

# Promise at the Place of Failure (June 5, 2011)

Jay Williams

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*Luke 23:44-53 and Acts 1:1-11; Key verse: Acts 1:4*

## Prolegomenon

Among a human's deepest worries is the fear to fail. The fear of failure is linked to our not wanting to be vulnerable—to being afraid that others might see us weak or in need of help. And because many in the world value strength, weakness brings shame. Because we are often so fearful of failure, too often we undercut our potential. This fear sometimes paralyzes to the point where we do not even try. So we hide in the shadows of complacency and comfort, unwilling to take a risk. It's easier and safer that way. We choose not to 'dream big because we dare not fail.'<sup>1</sup>

Normally I do not make such declarative statements about human nature. In fact, a couple of weeks ago I preached from the title "Rock, Paper, Scissors", using the game as a metaphor for the ambiguity of life. Most often life is not painted in black or white, but rather in a shade of gray. Just as the rock, paper, and scissor each has a strength, it also has a weakness. Living in Christian faith, I argued is about wrestling in the in-between of simple dichotomies and false opposites. But today, I very much am declaring that the fear of failure marks us as human beings.

## Introduction

Just think about it: from a young age, especially in school, we are taught that the "right" and virtuous thing to do is to succeed. We must pass all our tests and get good grades, so that we can get a well-paying job and live happily ever-after. I must admit this logic is convincing, and even as an adult student I still fear poor performance and get sick in my stomach with the possibility of failing the comprehensive exams of my doctorate for which I now study. But one needn't be a student to be inundated with the compulsion to succeed. The rhetoric of American military might is that failure is simply not an option. In the household, people of color and women, especially, are taught by their parents that they must work harder and smarter to be the very best, because anything short of perfection is to fail not only oneself, but the entire race and women everywhere. We can because we must. Indeed, as we stand a couple days before the Annual Conference, I cannot help but consider how the United Methodist church and many other denominations fear failure as they lose members. So we scramble to implement programs to get people in the pews, instead focusing on ministry. We

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<sup>1</sup> My alteration of adventurer Norman Vaughan's statement: "Dream big and dare to fail."

fear death of the church, but forget that it takes death to gain resurrection. And it is in the resurrection, the Bible tells us, that the church is born.

Now, don't get me wrong, hard work and perseverance are essential in this life. But life is so much more than winning and losing, more than successes and failure. **It's only part of the story.** I am suggesting that if we change our orientation to failure, it is the difference between living and living well. When we realize that failure is not the be-all and end-all, then we free ourselves from fear of it. By turning to the place of failure—to Jerusalem—Jesus signals that he came that we might “have life, and more abundantly.” (John 10:10)

**Thesis: Indeed, if we change the way we perceive failure then we have a better chance at success.**

### Textual Exegesis

We read today a story from the book known collectively as Luke-Acts. The author of Acts tells us in the text's first verse that this book is part two, and that part one of the story tells of Jesus, which is the gospel of Luke. So in order to understand what happens in the book of Acts we must read the gospel of Luke, and in order to see the completion of good news that Luke proclaims, we must read the Acts of the Apostles. Today's lectionary passage, then, includes the last verses of Luke's gospel and the first verses of Acts, also recorded by “Luke”.

And what we hear is this: Jesus tells his followers to stay put. Now, friends, this is rather odd advice. If I might be blunt, it actually sounds pretty crazy. Let's recall what had just happened: First, the long-expected Messiah comes and is crucified—killed on a Roman cross—in Jerusalem. Second, the body disappears and the ghost of Jesus starts appearing to select people, rarely to more than a few people at a time. And now, third, Jesus says stay in Jerusalem, the place where he was killed, where his followers had to hide in fear, because they too might be mocked and killed. In other words, it looked like Jesus' ministry had failed. His incarnation did not result in the toppling of political authority—hell, he did not appear to be the “King of the Jews”. He rode into Jerusalem at the so-called “Triumphal entry”, not on a valliant white horse, but on a smelly donkey—and one that was borrowed at that! From all logical appearances, Jesus' divine stay on earth ended in disaster—in utter failure!

In fact, it is at Annual Conference last year that this sermon was inspired. The renowned Rev. Dr. Zan Holmes of Dallas was our conference preacher and he pointed the participants to the Acts story that we share today. **Jerusalem, Rev. Holmes, described it, was a “place of failure.”** But it took so-called failure of the crucifixion to catalyze the resurrection, ascension, and Pentecost.

