

I

At the appointed hour, I took my place in the pulpit, I looked out over the casket before me and the congregation gathered in the pews to worship and to mourn, and I began.

I was still in my first year in ministry, and the deceased was Norma, the 60-something-year-old daughter of one of the 80-something members of the church. Norma had lived in another town and we had never met, but when she died, her sweet mother asked if I would conduct her daughter's funeral service, and I readily accepted.

I was just a minute or so into the service when I caught the eye of Norma's sister, and it was clear that she was trying to signal something to me from her seat in the front pew. I looked closer, and I could see that she was forming the name "Norma" with her mouth. I frowned, looked down at my notes, and a terrible ache formed in the pit of my stomach. On every page of my notes, I'd written the name "Nancy," and clearly I'd already said the name "Nancy" at least a few times, even though the name of the deceased was "Norma."

I immediately realized what had happened. In that congregation, a number of the women were named Nancy, and while I'd been in my office working on my notes for Norma's funeral service, one of the Nancy's had stopped by, and from that moment forward, in my notes, Norma had become transposed as Nancy.

So that's how I came to say the wrong name while leading a funeral service. Twice.

I was so terribly embarrassed, and after the service, I apologized profusely to the family, and they were nothing but kind and gracious about it. But I still think about that day and even now, I feel my cheeks getting warm.

I'd like to tell you that that in all the years I've been trying to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, that moment was my biggest failure, but I'd be lying. That was but one of a huge number of times I've missed the mark, I've screwed up, I've failed to be the person that my baptism calls me to be.

II

We know that everyone makes mistakes. Everyone, sooner or later, despite their best intentions, despite their best efforts, completely misses the mark. Sooner or later, everyone fails.

Sometimes those failures are visible to everyone. And sometimes, maybe we think we're the only ones that will ever know. But for we who are people of faith, we must acknowledge that God sees it all, no matter how big or how small.

III

And our story today is about a massive failure of discipleship on the part of the very people in the world who should have been in the best position to know and do better. So listen now for a Word from God from Luke 24:1-12.

*But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again." Then they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.*

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

Early in the morning on the first day of the week, when the women discovered the empty tomb and heard the startling words of the two men in dazzling clothes, they ran to tell their story.

But they did not run to the police. They did not run to the press. They ran to the eleven men in the whole world who were in the best position to know and understand what had just happened.

For three years, these men had been with Jesus every day. They had heard every parable. They had seen every miracle. More than once, Jesus had told them point-blank that when they got to Jerusalem, he would be handed over and crucified, and on the third day, he would rise again. And just a few days before today's story, these eleven men had pledged to follow Jesus, no matter what, even if it meant imprisonment, torture, and death.

And so here it is, early in the morning on the third day. And Mary Magdalene, and Joanna, and Mary the mother of James, and the other women who were with them have come running back from the cemetery to report that the tomb is empty, to report that two men in dazzling clothes have asked them why they're looking for the living among the dead. These women are not strangers to the disciples. They've known each other for years. They've followed Jesus together from the beginning. And yet the eleven men in the world who are in the best position to know and understand what has happened dismiss their testimony as "an idle tale."

I don't know why the men didn't believe the women. Maybe they were frightened. Maybe they were

embarrassed. Maybe they were jealous. Whatever the case may be, they did not believe them.

And the story could have ended right there.

But I noticed something last week as we were reading again through Luke's version of the passion story. In Luke's account of the night of the last supper, before his betrayal and arrest and crucifixion and death, Jesus says to Peter, "I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers."

We know, of course, that when the chips are down, Peter denies three times that he ever knew Jesus. We know, of course, that while Jesus is on the cross, Peter is nowhere to be found. We know all about Peter's failure. And it seems that Jesus knew all about it, too.

But what intrigues me about this exchange on the night of the last supper is this: when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.

So the women have come back from the tomb and reported it empty, and the men have not believed them. And the story could have ended right there. Except it doesn't.

When Peter heard the testimony of the women, he did not sit still. When Peter heard the testimony of the women, he did not cower with fear or sulk with jealousy or mock with bitterness. No, on Easter Sunday, Peter *got up and ran to*

*the tomb*. On Easter Sunday, Peter began to turn back to the way of Jesus and to strengthen his brothers, just as Jesus prayed he would.

#### IV

My friend, I imagine that there are some moments in your life of which you are not especially proud. I imagine that there are times in your life when you did not live fully into your identity as a disciple of Jesus Christ. I imagine there are times in your life that when the chips were down, when it was all on the line, despite all of your best intentions and big talk, you were a no-show.

Here is the good news of the gospel, my friend. Easter means that your failures, no matter how severe, no matter how embarrassing, no matter how disappointing, are not final. Easter means that there is no sin of yours that is beyond God's forgiving. There is no failure of yours that is beyond God's redeeming. There is no death of yours that is beyond God's resurrecting. Easter means that grace always bats last.

But Easter also means that there is some work to do. Peter didn't just sit there thinking deep thoughts. He got up and *ran*.

So what's your Easter work? Perhaps someone has shared a testimony about their experience with you that you have dismissed as an idle tale, and it's time to listen and to make an amends. Perhaps for a little too long you have been cowering in fear or seething in rage or stewing in envy.

What's your Easter work, my friend?

V

And what about us, as a community of faith?

First Presbyterian Church of Athens is a truly remarkable congregation. It's not an overstatement to say that our community would not be what it is today if First Presbyterian Church had never existed. Lives have been changed because for over 200 years now, First Presbyterian Church has a heart for Jesus and a heart for our community.

But 200 years is a long time. And if we said that in that whole 200 years, our church has never missed the mark, never failed to be the church that God is calling us to be, we'd be lying. The church, after all, is made up of human beings, and despite all our best intentions and all our big words about following Jesus no matter what, we make mistakes.

But the Good News of Easter is that grace always gets the last bat.

The Good News of Easter is that even now, Jesus is praying for us, that once we have turned back, we will strengthen our brothers and sisters.

The Good News of Easter is that we need not cower in fear or sulk in jealousy or sink in cynicism.

The Good News of Easter is that the testimony of the women is true. The tomb stands empty.

He is not here.

He has been raised.

Thanks be to God!

Amen.