

Sermon: After
Text: John 20:19 – 32
Date: April 11, 2010 AM
Place: Jesup First UMC

In the spring of 1738, a young Anglican priest boarded a boat in Charleston, South Carolina headed home to England. By almost every conceivable definition of the word, he was a failure. Although he had been ordained for 13 years, nobody wanted him to preach in their churches. His preaching was too hard. So, he volunteered for a missionary tour in Georgia, hoping things would be better, but ... they weren't! In Georgia, he had nothing but problems ... problems with his brother, problems with the colonists, problems with women, and finally, John Wesley decided to go home. And if there is one single statement that best describes how he was feeling, it is this one: *"I went to Georgia to convert the Indians, but O my God, who will convert me?"*

Have you ever felt like a complete and utter failure? One Monday morning, the pastor backed his pickup to the church door and began loading his entire office into the back. Then, he drove across town to the city dump and dumped it all. Then, he went home and wrote the District Superintendent: *"Dear Sir, believing that I am nothing but an embarrassment to Christ and His Church, I hereby surrender my credentials."* And he left the ministry forever.

If anybody had the right to feel like a failure, it was Jesus' disciples. They had followed Jesus throughout Galilee. And at times, they were surrounded by thousands of people. Jesus was

popular and they were right in the middle of it all. But then, He began talking about sacrifice and suffering and dying; and soon, people began leaving Him. In fact, He turned to the disciples one day and said: **“Will you leave me also?”** Well, they all pledged their loyalty; in fact, Peter said: **“Even if everybody else leaves you, I never will.”** But in the end, they all left Him.

And then, on Easter morning, the women went out and found the stone rolled away and the tomb empty. And Peter went out to investigate and found everything just like the women had said it was. But on that first Easter evening, they were gathered behind locked doors. And it’s hard to imagine what they must have been feeling. They had to be disappointed in themselves for abandoning Jesus. They had to be confused about what to do next. And suddenly, Jesus came and stood among them and said, **“Peace be with you.”** And He showed them His hands and side and said: **“Receive the Holy Spirit.”** And that’s when everything changed!

Brothers and sisters, how do you respond after you’ve failed God? After your best efforts at faithfulness have fallen short?

You see, it’s easy to become paralyzed by fear and failure! Verse 19 says: **“On the evening of the first day of the week, the disciples were together with the doors locked for fear of the Jews.”** Fear is a reality, a paralyzing reality for some.

Daddy loved to scare my mama. As a child, I remember him hiding behind the door or around the corner and sometimes putting on scary masks, and

waiting for her to come through the house. And she would scream bloody murder and stand there with her chest heaving up and down and her heart pounding. And for days, every time she walked through that area of the house, she'd slow down and look to see if daddy was there.

Fear paralyzes. In fact, there are people in Jesup this morning who won't leave their homes because they are afraid. And there's no way to convince them that their fears are not valid. When you're afraid, you're afraid. Fear paralyzes; it controls your life and dictates what you do and don't do.

In a world of imperfect people, it's easy to become paralyzed by fear and failure.

But our Lord offers freedom through His presence! As the disciples sat paralyzed by fear and failure, suddenly Jesus came and stood among them and said: "**Peace be with you. Receive the Holy Spirit.**" God's answer for the paralysis of fear and failure is His presence. Where God is, there is peace ... peace with self, peace with others, and peace with God!

Friends, I can't begin to count the times that I have felt paralyzed by fear and failure. Many pastors feel it. My mentor at Asbury Seminary used to say: "*When I was young in the ministry, I wanted to quit every Monday morning. Then, I matured and grew up and I moved it forward to Sunday afternoon.*" The ministry is a very lonely experience. Here we are surrounded by people and yet, lonely. And there have been times when I felt alone in my fear and failure, but somehow

God steps through the walls of my fear and failure and His presence brings me peace.

It is the presence of God through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit that frees us and ensures us: **“Behold, I will be with you always, even to the end of the world.”**

Our Lord also offers freedom through forgiveness! I find it interesting that the first thing Jesus said to His disciples was the typical Jewish greeting: **“Shalom!”** Or **“Peace be with you.”** Now, you and I might have said: *“Hey, where were you guys when I needed you?”* Or *“How could you let me down like that?”* You see, we want others to know when they’ve hurt us. Sometimes we’re like little Johnny.

One day mama was walking through the house when she heard her son scream. So she ran into his bedroom and found her daughter standing with a hand full of Johnny’s hair. Well, she was real cool about it; she got the girl’s hand untangled and she said: *“There, there, Johnny, Sara didn’t mean that. She just doesn’t know it hurts yet.”* The little boy nodded and mama left the room, but halfway down the hall, she heard Sara scream. And she went back and said: *“What in the world happened?”* And Johnny said: *“Now she knows.”*

But even though they failed Him and left Him to die alone, Jesus said: **“I will never leave you nor forsake you.”** After the resurrection, Jesus spent 40 days with the disciples, letting them know all is forgiven.

Our Lord also offers freedom through His Commission! Each of the Gospels has some form of commissioning after the resurrection. John says: **“Jesus said to them ... as the Father has sent me, so I send you.”** Just as He had sent them into the villages of Galilee, now He was sending them to the entire world. Their failure was not the end of their usefulness.

I met Jim in one of my churches. Jim had been a leader in the church and in the community, but then he messed up and because of his problems, he spent 18 months in prison. And since his release, Jim didn't feel worthy to serve in the church. He quit the choir; he wouldn't accept a leadership position. He believed his failure disqualified him from being used by God!

Jesus makes sure the disciples understand His plan for their lives. They are to be His **“witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, and to the utter most parts of the world.”** How liberating!

Our Lord offers freedom through the restoration of our faith! Oh what it must have been like to see a dead man walk into the room! To be gripped by doubt and confusion one minute and to filled with faith the next. Each of the disciples had a unique experience with the Risen Lord. The Beloved Disciple believed when he saw the empty tomb. Mary believed when He called her name. Most of the disciples believed when they saw Him. And then, there's Thomas! Thomas believed when he was invited to touch Jesus' hands and side. Everybody is different and we all have different ways in which faith

becomes real. And yet, Jesus invites us – just like He invited Thomas – to examine the evidence and believe. We are invited to consider the empty tomb, the angels dressed in white, the testimony of the women, and the appearances to the disciples and then, ... believe! How liberating!

You know, friends, we could spend our lives locked up behind closed doors, just like those disciples. We've all failed Him! We've all denied Him! We've all betrayed Him! We all have insecurities and doubts about ourselves and about issues of faith. And these things could keep us locked up for a lifetime, but ... this morning, Jesus wants to step through the walls of our fear and failure and bring freedom. Won't you accept it? The Bible says: **"Those whom the Son has set free are truly free."** Come, experience for yourself in liberating power of the resurrection.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen!