

August 9, 2009
Park Road Baptist Church
Maria Hanlin

Text: Exodus 3:11-14; 4:1-5, 10-13
Mark 16:1-8

NEVER GIVE UP!

Have you ever felt like a complete failure? Here is a pop quiz for you. See if you can fill in the blank with the answer to these sayings:

I'm ready to throw in the _____. I'm falling _____. I'm burned _____

We know these sayings so well because we understand failure too well. Patsy Clairmont tells a story about her son, Jason, when he was 7 years old and she put him on the bus for school. Two hours later there was a knock at her front door and there stood her son, Jason. Patsy said, "Jason, what are you doing here?" He said, "I've quit school!" Patsy said, "Why?" Jason answered, "Because it was too long, too hard, and it was boring." His mom answered, "Jason, you have just described life, now get back on that bus!" All of us have experienced the failures and the difficulties of life. And we are not alone. The Bible is full of failures – or at least what appear to be failures by the world's standards.

Defeat and failure are as old as Moses. Moses was born a slave, destined to die at birth by Pharaoh's command. But Moses' life is spared when he was rescued by Pharaoh's daughter. So Moses the slave becomes the Prince of Egypt complete with palace, power and more wealth than we can comprehend. By any standards, Moses had it all. But during that time, don't you know Moses began to realize that he was different? His skin color was different from everyone else in the palace because he was a Hebrew. So about his 40th birthday, Moses has a mid-life crisis and gives it all away. Paul writes in the NT book of Hebrews 11:24-26, "It was by faith that Moses, when he grew up, refused to be treated as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. He chose the share the oppression of God's people instead of enjoying the fleeting pleasures of sin. He thought it was better to suffer for the sake of the Messiah than to own the treasures of Egypt." Moses went from living 40 years in the lap of luxury as a prince of Egypt to living 40 years in a tent as a Bedouin goat herder. That is what I call downward mobility. There had to be days when Moses wondered, "How did I get here?" What a failure.

But God seems to think people with great failures make the best leaders. For after 40 years as a goat herder, God calls Moses from the burning bush to go and tell Pharaoh to let his people go out of slavery. There is one problem - Moses is full of excuses: "But Lord, who am I that I should go to Pharaoh? I'm a nobody. Surely you have someone younger, more qualified, more respected." God responds, "Moses, it isn't you who will do it. I am going to do it through you." So Moses finds a second excuse, "That's great, God, but I still can't go because I don't know who to tell the people sent me." God says, "No problem, Moses, just tell them that the One who gives life to all things, I AM, sent you." A third time Moses protests, "Ok, God, but what if they don't believe me and say I made all this up?" A third time God answers, "I will give you power to do miraculous signs to prove I sent you." Moses has one more excuse - his ace in the hole. Moses says,

“Well, God, you need to know that I have this little problem. I stutter. I can hardly talk to my wife. How can I talk with Pharaoh? God, you need to find someone else because I can’t do it.” God says, “Moses, who do you think made your mouth? Who formed your lips? Just GO!” Here we have the greatest hero of the Old Testament and the towering figure of Jewish religion. If God appeared to you in a burning bush, don’t you think you’d say, “I’ll go wherever you want, Lord?” Maybe...or maybe not. Moses has the same human tendencies that we have. Finally, Moses relented and enthusiastically said, “*ok God...if I have to, I’ll go.*”

So Moses goes back to Egypt and tells Pharaoh, “God says let the Hebrews go.” Pharaoh not only refuses Moses request, he increases the burdens on the backs of the Hebrew slaves because Moses dared to ask. The people complain against Moses: “Why did you get us into this mess, Moses?” So Moses complains to God, “Since I’ve done what you’ve asked, Pharaoh has mistreated the people even more, and you have done nothing to deliver them.” Harsh words against God. Words of failure. Moses felt defeated. It would have been better if the people had not hoped at all. It would be better for the people be content to be slaves than for there to be false hope about freedom. Moses failed. God failed. Hope failed.

