

[Heist Collage?] How many of you love heist movies? The most popular in recent memory are films like the *Oceans 11* franchise or the magic movie *Now You See Me*. But where are my *A-Team* fans? We love these movies - they usually involve stealing something (even if that's a person). And the heists work because every time, near the end, it *looks* like the heroes have lost. One of them gets caught or they can't get to the money or whatever. And then, suddenly, they're gone and *they got away with it*.

The best part of the story is when the camera goes back and shows you how they got away with it and you realize *that failure was part of the plan the whole time*. That in fact the plan wouldn't have worked without one of them getting caught.

We love that in part because we realize the heist was much bigger than we thought. That we - like the villains of the film - were fixated on a plan that was much too small, while our heroes were working on something much, much bigger.

I wonder if part of the reason we like watching these plans that seem like failures but are actually carefully orchestrated successes is because of how well we're all acquainted with failure in our lives.

[FAIL!] I'd be surprised if even a handful of us can say honestly we're on Plan A for our lives. I didn't originally want to be a pastor when I grew up. I wanted to work as a physicist, studying time travel. My road to becoming a pastor was long and winding, filled with plenty of missteps and hurts. Same with my marriage - I didn't start dating Amanda until I was 27. I had dated plenty before her, and was even convinced I was eventually going to marry a couple of them.

What about you? Not in the career you imagined for yourself? You're not even sure what a dream job might *be* anymore. Your marriage is colder. Or maybe you're not married. It never happened or it imploded. You can't have kids, you never had kids, you have kids and they're not becoming the people you'd imagined. You're lonelier than you thought you'd be. Or poorer. Or more depressed.

Life didn't go the way you thought it would. If you're being honest, to describe your life (or a particular area of your life) as a "failure" wouldn't be too far off.

If you can feel me, then I've got some very good news for you: Failure is a chance for us to see something bigger going on. It's a chance to step back from our lives and imagine that God might be doing much more than we thought.

[Scripture Slide] There's no better day to celebrate this possibility than today, on Easter Sunday. If you have a Bible turn with me to Mark 16. (If you grabbed one of our free bibles in the back, Mark 16 is on page XXX.) We usually think of Easter as a big celebration. But let's put ourselves in the sandals of those first followers of Jesus.

For them, Easter morning was full of fear, terror and despair. They had thought this Jesus they followed was Israel's new king. When they marched into Jerusalem at the beginning of the Passover week, they expected him to announce his kingship and kick out Rome, to break open the skies and usher in God's new kingdom.

[Cross Fail] Instead, Jesus was arrested and executed as a false king. The Jewish authorities had colluded with the Roman authorities and Jesus was caught in the middle, crushed and killed. Which meant all his followers were in danger. They had all fled when Jesus was arrested, and were in hiding.

In fact, according to Mark, only a few women dared approach Jesus' tomb on Sunday morning. They came to give him a proper burial, refusing to let their would-be king, their spectacular failure, be buried like a common criminal.

Let's read what happened, beginning in verse 1:

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body. Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb and they asked each other, "Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?"

But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed.

"Don't be alarmed," he said. "You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.' "

Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid. -- Mark 16:1-8

Trembling and bewildered, the women fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone because they were afraid.

A handful of women - near the bottom of the social order in their day - are the only witnesses to Jesus' resurrection. And they say nothing to anyone because they're afraid.

For Jesus' followers, the resurrection doesn't make sense. And let's be clear: that Jesus could come back to life isn't the confusing part. Jesus had raised several people from the dead in the last couple of years. So they weren't confused that Jesus *could* come back to life.

[Empty Tomb Confusion] No, they couldn't imagine what it *meant* that he had come back. Just as they couldn't fathom why he died in the first place. Like the villains in the heist films, who walk into their vaults emptied of all the money, they simply couldn't wrap their minds around what *this particular* empty tomb meant.

[Scripture Slide 2] Which makes what happens next pretty awesome. Flip over to Acts 10 (which again in the free bibles is page XXX). If you fast-forward a couple of years, you find that first bunch of followers wholly transformed. The best example is Peter, the very person who denied he'd ever heard of Jesus the night Jesus was arrested. Peter was so ashamed and afraid for his own life, he was nowhere to be found at the tomb. Fast-forward to Acts 10. Peter is in the city of Caesarea. He's been summoned to the home of Cornelius, a Roman centurion who believes in the God of Israel and wants to meet Peter. Peter has come to his home, and is addressing the people gathered there. As we read, keep the old Peter in mind, the Peter who was so afraid he abandoned Jesus and denied he even knew him. Let's look at Peter now, beginning in verse 34:

Peter began to speak: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right. You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, announcing the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. You know what has happened throughout the province of Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached - how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.

"We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a cross, but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen—by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name." -- Acts 10:34-43

Peter boldly announces the good news about Jesus - that his resurrection marks him the judge of the living and the dead, that Jesus is the culmination of God's plan that's been in play since the beginning.

What makes this speech particularly fascinating is Peter's opening line. He says, "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right." Peter is Jewish. Cornelius is non-Jewish, a Gentile, which means that everyone in his home is also a Gentile. The Jewish faith - particularly in Peter's time, had strict prohibitions against Jews mixing with Gentiles.

To be clear: God had commanded that Jewish people like Peter not mix with Gentiles. They weren't to eat with them, to marry them, even to be in their homes or cities.

And Caesarea is a Roman city, named after Caesar. It was a blight on the Jewish identity (imagine if China conquered America and founded a city called New Beijing - how many Americans would love that idea?).

But now Peter has come to Caesarea, to the home of a Roman soldier. He stands in the midst of a bunch of people the plan said were out, and Peter realizes that something marvelous has happened:

He had the plan wrong. He thought Jesus was an earthly king, come to free the Jewish people from Rome. But now, standing among all these outsiders, these people who never would've been rescued if Jesus were only a Jewish king, Peter realizes he had it wrong all along.

Dying was part of the plan. God was pulling off a cosmic heist, rescuing not just the Jewish people but *everyone, everywhere*, from every time and every place. In Jesus' death and resurrection, every person who was an outsider can not become an insider. God blew up the bank, erased every debt, every line that kept people from the good news.

And Peter now has the great privilege of announcing that to this room crowded with outsiders. Good news - you're in. Good news, God isn't holding your failures against you. Good news, God is in the business of rescuing failures, redeeming and restoring them.

[How do we illustrate this?] How can he say this? Because Peter was the ultimate failure. His testimony might have kept Jesus from death. But his fear kept him silence and ushered Jesus to his death. And now Peter sees that God works in failure, that God is the God of failure.

So we return to our failures. To the failed marriages and failed jobs and mistakes and broken promises and betrayals and abandoned dreams.

We want to hide these things. We want to bury them and the shame that comes with them.

But God invites us to bring our failures to him. To trust that failure isn't the end of the road and that God has a bigger plan for us, one that challenges us to look beyond our failures.

Failure doesn't kill us. Take a look at some of these famous failures. [[Failure Video](#)]

I want to invite you this morning to imagine that God is doing something big in your life. I want you to imagine that you might be like Peter - ashamed, afraid. Paralyzed by your failures, scared to move forward.

Jesus has been raised from the dead. In his death, he conquered death once and for all, and has invited us to join in his life. All we have to do is say Yes, like Cornelius did.

God raised Jesus from the dead to make a way for you to have life. God raised Jesus from the dead so that you need not be defined by your failures and shame. God is inviting you to be transformed, to become a bold proclamation of life, a walking example of what happens when failure isn't the last word.

What would it take for you to say Yes this morning?

### **Examine and Baptisms**

I want to invite you into a prayer experience called a Prayer of Examine. I'm going to put four questions on the screen, and give you a few moments to reflect prayerfully on them. The Examine is a space, an opportunity for you to consider what it looks like for you to respond to the good news you've heard this morning.

1. **Where do you feel like a failure?**
2. **How has that failure paralyzed you?**
3. **When this week will it be easy for you to sink back into that failure?**
4. **What does it look like for you to risk saying Yes to God this week?**

After Peter makes his announcement of the good news about Jesus, the Holy Spirit comes upon all those outsiders, marking them as insiders. Peter looks around and marvels, and then wonders, "What is keeping everyone from being baptized?"

Baptism was a mark of Jewish belonging. It symbolized turning from sin, being washed clean and following God. Those first followers of Jesus had adopted baptism as the marker of joining the Church.

And now Peter says, all these outsiders, these non-Jews, they're part of the plan now. They can and should be baptized. So Peter baptized them all in the name of Jesus.

For 2,000 years, Christians have been baptizing on Easter Sunday. So today, we baptize outsiders who've become insiders. Let's hear their stories. [[Baptism Video](#)]

### **Benediction**

For the next several weeks, we're going to follow Jesus' followers. We're going to see how Jesus' resurrection challenges us to a bigger, riskier faith, a faith that makes us uncomfortable because it's almost *too much* grace. Too much forgiveness. The horizon is *too open*, the skies *too blue*. And yet they call to us, promising a freedom and hope we can barely imagine are possible.

I hope you want to join us on this journey. [Newcomers' Lunch]

We are a bunch of failures who are figuring out that it's all part of the plan. Go now confident that God can do more with your failures than you can even begin to imagine. Risk saying yes, risk moving forward, confident that God has gone before you to prepare the way.