

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,  
on Sunday, June 4, 1995, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

**LUKE 5:6; MARK 14:3; 1 CORINTHIANS 11:24**

“Their nets broke.”

“She broke the jar.”

“This is My body... broken for you.”

**THE GOSPEL OF BROKEN THINGS**

We read this morning three New Testament stories about broken things; and looked at through the windows of human experience, they speak of disappointment and defeat. As we prepare now to approach once again the Table of the Lord, we would do well to discover the message which these three broken things bring to us. “Their nets broke”: “She broke the jar”: “This is My body... broken for you.”

**1. The broken NETS.**

You remember the story. The fishermen had toiled all night and had caught nothing. Jesus comes along in the morning, steps into Peter’s boat; they cast off a few yards from shore, and Jesus uses the boat as a pulpit from which to proclaim His timeless message to the people who have congregated on the beach.

After He has finished, He asks Peter to put out into deep water and let down the nets. Peter must have thought, “This Man doesn’t know much about fishing if He imagines we’ll catch anything with the sunshine beating down upon the water. These fish in Galilee aren’t stupid!” However, he did what Jesus asked, and lo and behold, within a few moments the nets were crammed full of the glistening treasures of the lake!

How often had these seasoned Galilean fishermen dreamed of just such a catch as this! What wonderful things they would do for their wives and children if only the lake would yield them a consistently good harvest. But now their dream is being realized. The nets are bulging with fish.

But wait a minute! The nets are tearing; they can’t bear the weight of the catch; and those precious fish are slithering back into the water. So near and yet so far! It was a moment of intense disappointment and defeat.

Oh, Peter, James and John, we are all fishermen with you in this! We can relate to your experience! We plan, we dream, we toil — what great things we shall do when our ship comes home laden. Then one day it comes beating up the bay, sails shimmering in the sunshine. But in the very harbor mouth it strikes a submerged rock and founders. Have we not known people who have toiled, sacrificed, refused to take vacations, in order to make themselves financially secure; consoling themselves with the thought of all that they would do once they had accumulated enough money. At last they make plans for retiring; but suddenly their health gives way, or

tragedy strikes, or the bottom drops out of a business venture, and the dreams become mocking ghosts.

Did not our Lord tell about just such a man? (Luke 12:13- 21) He was becoming a well-to-do farmer, and one day he decided to tear down his old barns and build new ones which would be much larger and more functional so that he would be able to make lots more money. But the next morning his sons came to Jesus to ask Him to make a coffin for their father who had died during the night, no doubt the victim of a heart attack.

To a lesser degree do we not all come to the Table this morning heavy hearted because in some area of our life the net has broken and we are conscious of disappointment and defeat? The Psalmist says (Ps. 42:5), “Why are you downcast, Oh my soul? Why so disturbed within me?” Perhaps you say, “How can I help it? Life has been so different from what I had hoped for. Disappointment, frustration, loneliness and disillusionment have left their cruel impress upon my soul.” The failure of a friendship, a devastating illness, a shattered marriage, a crushing bereavement, and we are left with only tantalizing dreams of what might have been — dreams that haunt and mock us. The nets are broken!

## **2. The broken JAR.**

Again, it is a dramatic scene. Jesus and His disciples are having a meal in the home of a man named Simon, in Bethany, when suddenly a woman enters, perhaps Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus; and in her hand she bears a jar of very expensive perfume. It was pure nard, a perfume made from a rare plant that came from far-off India. It would have cost a working man in Palestine a year’s wages to buy that jar with its contents. And kneeling down before her Master, she did not sprinkle a few drops of the perfume on Jesus; she broke the jar and poured it all on His head. It was a beautiful expression of the sheer extravagance of love. How Mary must have looked forward to that moment! How she had saved and sacrificed to purchase this gift. How often she had anticipated this whole incident in her dreams. It was all to be so sacred, this demonstration of deep and pure affection for her Master.

But what happened? Her action was completely misunderstood. Scorn was poured upon her. We read that they regarded what she had done as a prodigal waste of money, and as verse 5 tells us, “they rebuked her harshly”; so much so that the breaking of the jar seemed a signal for the breaking of Mary’s heart. A brutal, mercenary matter-of-factness crushed her sensitive soul. A thing of exquisite loveliness was crucified.

Oh, Mary, how our hearts ache for you as you learn the bitter lesson that the path of tender concern and affectionate devotion often leads up the hill to a cross! We take our alabaster jar of affection and concern for the unsaved into the world, to find so often that it is misunderstood and scorned. In sincerity and out of a real warmth and concern of the heart, we speak the gentle word, we make the loving gesture, we offer our humble witness to the redeeming power of our Lord. But a cynical reception gives us a shuddering and sickening rebuff. We are left, like Jesus Himself, to weep in loneliness over a city which we wanted so badly to take under our wings. It is a grim commentary on human nature that it has so often crucified the things of tenderness and beauty when they have been first offered. After all, God

Himself gave His very best to a world of lost sinners, and they nailed the Lord of glory to a cross.

### **3. And that brings us to the broken BODY.**

What did the Cross convey at first to the disciples? They regarded the death of Jesus as the utter devastation of all their hopes and dreams. It wasn't fair that One so young and good should be so brutally done to death. Surely God must have been asleep at the switch to allow such a horrible injustice to take place. All that they had hoped for, the restoration of Israel, seemed on the point of being realized. Then with devastating suddenness everything had changed. He was dead on a Roman instrument of torture between two criminals. And in a moment, every light in their life was extinguished, snuffed out.

We, too, know something of what it means to see a lovely dream smashed to atoms; to see, as James Russell Lowell puts it —

“Truth forever on the scaffold,  
Wrong forever on the throne.”

And we have agonized over what we consider to be the cruel injustices of life; and in our dark moments, we agree with Thomas Carlyle when he exclaimed — “God sits in heaven and does nothing.”

There is a beautiful verse in Paul's letter to the Romans (15:4) which makes this remarkable statement: “Everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.” And so it is here. We have been looking at these incidents through a window of human experience. But we dare not rest content with this view. Remember, the Bible is not man's word about God; it is God's Word about man. It is about God's gracious dealings with mankind. Here in the Holy Scriptures we see the broken things interpreted, not through human thought, but through divine love and wisdom. Here in God's Word the experiences of “breaking” are interpreted in God's way, and so far from being moments of tragedy, they emerge as moments of triumph. Let us look, then, at these seeming calamities in their true light — through the eyes of God.

1. Humanly speaking, the breaking of the nets was a tragedy, but God used that experience to bring Peter to his knees in repentance and faith, and along with his friends James and John, to become our Lord's disciple, leaving everything to follow Him. We know how this trio became our Lord's inner circle of friends, and ultimately outstanding leaders in the early church.

Even though the nets broke, great blessing was the net result because, you see, spiritual gain can come out of material loss. In the history of the Church, great revival has often followed times of economic depression, political chaos, or moral and spiritual declension. When people are affluent, they are more liable to forget God and rely solely on their own feeble resources.

When things break, they may be angels in disguise to bring us to Jesus. God can

sometimes use a broken net to break a stubborn will and bring a person into intimate communion with Himself; and that is triumph, not tragedy. Sometimes God strips us of very precious things in order that He Himself may become more indispensable to us. Our disappointments are often His appointments.

That brilliant woman, Clare Booth Luce, author, diplomat, and wife of the founding editor of Time magazine, had everything going for her. And then tragedy struck. The Luces lost their daughter, their only child, when she was seventeen. Mrs. Luce was devastated, bitter, and belligerent. She shook her fist in God's face. She confronted Bishop Fulton Sheen one day and defiantly asked him, "Bishop, why did God take my daughter?" The bishop looked her straight in the eye and replied, "Mrs. Luce, God took your daughter in order to save your soul." It was a sharp and perhaps cruel arrow, but it found its mark, and as a result, after much counseling and searching of the Scriptures, Mrs. Luce became a committed Christian for the first time in her life. It was triumph out of tragedy.