God said, “Go back and try again, Moses. Tell Pharaoh to let my people go.” “You must be kidding, God. You don’t like me much, do you?” But eventually, as we know this story from the book of Exodus, after many trials, setbacks and failures, Pharaoh lets the Hebrew people go. God wins! Moses wins! Hope wins!

But...it isn’t long before failure rears its head again. In the pilgrimage through wilderness, the people quickly get discouraged. They get hungry. They get angry and even threaten to kill Moses. They form a “Back to Egypt Committee” and complain, “We were better off as slaves in Egypt.” Even while Moses is up on the mountain receiving the Ten Commandments, the people are down in the valley, bowing before a golden calf. You wonder why God doesn’t give up on the people as failures. God does get frustrated and tells Moses, “You tell those stiff-necked people....” Yet God fulfills his promises, brings hope out of despair and brings the people into the Promised Land.

So it is throughout scripture. The Bible is full of the humanness and failures of the people who answer God’s call. And it is full of God taking our worst mistakes and bringing new possibilities. Until finally, God sends God’s son to bring hope to the world. But even this story seems to be a failure. Jesus was never popular, especially with the religious leaders of his day. In fact, after one of his sermons, the people tried to kill him. (Don’t get any ideas!) His friends misunderstood Jesus, they abandoned him, and one of them even betrayed him to his death. Jesus never had any money or owned a house. In the end, he was crucified as a common criminal. A complete and utter failure. The women shake in fear as they go to the tomb. As we heard in today’s gospel lesson, when the women go to the tomb to anoint Jesus’ body and an angel appears saying Jesus has been raised from the dead, they are so disillusioned that they flee away, trembling and bewildered, saying nothing to anyone because they were too frightened to talk. Often in the midst of our failures, we can’t see new life even when it is right in front of us.

But that isn't the end of the story, is it? What looks like a dead end is the beginning of a new way far beyond our imagination. Despite the apparent failure of Moses, the Hebrew people found the Promised Land. Despite the apparent failure of Jesus, his resurrection has changed the lives of billions of people across the centuries. When we are ready to throw in the towel is precisely when God works best. For God is in the resurrection business. God specializes in bringing new life from death.

Bob Horn was a member of my congregation when I was a pastor at Northridge UMC. He won the Distinguished Professor Award as professor of political science at Cal State Northridge. He was instrumental in getting girls soccer adopted in the Los Angeles School District. At the age of 59, he was diagnosed with ALS, otherwise known as Lou Gehrig's disease. In 1996 on a ventilator, completely paralyzed except for one eyebrow and a muscle in his foot that worked the computer, unable to talk or eat or do anything for himself, Bob wrote a book about his ALS titled, "How Will they Know if I'm Dead? Transcending Disability and Terminal Illness." (The title shows his amazing sense of humor!) In a 1996 opinion piece in The LA Times, Bob explained how he overcame what others would consider utter failure and defeat, "after five years of being tethered to a ventilator, 'eating' via a tube in my stomach, 'talking' with my eyebrows and operating the computer with my foot, did I make the right choice (to go on a ventilator)? You bet! What I have left is more valuable than what I have lost. The things I can do are more important than those that I can't...I can think, reason and analyze, remember, read, write, learn and communicate. I can love, feel happiness and sadness, be enthusiastic, get angry, feel joy. I can believe, hope and have faith." In spite of so many limitations, Bob Horn never gave up. And he inspired thousands.

In the midst of the defeats and failures of life, we often ask, "Where are you, God? Don't you care?" I know when my mother had to have her second leg amputated, that was my cry to God. And yet my Mother never gave up. She said from the nursing home bed to which she was confined, "I try not to dwell on what I have lost but to look at all I have left and be thankful." You see, I believe that God never wastes a hurt, never neglects a failure, never leaves us alone. In fact, often it is through our worst experiences that God brings our most powerful successes.

Pastor Steve Sjogren writes, "We have been conditioned to think that failure is a painful thing that ought to be avoided. The truth is that failure is the necessary doorway to growing and learning about most things in life."

