

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, March 31, 1991, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.
EASTER DAY

JOHN 20:19,20

“On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you!’ After He said this, He showed them His hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.”

EASTER POWER FOR CONFIDENT LIVING

One of the things that fascinates us about the Easter story is the sudden change in the disciples. One minute they’re defeated; the next minute they’re dynamic. One minute they’re crushed; the next minute they’re confident. One minute they’re having a pity-party; the next minute they’re taking on the world. What made the difference? Here’s my message in one sentence: When you see the risen Lord Jesus Christ and enter by faith into a personal relationship with Him, you will become a confident person.

What is it that robs us of confidence? Three things: Fatigue, Failure, and Fear and in our text, we see all three of these assassins of the soul exemplified in the lives of the disciples.

1. In the first place they were suffering from fatigue. They were stressed out. Notice it says it was late that Sunday. After all, it had been a very rough week -- they had had Palm Sunday, and the emotional entry into Jerusalem. Then there had been the cleansing of the Temple, the Last Supper, the betrayal by Judas, Gethsemane, the six trials of Jesus, and finally the horror of the crucifixion. And they were emotionally drained. And folks, let me tell you, the most common cause of discouragement is just physical and emotional exhaustion. Things always look worse when you’re tired. Vince Lombardi once said that “fatigue makes cowards of all of us.”

A recent cartoon showed a psychiatrist talking to a patient, and he’s saying, “Did this feeling of being an insignificant, dominated pipsqueak, with no self-confidence, and always tired, happen suddenly, or did it develop normally with marriage and parenthood?!” When you get tired, you lose your confidence. Psalm 119:73 speaks of God wanting His loved ones to get their proper rest. Sometimes the most spiritual thing you can do is go to sleep (but not during this sermon, please!). It’s amazing how much better things look after you’ve had a good night’s sleep! Fatigue. And then they were suffering from

2. Failure -- it too robs us of confidence. Those men on that Easter night felt like a group of losers. Why? Well, look at Matthew 26:56: “All the disciples deserted Jesus and fled.” We know that Peter denied Him and Judas betrayed Him, and now eleven of them are having a pity-party; they’re second-guessing themselves. They’re saying, “We were wrong. Jesus was supposed to be

the Messiah, and now He's dead. Who cares? What now?"

How do you handle failure? A book was published some time ago entitled The Book of Failures - the official handbook of the not-so-great Club of Great Britain! Ironically, when they first published the book they forgot to publish the first two pages — they added them in the second edition; so even the book was a failure! The point is that “if at first you don't succeed,” you're normal! Welcome to the human race! The fact is, life has its setbacks. You remember “Murphy's Law” -- “if there is a possibility for something to go wrong, it will go wrong!” Believe me, Murphy was an optimist! Someone said, “Just about the time I think I'm going to make ends meet, somebody moves the ends!” Fatigue; it robs you of confidence, and so does failure.

3. And finally there is fear -- and it is perhaps the greatest robber of all. Notice that our text says that the disciples had the doors locked for fear of the Jews. They had seen what happened to Jesus, and they weren't too excited about what might happen to them if they showed their faces in public.

Have you ever played the “What if?” game - the “fear” game? “What if I fail? What if I never get married? What if I get cancer? What if I lose my job?” You notice how we always tend to imagine the worst. Have you ever gotten a letter from the IRS saying they were going to audit your tax return? That starts the adrenaline flowing! Have you ever been driving down one side of a four-lane highway and a Highway Patrol car makes a U-turn and starts following you?!

What do people worry about the most? Surveys tell us that the greatest worry for most people is the fear of death, and that's what Easter is all about -- helping us overcome that fear. Most folk don't even want to talk about it. Invite some friends over to your home some evening and say, “Let's talk about death,” and watch what happens! In last week's issue of U.S. News and World Report (March 25, 1991) there is an interesting series of articles entitled “The Rekindling of Hell.” It says that in a survey 78% of Americans believe there is a heaven, and 78% think they have a good or excellent chance of going there! Concerning hell, only 60% believe in it, and 24% think they have a good or excellent chance of going there, although 9% of people professing no religion thought they might go there.

