

Jesus and His Friends
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
April 3, 2022-AM Service
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Mark 14:27-31, 43-52

On a dark, wet night sometime after our first child was born, I followed a line of people into an unfamiliar church basement in Grand Rapids for a meeting. I was a student in seminary thinking about what might be next, and I came to watch and learn. Three potential pastors were undergoing an oral exam by classis, our local governing church body, and I wanted to see how this went. One of the interviewer's questions from that night sticks in my memory years later. It caught me totally by surprise.

It went something like this: In up to 10 words, how would you summarize the gospel? The simplicity--and the difficulty--of the question stumped me that night. 27 books in the New Testament, and the interviewing pastor wanted 10 words! I don't remember the responses exactly. One of the answers was something like this: God's grace for fallen people comes through Jesus.

A couple of other options, straight from the New Testament: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners;" or, "God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ." Or, "believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved." In my short lifetime of belonging to Jesus at the time, I realized I hadn't ever consciously tried to distill the good news into such a refined formula. What would YOU say?

Jesus words to the disciples in Mark 14:27-28 are themselves a short statement of good news. But maybe it's not the first one we would think of committing to memory and sharing. The sunshine in this gospel portrait is certainly muted. But cast in black and blue and purple and gray, the true and good and beautiful news is there. "I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered."^[d] 28 But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee."

It is Passover night, and things are about to get very bad for Jesus, and for the disciples. They have just celebrated a somber dinner and are headed for the Mount of Olives. Three times in Mark, Jesus has already told his friends in plain terms that he has to suffer and die, and that he will rise on the third day.

But it's clear that Jesus' friends haven't absorbed these facts. Peter, James, and John have even gone with Jesus up a mountain, where they see him awash in heavenly glory. They see Moses and Elijah. They hear the Father's words of affirmation. And then Jesus gives them a curious order: They aren't to tell anyone what they've witnessed until after he has risen from the dead. They wonder among themselves what "rising from the dead" means. Surely it must be some kind of metaphor.

This kind of good news is such an unimaginable prospect for Jesus' friends that Jesus tells them they'll all "fall away" because of it. Jesus, aware of their frailty to the end, wants to prepare them for the difficult hours ahead.

Peter, who once rebuked Jesus for talking this way, has come to see that suffering might be involved in Jesus' mission. No longer does he try to talk Jesus out of it. Instead, he professes his enduring loyalty, even to the point of death. "Even if all fall away, I will not...even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you." Peter makes a strong and admirable declaration. His posture of devoted perseverance for his Lord reveals his heart. He desires--fully intends--

faithfulness. He *wants* to go with Jesus to the very end. Even if the other 10 are fearful, feeble, and fickle, Peter believes his commitment will somehow endure.

But Peter is deceived. He doesn't know what he doesn't know. He doesn't know that he is no match for the circumstances he will meet in a matter of hours. He doesn't know that he won't respond in the way he thinks. His failure will cut him to the quick.

"Falling away" is something that *happens to* Peter and the other disciples. Literally, Jesus says the disciples will "be scandalized" by his arrest. They will be tripped up, trapped, made to fall-- perhaps even offended by the humiliating end of the teacher they have followed. For their Shepherd will be struck, the axis of their world will tip, and they will be scattered like lost sheep.

It gets worse. Not only will *these* friends fall away and disown Jesus. Before the night is over, another of Jesus' friends also betrays him. Judas—from the inner circle of 12, with the same access and experience and service with Jesus as everyone else. Judas, considered trustworthy enough to manage the group's finances, Judas comes leading a Jewish delegation with weapons and a warrant. And upon Judas' reprehensible kiss Jesus is seized, arrested, and led away.

3 years together. 3 years of living, eating, and traveling together. The disciples must have been reasonably sure they knew what Jesus was about, where he was headed. He was the Christ—the Son of the Living God. Arrest, trial, and death did not fit the paradigm.

The events are so disorienting and terrifying that despite the eleven's stalwart professions, despite their devotion and their best intentions, they ALL fall away. Just as Jesus has said. Mark reports that at this point, "everyone deserted him and fled."⁵¹ A young man, wearing nothing but a linen garment, was following Jesus. When they seized him, ⁵² he fled naked, leaving his garment behind." Like Peter and the others, we stumble and fall. We are subject to the same fears, sufferings, temptations and failures. We don't uphold our most valued commitments and cherished intentions. And we live with varying degrees of uneasiness about those shortcomings.