Verse four of the first chapter of Acts states it clearly: “he [Jesus] ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father.” And the promise of the Father, we recall from the gospel of Luke, in the verses just after the Lord’s Prayer, is the gift of the Holy Spirit (11:13). So Jesus commanded the people to stay at the place of failure in order to experience the Pentecost. **So the promise at the place of failure is that the Holy Spirit would come, and “when the Holy Spirit comes, you shall receive power” (1:8).**

In other words, by staying at the place of failure, Jerusalem is transformed from the crucible of crucifixion to the point of Pentecost. Had Jesus’ disciples cut-and-run, after the loss of Jesus, then they would have missed out on what was yet in store. Stay in place for a moment in order to reassess the situation. If they had judged the situation too quickly, gotten out of dodge, and left Jerusalem, then it would always be marked as a place of shame. But because they read on to the end of the story, were obedient to Jesus’ command, and stayed put in Jerusalem, then the cross no longer was an emblem of shame, but rather become a symbol of the new life that Christ gives.

### Main Points

Because the disciples were obedient, then they received the gifts of their faithfulness. In other words, the text tells us that three things happen:

- **Bear witness – even to the ends of the earth (verse 8b)**
  - No longer *only* about Jerusalem, but all Judea and Samaria...metaphor for all people and all nations.
- **Look around, not up (verse 11)**
  - The angels testify: Pick your jaws off the ground, and start doing something. I love the angels in Luke-Acts, they ask the women at the tomb: “why do you look for the living among the dead?” Now they say, stop talking about how good God has been in your life, and start showing folk by your works.
- **With patience comes power (verse 8a, 11)**
  - Just as Jesus goes up to heaven, he will come down from heaven—though we know not the day nor hour. When the disciples want to know the date of the rapture, Jesus responds: “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority” (Acts 1:7).

- Because the disciples waited, did not cut-and-run and cut their losses, they gained so much more. They were given the Holy Spirit, the symbol of comfort and life, of movement and liberation, of power and vitality.
  - What happened at Jerusalem reveals that there is only **a place of failure, not a person of failure**. Just as the cross and death become transformed, even the most vile and broken person can be transformed into a new creation. “See I am doing a new thing! (Isaiah 43:19).
  - Failure is a moment; it only becomes permanent when we choose to reside in failure. But we have to stay just a little while in those dark places to know that “weeping endures for a night but joy comes in the morning” (Psalm 30:5).
  - Power has been given and the promise has been fulfilled. The choice is ours how we handle failure, and if we stay there permanently, or if we are sent out into the world as witnesses of new life.

## Conclusion - the eschatological point

**Holding patterns and bad weather** – As you know, I travel a good deal, personally and professionally on behalf of the church. After a long trip of meetings and presentations, when I board the flight back to Boston, the last thing I desire is a delay. Patience is virtuous, and I admit, I struggle to be patient in this world of instant gratification. I dread flight delays that leave me stranded in an airport or on the tarmac, but what is most annoying is to be almost home and the plane to be placed in a “holding pattern” by air traffic control. Sometimes the delay is caused by flight congestion, but on other occasions the plane is forced to circle for miles away from the destination because of bad weather.

When the circumstance is weather, something like the terrible storms that have ravaged so much of our country lately, and even western Massachusetts, though I may be annoyed to not be in the bed, I am grateful for the delay, and these delays teach me something about patience: It is much better to be delayed than dead. Better to wait in Jerusalem, the place of failure, than to rush quickly to places that we are not ready or equipped to go. Had the disciples gone out without Holy Ghost power, then they would not have been able to withstand the attacks that would come their way. John Wesley said: "Unless God has raised you up for this very thing, you will be worn out by the opposition of [people] and devils." Failures prepare us for future success. So when the storms of life are raging, I'd rather wait a little while than to unnecessarily be put in harm's way.

But any good pilot knows that sometimes, even with years of experience and the best of equipment, you cannot always avoid the storms by delaying. Sometimes the bad weather is all

around, and you cannot fly above it, you cannot fly around or under it, sometimes the only option is to fly right through it.

And when I have to go through life's storms, I want Jesus to order my steps and direct my path, because it is he who can say to the storms, "peace, be still." (Mark 4:39) So yes, I'm going to listen to him when he tells me to be patient, "be still and know that God is God." (Psalm 46:10). I will place my trust and faith in him, and place, as the song goes, "my hands in the hands of the man who stills the waters and calms the rolling sea".

Yes, I'm going to heed the warning to stay in Jerusalem, the place of failure, so that I might receive the promise of the Holy Ghost and receive power.

### **Other inspirations**

Finding the "courage to be" (Paul Tillich)

"Failure to Launch" movie

"Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you *not* to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others." (Marianne Williamson)