In a Peanuts cartoon, Lucy and Charlie Brown are talking. Dejected, with his head hung low, Charlie Brown laments, "Another ball game lost. Good grief!" The next frame Charlie Brown says, "I get tired of losing....everything I do, I lose!" Lucy offers her psychiatric advice, "Look at it this way, Charlie Brown, we learn more from losing than we do from winning." Charlie Brown turns and shouts at her so loudly it sends her tumbling, "That makes me the smartest person in the world!"

Failure is hard. It isn't easy to lose a job, see a relationship fail, flunk a test. I think of all the people in our city now who have lost jobs in the past months, or those who line up at your church for help from Crisis Assistance Ministry which has experienced a 43% increase in people seeking help over last year. Marion Wright Edelman says, "Don't be afraid of failing. It's the way you learn to do things right. It doesn't matter how many times you fall down. What matters is how many times you get up." My friends, we worship a God who is in the "getting up" business. In fact, resurrection means: "stand up!" We are to stand up when we fall down in life because there is a God who carries us in the tough times and brings new life from what we consider the disasters in our own. God is in the resurrection business. God specializes in bringing new life from death. God majors in seeing the possibilities in our defeats. What God longs to give each of us is hope. Hope that no matter how many times we fall down in life, we never give up. For God is always with us.

A mom was trying to inspire her young son as he was learning to play the piano. So she took him to a Paderewski concert. After they were seated, the mother spotted a friend in the audience and walked down the aisle to greet her. Seizing the opportunity to explore the wonders of the concert hall, the boy got up and eventually walked through a door marked, "NO ADMITTANCE." Seconds later when the houselights flashed, the mother returned to her seat and was dismayed to discover that her son was missing. Suddenly, the curtains parted and the spotlights focused on the impressive Steinway on stage. In horror, the mother saw her little boy sitting at the keyboard, innocently picking out, "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star." At that moment, the great piano master made his entrance, sized up the situation, quickly moved to the piano and whispered in the boy's ear, "Don't quit. Keep playing." Leaning over, Paderewski reached down with his left hand and began filling in the bass part. Soon his right arm reached around the other side of the child, and he added a running obbligato. Together, the old master and the young novice transformed a frightening situation into a wonderful experience. And the audience was mesmerized.

That is the way God works. We so often find ourselves in difficult situations. We try our best, but the results sound more like chopsticks than Mozart. Or they blow up in our faces. But with the hand of the Master, even our worst situations, our deepest disappointments, our failures can be transformed into wonderfully creative masterpieces. No matter what you face, God is whispering deep within our beings, "Don't quit. Keep playing. You are not alone." Together we will transform the broken patters into a masterful work of art. Together, we can transform our church and this corner of the world to work for the Kingdom of God.

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Defeat and failure are as old as Moses. Moses was born a slave, destined to die at birth by Pharaoh's command. But Moses' life is spared when he was rescued by Pharaoh's daughter. So Moses the slave becomes the Prince of Egypt complete with palace, power and more wealth than we can comprehend. By any standards, Moses had it all. But during that time, don't you know Moses began to realize that he was different? His skin color was different from everyone else in the palace because he was a Hebrew. So about his 40th birthday, Moses has a mid-life crisis and gives it all away. Paul writes in the NT book of Hebrews 11:24-26, "It was by faith that Moses, when he grew up, refused to be treated as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. He chose the share the oppression of God's people instead of enjoying the fleeting pleasures of sin. He thought it was better to suffer for the sake of the Messiah than to own the treasures of Egypt." Moses went from living 40 years in the lap of luxury as a prince of Egypt to living 40 years in a tent as a Bedouin goat herder. That is what I call downward mobility. There had to be days when Moses wondered, "How did I get here?" What a failure.

