation to sleep. As a church we are called to stay awake and keep vigil in the storms of our time; during troubling social realities and the horrors of what is wrong in the world.

Life has a way of waking us up. This week 59 Tomahawk missiles woke us up; woke the world up out of our collective sleep, our avoidance of Syria's agonies. Life has a way of waking us up. Deep loss, deep love wakes us up. A family emergency wakes us up. Becoming a new parent can do it. So can failure.

Sometimes we have a hard time believing we can ask someone else to stay awake with us. No one faults a person who asks a friend for childcare so he or she can go to chemotherapy. But a lot of life isn't an emergency. It is just hard and full and fast. It is more manageable if shared.

We often think that others need companionship more than we do. After all, there are people out there without parents, people without food or soap, people without civil rights. Who are we to complain because our elderly relative needs to downsize or move or our child has the flu or we are in between jobs, or facing surgery? We,

too, need people to walk with us and stay with us amidst all that life sends our way. Sometimes we get stuck thinking only those who are desperate can ask for others to stay awake with them.

The truth is, if we wait for tragedy to strike before we ask for help, we are the ones who lose. Whether our life is in full blown crisis or not, the simple act of asking for others to remain, to stay awake with us creates a connection, and life with connection has vibrant colors.

Jesus asks for companionship. “Stay awake with me.” Sometimes staying with those we love in their struggles is the hardest thing of all. Watching them struggle hurts us. I think of spouses who offer care to one another. When the health of one fails, it takes determination and courage and patience to journey with that ill one, to stay beside him or her, to recalibrate one’s own pace to match a new pace. “Remain with me. Stay awake with me.”

Disciples want to stay awake but they can’t. Jesus pulls away to pray again, shifting his prayer slightly, realigning his longing with the inevitability of the cross. It’s a profound struggle, only steps away from three sleeping disciples. “My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.” Jesus does the unimaginable. He accepts the suffering to come. He shifts from asking God for deliverance from death to expressing trust and commitment. He carries the tension and the unfairness of it all without giving into despair or bitterness or the urge to hurt back. Jesus does not stop acting out of God’s love. He stays awake.

Earlier today the children presented a Living Museum: Scenes from Holy Week. Annabell, age 8, and Emilia, age 7, were disciples who try to stay awake with Jesus. But they fall asleep. They say:

Yes, Jesus, I will stay awake with you. Jesus, I am very tired. I am sorry for falling asleep. I tried to stay awake, Jesus. I’m so sorry.

Disciples fail Jesus. The amazing thing is that Jesus doesn’t fail them. He forgives them and embraces them and puts them to work in ways they never could have imagined.

Holy Week invites us to be honest. Honest about the disappointments we cause and also the disappointments we endure. Holy Week takes us into a storm. The good news is we know the end of the story. We don’t go into the downpour alone. We have each other, and we have the Risen One, good news from the other side of death. The Risen One, who stays awake with us. We hold on to hope as we enter Holy Week. We do our best to stay awake. Try to stay awake. Amen.