2. So it was with the breaking of the lar. The world thought it had crushed Mary. But the world's misunderstanding of Mary only led to her richer understanding of her Lord. The sneers of her detractors were eclipsed by the appreciation in His smile. The hostile world only succeeded in driving her closer to Him, and that was triumph!

So it has always been, and always will be. "Those who sow in tears will reap in joy" as the Psalmist reminds us. (Ps. 126:5) Jesus knew all about this in his own life here on earth. He experienced time and time again the cruel rebuff, the bitterness of being misunderstood and misrepresented. He was scorned, despised, and rejected, but He never struck back; He never felt sorry for Himself; He simply leaned more heavily on the everlasting arms. And in this He is our shining example and our inspiration.

As the writer to the Hebrews so beautifully expresses it, "We do not have a high priest Who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have One Who was tempted (and tested) in every way, just as we are..." (Hebrews 4:15)

But do remember, He not only sympathizes with us; He also empowers us to be "more than conquerors." (Romans 8:37) The saintly Scottish Covenanter minister, Samuel Rutherford, was cast into prison for his faith, and threatened with death, and yet from his prison cell he wrote one day to a friend, "Jesus Christ came into my cell last night and every stone flashed like a ruby!" There is the power of the living Christ to transform tragedy into triumph.

Are you ever misunderstood, misrepresented, rebuffed? Don't let it make you bitter. When those experiences come, and if you are faithful to your Lord they will come, lean hard upon Him Who has been through it all Himself. From the coldness of the world, turn to the warmth of His love. His smile of approval is worth it all!

3. And so it is with the broken body of the Lord. His enemies imagined that when He breathed His last on Calvary, that was the end. But in fact, it was only the glorious beginning. Look at Him suspended between earth and heaven, naked and lifeless upon a Roman cross, brutally murdered. It appears to be the quintessence of tragedy and defeat. But never imagine

that you are there witnessing the defeat of goodness: On the contrary, you are witnessing the eternal victory of God Almighty. At Calvary God took the very stuff of sin, this hellish deed that killed the Son of God; He has got His hands upon it, and He has compelled it to serve His ends and not the devil's. He has transformed history's most infamous crime into the salvation of lost sinners. "Blessed Christ of God — they gave You a Cross and You made it Your throne!" And then the authentication of the victory — the empty tomb on Easter morning.

"Up from the grave He arose.  
Jesus, my Savior!"

It was not tragedy; it was triumph. One of the most amazing things about the early disciples was the way in which they regarded the death of Jesus after the Holy Spirit came upon them at Pentecost. From that day forth they never regarded the death of their Lord as something done to Him by sinful humanity; but rather as something done by Him for a sinful world. In the drama of Calvary God had the last word, as He always must have.

This is the message of the Lord's Table; and that is why we began the service this morning with a hymn of the resurrection. And that is why each of us can be quiet and brave and steadfast amid the world's tribulation. That is why we can always confront Satan and his legions with the ringing affirmation:

"Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns!" (Rev. 19:6)

It is a law of life — there must be the **BREAKING** before there can be the **BLESSING**. The farmer "breaks" the ground; but there is no thought of defeat in his heart as he contemplates the broken soil. It is the first step toward the harvest! In the bird's nest the shell of the egg begins to chip and "break." But the mother bird rejoices at the thought of the new little life that will come forth from the breaking. The ugly-looking chrysalis "breaks," but only to allow the beautiful butterfly to emerge. The day "breaks" and the shadows of the night flee away.

The broken nets; the broken jar; the broken body all remind us that God can transform all the broken things in our lives — the disappointments, the frustrations, the misunderstandings and misrepresentations, the illnesses, the heartaches, the bereavements, the defeats, and the tragedies. And why are we so sure that He can do this? Let St. Paul give us the answer:

"What then shall we say in response to this?  
If God be for us, who can be against us?  
He Who did not spare His Own Son,  
but gave Him up for us all —  
How will He not also, along with Him,  
graciously give us all things?" (Romans 8:31-32)

So, let us bring all our broken things to Him, that He may use them to draw us ever closer to Himself!

**AMEN.**