John Ortberg identifies this struggle in the opening of his book *The Life You've Always Wanted*. "I am disappointed with myself," he writes. "I am disappointed not so much with particular things I have done as with aspects of who I have become. I have a nagging sense that all is not as it should be". Ortberg writes about the gap between who he is and who he wants to be. He knows there are darker, more difficult cracks in everyone's character. But he writes about the ordinary, small compromises and accommodations made under the stresses and limits of daily life as a dad. "When I look in on my children as they sleep at night," he says, "I think of the kind of father I want to be. I want to create moments of magic, I want them to remember laughing til the tears flow, I want to read to them and make the books come alive so they love to read, I want to have slow, sweet talks with them as they're getting ready to close their eyes, I want to sing them awake in the morning...I look in on them as they sleep at night, and I remember how the day really went. I remember how they were trapped in a fight about checkers and I walked out of the room because I didn't want to spend the energy needed to teach them how to resolve conflict...I remember how my daughter spilled cherry punch at dinner and I yelled at her as if she had revealed some deep character flaw...simply because I'm big and she's little and I can get away with it...I am [also] disappointed that I still love God so little and sin so much...The feeling of disappointment is...a reflection of a deeper problem—my failure to be the person God had in mind when he created me... [T]he ache in my heart to be at home with the Father."

Peel back the layers of our aspirations and intentions that paper over the void of our failures, and what you will see looks an awful lot like the young man fleeing the Sanhedrin's police force on the Mount of Olives: a naked soul running for cover.

There's the woman who has always longed for her dad's approval. Achievement is the currency that earns it. She really wants to make her dad proud. She longs to be worthy of his affirmation. These things drive her, even as an adult. She keeps climbing the ladder at work. And then one day her company is bought out and her job is cut. She's tripped up. Not only is her job gone; not only does she feel disillusioned about her own value; she also wonders if she can face dad.

She stewes over her failures, real and perceived, and she puts off the phone call. Will her dad jump on her failures and criticize her faults? Will he dissect where she went wrong? Or will her vulnerable soul, her openness and shame come into the sight of a father who sits with her in the disappointment? Will he say, "I know. I know. You've been caught in something bigger than you. I love you and I'm not going anywhere."

Friends and spouses and parents and families and church communities and neighbors fail. But because of Jesus, our Heavenly Father--who cannot fail--comes alongside us, weak and wounded as we are. Jesus *knows* his disciples will fail him. He knows it all--their self-deception, their naked fear, their shame. He sees it coming despite their protests. He tells them ahead of time. And just as he has said, it comes to pass. "You will all fall away. Strike the shepherd and the sheep will be scattered. But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee." Faced with the abandonment and betrayal, you could expect a merely human friend to say, "Thanks a lot, guys. Laying down my life for you has never seemed like a better idea than it does today."

But not Jesus. Jesus doesn't condemn the disciples' failure. He speaks words of a future hope: They will be at home together in Galilee, and he will lead them once again. "After I am raised I will go before you to Galilee." Jesus, fully human, fully God, says, "I will face the abandonment of friends who pledged never to leave or forsake me. I will face this betrayal, arrest, and trial; this judgment and punishment. I will face the dark night of the soul, wondering if God himself has turned away. I will face physical suffering and death, the last great enemy.

With the strength that casts out the demons and stops wind and waves with a word, Jesus turns toward the obedience of the cross, willed for the sake of love. Because through the path of suffering and death comes the promise of resurrection and restoration.

John Bunyan, the author of *Pilgrim's Progress*, wrote 57 other books, including one devoted to unpacking John 6:37; "Whoever comes to me I will never—not ever—cast out." Paraphrasing Bunyan's take on the steadfast nature of the heart of Jesus despite human failure, author Dane Ortlund writes: "We are factories of fresh resistances to Christ's love. Even when we run out of tangible reasons [for him to] cast [us] out, such as specific sins or failures, we tend to retain a vague sense that, given enough time, Jesus will finally grow tired of us and hold us at arm's length... 'No, wait—we say, cautiously approaching Jesus— 'you don't understand. I've *really* messed up, in all kinds of ways.'" "*I know*," he responds. "You know most of it. But there's more perversity down inside me that is hidden from everyone." *I know it all*. "Well the thing is, it isn't just my past. It's my present too." *I understand*. "But I don't know if I can break free of this any time soon." *That's the only kind of person I'm here to help...* "You don't get it. My offenses aren't directed toward others. They're against you." *Then I am the one most suited to forgive them*. "But the more of the ugliness in me you discover, the sooner you'll get fed up with me." *Whoever comes to me I will never cast out.*"

The Jesus who sees all of you--even the parts you can't or won't see, faces his own death exposed and alone. With dignity and composure. He did it so that he could receive your battered, naked soul and baptize it in the healing water of his name. He raises you with him in new life and gives you new clothes to wear, his clothes. You need not fear exposure, ridicule, or shame in God's eyes, for the God who made you has also redeemed you at great cost. Thanks be to God.

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