

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, July 11, 2010**

**ASLEEP IN THE GARDEN**

**Matthew 26:36-46**

**WHERE WERE YOU?**

There are certain moments in life, certain historical events, we will never forget. And we are sure we will never forget where we were when it happened, or where we were when we heard the news.

For example, I remember where I was when I first learned that President John F. Kennedy had been shot and killed in Dallas on November 22, 1963. I was sitting in Mrs. Carner's third-grade classroom at Rockland Elementary School in Pennsylvania.

A few years later, in July 1969, I remember watching on TV the first Apollo moon landing and Neil Armstrong's "one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind." I was 13 years old at the time.

I remember where I was when President Richard Nixon announced to the nation he was resigning the office of President of the United States in August 1974. I was working that summer as a bellman at the Athenaeum Hotel in Chautauqua, NY.

And, yes, I remember where I was on the morning of September 11, 2001, when I first heard the news that a plane had crashed into the World Trade Center in New York. The news would only get worse as the day wore on. From our old church office on Franconia Road, I'm sure I heard the sound of American Flight 77 crashing into the Pentagon.

Were you there? Some of you probably were there at the Pentagon that terrible day. Or perhaps you know someone who was injured or killed on 9/11, if not at the Pentagon, then at the World Trade Center or in the crash of United Flight 93 in Pennsylvania.

**PETER WAS THERE**

When you read through the Gospels in the New Testament, you discover that in so many of the defining moments in the ministry of Jesus, Peter was there, along with the other disciples. They were eyewitnesses of what Jesus did. They heard His voice with their own ears.

On one occasion after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, and after the Holy Spirit had been given to the church at Pentecost, Peter found himself speaking to a gathering of Gentiles (non-Jews) at the home of a man named Cornelius. He told them about how "Jesus arrived from Nazareth, anointed by God with the Holy Spirit, ready for action. He went through the country helping people and healing everyone who was beaten down by the devil. He was able to do this because God was with Him" (acts 10:38, *The Message*). Then Peter continued:

“And we saw it, saw it all, everything He did in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem where they killed Him (on) a cross” (10:39, *TM*). But that wasn’t all. Peter told his audience that God raised Jesus from the dead on the third day and caused Him to be seen by witnesses whom God had already chosen – by those who ate and drank with Him after His resurrection (10:40-41).

Peter was saying: *We were there. I was there. I saw it with my own eyes. I am an eyewitness to all these things.*”

Think about some of the things Peter witnessed:

When Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount, Peter was there.

When Jesus calmed the storm out on the Sea of Galilee, Peter was there.

When, in the midst of another storm, Jesus came out to His disciples in the middle of the night, walking on the water, Peter was there.

When Jesus miraculously fed the crowd of 5,000, Jesus was there.

When Jesus brought back to life the young daughter of Jairus, a leader in the synagogue, Peter was there.

When Jesus was transfigured and revealed His glory on the mountain, Peter was there.

When Jesus healed a blind beggar named Bartimaeus, Peter was there.

When Jesus raised His friend Lazarus from the dead, Peter was there.

When Jesus rode into Jerusalem to the “Hosannas” of the crowd on Palm Sunday, Peter was there.

When Jesus instituted the Lord’s Supper and washed the feet of His disciples in the upper room, Peter was there.

When Jesus was betrayed by Judas and handed over to the Jewish authorities, Peter was there. He tried to come to Jesus’ defense by brandishing a sword, which he used to cut off the ear of Malchus, the high priest’s servant.

I’m not sure exactly where Peter was when Jesus was crucified, but he knew what was going down. Though his courage had failed in the hour of testing, as we saw last Sunday, Peter was no doubt still watching from a distance as Jesus was nailed to the cross.

When Jesus rose from the dead on Easter morning, Peter didn’t see Him rise. No one did. But when Mary Magdalene came and told Peter and John that the tomb was empty, the two

disciples ran to the tomb as fast as they could to see for themselves. They found the tomb empty, except for the grave clothes which were lying there.

When Jesus appeared to His disciples alive after His resurrection, Peter was there. He saw Jesus with his own eyes.

The list could go on and on. But you get the idea: Peter was there. He was an eyewitness to salvation history in the life and death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ.

### **IN THE GARDEN**

Peter was also with Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night before Jesus' crucifixion. After supper in the upper room, Jesus and the eleven disciples (the twelve minus Judas) went out to this garden spot near the entrance to the Mount of Olives. Leaving eight of them at a distance, Jesus took three of the disciples – Peter, James and John – with Him to a secluded place in the garden to pray.

The Gospel writers tell us that this was actually the third time Jesus had taken just these three disciples with Him. The first time was when He went to the home of Jairus and restored his daughter to life after she had died. The second time was on the mount of transfiguration. The third time was here in Gethsemane. In each case, Jesus took Peter, James and John with Him.