They asked some children to write some sentences about what they believed about death. Gilda, aged 8, said, “When you die they put you in a box and bury you in the ground because you don't look too good.” Stephanie, aged 9 -- “Doctors help you so you won't die until you pay your bill!” (That reminds me of the doctor who gave one poor fellow six months to live, but when he hadn't paid his bill at the end of that time, he gave him another six months!) Marsha, aged 9, said, “When you die, you don't have to do homework in heaven, unless your teacher is there also!” And Raymond, aged 10, remarked, “A good doctor can help you so you won't die. A bad doctor sends you to heaven!”

Are you afraid of death and of what lies beyond it? Hebrews 2:15 (Good News Bible) tells us that Jesus came to earth and died on the Cross to “set free those who were slaves all their lives because of their fear of death.” I'm not afraid of dying; do you know why? Because I know exactly where I'm going, and I know the One Who is waiting there to greet me. I'm already

friends with Him. I know Him personally as My Savior and Lord.

People are afraid of the unknown. You could get to know God personally right now. That's what Easter is all about. You don't need to be afraid of death, because if you know Jesus Christ here and now, you can be sure that you will be with Him over there!

So, what causes us to lose confidence? — Fatigue, failure, and fear.

And what restores our confidence? Two things — (1) God's presence, and (2) God's power.

1. God's presence gives me the power to start over again. Look at our text: "Jesus came and stood among them.... The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord." Acts 4:13 (Living Bible) says, "When the Council saw the boldness of Peter and John, and could see that they were obviously uneducated non-professionals, they were amazed and realized what being with Jesus had done for them!" These fellows were common, ordinary people, but they were bold. Before the resurrection, they're cowering in fear in a room with the doors locked. But they're back on the streets a few days later taking on the enemy.

What had happened? They had been with Jesus, the risen Lord! They not only knew He was alive, they had been with Him; they had a relationship with Him. Have you entered into a personal relationship with Jesus? If you have, then

"You lose your fear
When Christ is near."

Jesus said to His friends, "Remember, I am with you always, even to the end of time" (Matthew 28:20). And that gives you confidence to start over again, and to say, "Lord I know you're with me. Help me to handle this problem in my life." Look at Proverbs 14:26 (Good News Bible): "Reverence for the Lord gives (what?) confidence and security to a man and his family."

Christ's presence with us encourages us to try again. When Ezra and Nehemiah returned with their Jewish compatriots from exile in Persia, they must have had the same feelings of shock and revulsion that the people of Kuwait have today. They saw their holy city of Jerusalem in ruins, the walls broken down, and the gates destroyed by fire. But the immediate reaction of those intrepid Israelites was this: "Let's start rebuilding!" Have you ever been halfway through a project, and wanted to start over? Have you ever been halfway through a career, and wanted to start over?

God says, "Perhaps you feel that you have messed up your life. Start over again and remember that I'm with you to help you." God wants to help you. That's the good news of Easter.

Do you ever feel like Humpty Dumpty?

“All the king’s horses and all the king’s men...”
nothing’s going to put me back together again.

I saw a bumper sticker this week that said, “Humpty Dumpty was pushed!” Maybe you were pushed, or maybe you slipped on one of Satan’s banana peels, or maybe you just disobeyed God’s law, and now your life is in disarray. Read Isaiah 43:19 (Good News Bible). God says, “Do not...dwell on what happened long ago. Watch for the new thing I’m going to do (in your life).” You see, God specializes in new beginnings, and it’s never too late to start over. Failure is never final unless you let it be. You’re never a failure until you give up. God says, “Forget the past; focus on the future, because your past is water under the bridge; you can’t bring it back.” Every one of us has skeletons in our closet, and we can all say, “If only... I hadn’t done this or that or the other thing. If only I hadn’t been such a blundering fool!” But the good news of Easter is that when Jesus Christ came back to life, He showed Himself to His disciples, and His very presence gave them the power to start over again; and they went from the bottom of the pile, until now there are Christians in every part of this earth. Obviously, something happened. What happened was that God’s presence gave them the power to start over again. But there’s another truth that we see here:

2. God’s power gives me the confidence to keep trying. God’s presence gives me the power to start over again, and God’s power gives me the confidence to keep going. You see, after you start in the right direction, you need power to continue. Look at Ephesians 1:20 (Phillips): “How tremendous is the power available to us who believe in God. That power is the same divine energy which was demonstrated in Christ when God raised Him from the dead...” Now, that verse says two things: (a) it says that the resurrection of Christ (which millions of Christians are celebrating today) demonstrated how powerful God is; and (b) it says that that same power is available to us. The point is this: if God can raise Jesus from the dead, then He can handle any problem that confronts me -- or you. There is no problem too big for Him to handle, and He specializes in hopeless cases!

You remember what those men kept saying as they built the Panama Canal, “The difficult we do at once; the impossible may take a little longer!”

But you say, “Pastor, you don’t know my finances.” But God does! “Pastor, you don’t know my health problem.” But God does! “Pastor, you don’t know the agony I’m going through because I’ve screwed up my life so badly.” But God does! And I say it again — He specializes in hopeless cases.

One of my favorite verses is Philippians 1:6, “...being confident of this, that He Who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.” Let me ask you this question: What has God started in your life? Whatever He has started He’s going to finish. He’s not going to quit on you. People have said to me, “Pastor, I’ve thought of becoming a Christian, but I’m afraid that I just couldn’t hold out. I’m afraid that if I really committed myself to Christ, in the first place, I might become a fanatic, or I might lose all my freedom, or I might lose all my fun.” Now let me tell you, those things don’t happen — God doesn’t turn people into freaks, He turns freaks into people. Remember, being a Christian doesn’t mean that you hold on to Christ, it means that He holds on to you! --“being confident of this, that He Who began a good

work in you will carry it on to completion.” Folks, that’s what I call “security.” You may let go of Him, but He will never let go of you.

Maybe some of you feel you’ve given up the faith. You say, “I was raised in a church, but have given up on God.” Let me tell you something -- God has never given up on you! At Easter, we talk a lot about believing in God. Have you ever realized that God believes in you? He believed enough in you to leave heaven’s glory and come to earth and die on a Cross for you -- to make you different, to make you a new person, to put meaning and purpose into your life.

Each of us came here this morning for many different reasons -- some came just mildly interested, checking us out; some of you came out of habit; some of you were invited by a friend; some of you came because it’s Easter. It doesn’t matter why you think you came today. The fact is: God brought you here so that He could say one thing to you, and it is this: You matter to God. And there’s infinitely more to life than just making money, retiring, and dying. God brought you here so that He could say to you, “You matter to Me! I really care about you!”

Look at Isaiah 54:7 (Good News Bible): “With deep love I will take you back.” That’s why God brought you here today, so that He might say to you, “I’ll take you back. You matter to Me.” And nobody will ever love you as much as God loves you. And Jesus Christ died on the Cross to prove it.

You were meant to know God; you were meant to be loved by God and to love Him. I’m not talking about religion, I’m talking about a relationship, a relationship to God, where, through the Lord Jesus Christ, you come into contact with the One Who made you and begin to understand that He put you on this earth not just to take up space, not just to breathe, grow old, die, and leave all you’ve got to your children.

He has a purpose for your life. I know it’s a cliché, but this Easter could be the first day of the rest of your life. And Jesus Christ wants to give you the power (a) to start over, and (b) to keep going. Perhaps you don’t have much confidence. It may be due to fatigue -- you’re just worn out. It may be due to the fact that you feel yourself to be a failure in life. Or maybe it’s because fear is gripping you by the throat - fear of ill health, fear of old age, fear of death.

I challenge you to let Christ give you faith and hope and love, so that you may be victorious in the battle of life.

AMEN.