But God seems to think people with great failures make the best leaders. For after 40 years as a goat herder, God calls Moses from the burning bush to go and tell Pharaoh to let his people go out of slavery. There is one problem - Moses is full of excuses: "But Lord, who am I that I should go to Pharaoh? I'm a nobody. Surely you have someone younger, more qualified, more respected." God responds, "Moses, it isn't you who will do it. I am going to do it through you." So Moses finds a second excuse, "That's great, God, but I still can't go because I don't know who to tell the people sent me." God says, "No problem, Moses, just tell them that the One who gives life to all things, I AM, sent you." A third time Moses protests, "Ok, God, but what if they don't believe me and say I made all this up?" A third time God answers, "I will give you power to do miraculous signs to prove I sent you." Moses has one more excuse - his ace in the hole. Moses says,

“Well, God, you need to know that I have this little problem. I stutter. I can hardly talk to my wife. How can I talk with Pharaoh? God, you need to find someone else because I can’t do it.” God says, “Moses, who do you think made your mouth? Who formed your lips? Just GO!” Here we have the greatest hero of the Old Testament and the towering figure of Jewish religion. If God appeared to you in a burning bush, don’t you think you’d say, “I’ll go wherever you want, Lord?” Maybe...or maybe not. Moses has the same human tendencies that we have. Finally, Moses relented and enthusiastically said, “*ok God...if I have to, I’ll go.*”

So Moses goes back to Egypt and tells Pharaoh, “God says let the Hebrews go.” Pharaoh not only refuses Moses request, he increases the burdens on the backs of the Hebrew slaves because Moses dared to ask. The people complain against Moses: “Why did you get us into this mess, Moses?” So Moses complains to God, “Since I’ve done what you’ve asked, Pharaoh has mistreated the people even more, and you have done nothing to deliver them.” Harsh words against God. Words of failure. Moses felt defeated. It would have been better if the people had not hoped at all. It would be better for the people be content to be slaves than for there to be false hope about freedom. Moses failed. God failed. Hope failed.

God said, “Go back and try again, Moses. Tell Pharaoh to let my people go.” “You must be kidding, God. You don’t like me much, do you?” But eventually, as we know this story from the book of Exodus, after many trials, setbacks and failures, Pharaoh lets the Hebrew people go. God wins! Moses wins! Hope wins!

But...it isn’t long before failure rears its head again. In the pilgrimage through wilderness, the people quickly get discouraged. They get hungry. They get angry and even threaten to kill Moses. They form a “Back to Egypt Committee” and complain, “We were better off as slaves in Egypt.” Even while Moses is up on the mountain receiving the Ten Commandments, the people are down in the valley, bowing before a golden calf. You wonder why God doesn’t give up on the people as failures. God does get frustrated and tells Moses, “You tell those stiff-necked people....” Yet God fulfills his promises, brings hope out of despair and brings the people into the Promised Land.

So it is throughout scripture. The Bible is full of the humanness and failures of the people who answer God’s call. And it is full of God taking our worst mistakes and bringing new possibilities. Until finally, God sends God’s son to bring hope to the world. But even this story seems to be a failure. Jesus was never popular, especially with the religious leaders of his day. In fact, after one of his sermons, the people tried to kill him. (Don’t get any ideas!) His friends misunderstood Jesus, they abandoned him, and one of them even betrayed him to his death. Jesus never had any money or owned a house. In the end, he was crucified as a common criminal. A complete and utter failure. The women shake in fear as they go to the tomb. As we heard in today’s gospel lesson, when the women go to the tomb to anoint Jesus’ body and an angel appears saying Jesus has been raised from the dead, they are so disillusioned that they flee away, trembling and bewildered, saying nothing to anyone because they were too frightened to talk. Often in the midst of our failures, we can’t see new life even when it is right in front of us.

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HOMEWORK

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August 9, 2009
Park Road Baptist Church
Maria Hanlin

Text: Exodus 3:11-14; 4:1-5, 10-13
Mark 16:1-8

NEVER GIVE UP!

Have you ever felt like a complete failure? Here is a pop quiz for you. See if you can fill in the blank with the answer to these sayings:

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