To be with Jesus on this night was a holy privilege. These three disciples were given an intimate glimpse into the anguish of Jesus' soul as He contemplated the full measure of the wrath of God which was about to be unleashed on Him as the perfect Passover Lamb who would take away the sin of the world. It was not the prospect of humiliation or the suffering of the cross that caused His soul to be overwhelmed with sorrow, as terrible as the physical suffering must have been. It was the thought of being abandoned by the Father and completely cut off from Him. It was the prospect of experiencing the full wrath of God for sin in His own being. As one biblical scholar (Godet) noted, Jesus did not drink the cup of God's wrath at Gethsemane, but at Gethsemane He resolved to drink it. As much as He wanted to avoid it, there in the garden Jesus settled the matter. Unlike Adam and Eve, who in the Garden of Eden said "Not Your will but mine," and brought sin and death into the world, Jesus said, "Not my will but Yours," and through His atoning sacrifice brought salvation and life to all who trust in Him.

Jesus took the three disciples with Him because He wanted – even needed – their company. Their companionship. Their support. Their prayers. He asked them in verse 38 to "keep watch with me." Then He went off by Himself a little further to pray alone. You know what happened. You know that three times Jesus went off by Himself to pray. And three times He came back to find His disciples sleeping.

These are the same disciples who earlier in the evening had promised to be faithful to Jesus to death. James and John, along with all the others, had echoed the words of Peter when he said he would never turn away or fall away from Jesus. But that night they couldn't even stay awake to keep watch with Jesus and pray. When Jesus most needed their support, they fell

asleep in the garden. Not once, but three times. While Jesus poured out His heart to the Father in prayer, they went to sleep.

The first time Jesus found them sleeping, He said to them: “Couldn’t you keep watch with me for one hour? Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation” (26:40-42). There is a valuable lesson here for us. Jesus knew that watchfulness (being spiritually alert) and prayer are essential to our defense against temptation. The temptation which was foremost in the mind of Jesus was not so much the temptation in their weariness to fall asleep, but the temptation to fall away from Him, which was about to sweep over the disciples like a tsunami.

Temptation is a fact of life. It is a given in this world. If you think you are immune to it, you are in more danger than you realize. The message of Jesus to the disciples in the garden and to us today is to stay alert and be in prayer so you don’t wander into temptation without even knowing you’re in danger (Matthew 26:41, *The Message*). If you are walking in a minefield of temptation and don’t know it, the chances of an explosion are high. Make sure you are on alert. Don’t fall asleep spiritually when temptation is at your door, because the consequences can be deadly.

It is not just the temptation to overtly deny Jesus that we have to guard against. Yes, we need to be on guard against the temptation to deny or compromise our faith. But the temptations we face may be more subtle and may even seem harmless to us, like the temptation to embellish your resume in some way, so that others think more highly of you than they should. Or the temptation to cheat a customer or a competitor or the government. Or the temptation to cross a line you know you shouldn’t cross in a relationship with someone.

The way to overcome temptation, Jesus says, is to keep watch and pray. Eternal vigilance. And constant prayer. Prayer provides strength. Jesus prayed in the garden and found the strength to keep going. Even to endure the cross. Meanwhile, what did Peter, James and John do? They slept.

Some of you may remember comedian Jack Handey’s “Deep Thoughts” segment on *Saturday Night Live* back in the 90s. In a book entitled *Fuzzy Memories*, Handey tells the story of a bully who demanded his lunch money every day when he was a child. Because he was smaller than the bully, Handey would simply hand over his money. Then he decided to fight back. He says: “I started taking karate lessons, but the instructor wanted \$5 a lesson. That was a lot of money (at the time). I found it was cheaper to pay the bully, so I gave up karate.”

Unfortunately, when it comes to fighting temptation, a lot of people – including a lot of Christians – do the same thing. We discover that fighting temptation is not an easy thing. We joke that we can resist anything but temptation. We conclude that it is easier to pay the bully (Satan) than to learn how to fight him. When we do, we grieve the heart of God.

Peter was there with Jesus in the garden. So were James and John. It was a holy moment. It was a holy privilege. But it was not a shining moment for them. They were there, yes, but

they fell asleep. They missed the moment of opportunity to keep watch with Jesus. And they missed the opportunity to find the strength each of them would need for the crisis ahead.

Let's learn from their mistake. Let's not fall asleep when a brother or sister needs us to be there and to keep watch with them. Let's not fall asleep when temptation lurks. Let's renew our resolve to remain spiritually alert and prayerful as we navigate the minefields of this world. There is no question that you and I can count on Jesus to be with us. The question is: Can He count on us to be there for Him?

Lord, let it be so, to the glory of Your name. Amen.