

***Overcoming the Fear of Failure***  
**4<sup>th</sup> Weekend in Lent – Color: Purple – March 5/6, 2005**  
**Sermon Background Study**

“For God did not give us a spirit of fear,  
but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.” (2 Timothy 1:7)

*Mark 14:66-72 (NRSV)*

<sup>66</sup>While Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant-girls of the high priest came by. <sup>67</sup>When she saw Peter warming himself, she stared at him and said, “You also were with Jesus, the man from Nazareth.” <sup>68</sup>But he denied it, saying, “I do not know or understand what you are talking about.” And he went out into the forecourt. Then the cock crowed. <sup>69</sup>And the servant-girl, on seeing him, began again to say to the bystanders, “This man is one of them.” <sup>70</sup>But again he denied it. Then after a little while the bystanders again said to Peter, “Certainly you are one of them; for you are a Galilean.” <sup>71</sup>But he began to curse, and he swore an oath, “I do not know this man you are talking about.” <sup>72</sup>At that moment the cock crowed for the second time. Then Peter remembered that Jesus had said to him, “Before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times.” And he broke down and wept.

*Acts 2:14-17 (NRSV)*

<sup>14</sup>But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, “Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. <sup>15</sup>Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. <sup>16</sup>No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

<sup>17</sup>‘In the last days it will be, God declares,  
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,  
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,  
and your young men shall see visions,  
and your old men shall dream dreams.

*Sometimes we fear that we will fail. Sometimes we fear that we have failed.*

*Today, we will consider Peter, who could not entertain the possibility of failure and was crushed when it came, only to be lifted out of his despair by the risen Christ and the power of God’s Spirit.*

When we planned this series, I don’t recall that we intended to devote two consecutive weeks to Peter. But as it has turned out, nobody other than Jesus plays as prominent a role in this series on fear as does Peter. In the first week of the series, we considered the story of the terrified disciples in the boat when Jesus calmed the storm. Because the boat left from Peter’s hometown, Capernaum, it is reasonable to assume that Peter was onboard. Last week, Peter was in the trio that climbed up the mountainside to see the transfigured Christ and was driven to the ground by fear when the voice of God came from a cloud. In today’s passages, Peter must confront a fear so overwhelming that it drives him to a betrayal he thought to be impossible.

*Before*

Last week, we saw that even though Peter had correctly declared Jesus to be God’s Messiah, he had failed to grasp that God’s Messiah must suffer and die in Jerusalem. “God forbid it,” Peter had exclaimed, only to be called “Satan” by Jesus for being a “stumbling block,” for tempting Jesus to take another path.

Still later, after many more grave warnings about Jesus’ suffering and death, the disciples gathered with Jesus in an upstairs room to share the Passover meal. Though it began like a normal Passover meal, things soon took a dark turn. Rather than speaking of Moses and the Exodus from Egypt, Jesus reoriented the meal around himself, as if he were the lamb being slaughtered for the meal. It was his blood that would be poured out. His body that would be broken. Afterwards, Jesus led Peter and the disciples to the Mount of Olives on the east side of the city. There, yet again, Jesus spoke of his death and predicted that his disciples would flee like a scattered flock. But Peter protested. Others may flee, but not Peter. He was the Rock. He would stand with Jesus. He would never fail his Lord! Imagine how Peter must have felt when Jesus turned to him, telling him that he would soon deny three times that he even knew Jesus.

Probably, even in the Garden of Gethsemane, Peter still didn't really believe that Jesus would end up dead. Surely there must be a way out. How could God's Messiah end up on a cross?! Yet, when Jesus was arrested and hauled away to Caiaphas' house, Peter kept his distance. When bystanders suggested that Peter knew Jesus or was one of his followers, Peter denied it – three times. Who could blame him? Peter knew quite well what happened to the followers of a failed, would-be Messiah.<sup>1</sup> They were rounded up too. Peter's denial was understandable but tragic. And he "wept bitterly" over his own failure.

*After*

About seven weeks later, Peter was still in Jerusalem. To the astonishment and joy of the disciples, Jesus' crucifixion had not been the end of the story, it had been a new beginning. God had resurrected Jesus. For weeks, Jesus had been with the disciples; more than five hundred people had seen him (1 Corinthians 15:6). After Jesus returned to his Father, Peter and the rest of Jesus' followers waited for the promised arrival of God's Holy Spirit. Jesus had told them that the Holy Spirit would empower them to be witnesses for Jesus and to begin the work of making disciples among all the world's peoples. And, on a day during the Festival of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit did come. The Spirit's effect upon the disciples was so astonishing that onlookers thought they were drunk. But Peter stood up and the rest of the Twelve stood with him. And Peter addressed the crowd that morning with such power and courage<sup>2</sup> that about 3,000 people came forward to repent and be baptized. By the power of the Holy Spirit, the Peter who had denied Jesus three times was now truly Peter, the Rock.

### *The Spirit-Filled Life*

It is one thing to say "remember who we are," it is another thing to live it. Though each Christian is filled with the Holy Spirit, many of us have little sense of what this really means for our lives.

As Christians, we proclaim that we are empowered by the Holy Spirit to grow in our discipleship so that we might truly be the light to the world. But . . . who is the Holy Spirit? What do we mean by empowered? What is a disciple? Indeed, what is a Christian? What do we mean when we talk about salvation and growing in holiness? What is the church? Why is the idea of community so prominent in the Christian faith? What future awaits us? What is our role in the kingdom of God? How do we connect what we believe with what we must do? How do we begin to make the choices God would have us make?

In the Spring Bible Academy session, I will be teaching a class on Monday evenings, *The Spirit-filled Life*. In this lecture-oriented class, we'll take a look at what the Bible has to say about these questions and more as we connect Christian belief with Christian living. We won't shy away from the hard questions as we learn together what it means to be authentic Christians.

You can register on-line for this class and all the other Bible Academy classes at:  
[www.standrewcccl.org](http://www.standrewcccl.org)

### *Peter, the Rock*

Before and after. Today's Scriptures could not be more strikingly different in their depictions of Peter. *Before* . . . a man who would not even stand with his Lord when things got tough. *After* . . . a fisherman who speaks with such power that 3,000 come to faith in Christ.

How do we explain this? Was it the effect of Peter's experiences with Jesus after the resurrection? Perhaps surprisingly, and certainly thankfully, it was not. The New Testament explanation for Peter's transformation is the arrival of the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit who empowers Peter at Pentecost. It is the Spirit who gives another disciple, Stephen, the courage to face his own martyrdom rather than forsaking Jesus (Acts 6 & 7). It is the Spirit who guides and directs the work of all Jesus' disciples in the months and years after Jesus' death and resurrection.

Why do I say thankfully? Because if it was Peter's time with the risen Christ that explained his transformation, then you and I would be left out. We have not been with Jesus as Peter was with Jesus. But, praise God, the Holy Spirit fills us just as the Spirit filled Peter. You and I are new creations, just as Peter was a new creation. We may not always feel it, but we rob ourselves of so much that God offers us, so much that is already ours, when we fail to comprehend and to live out the reality of our own Spirit-filled lives. Want to overcome fear? Remember who you are and whose you are!

<sup>1</sup>When Jesus was arrested and crucified, he would have been seen by everyone, including his own followers, as a failed, though well-meaning, would-be Messiah, of which there had been several. Amongst first-century Jews, there was simply no conception of a crucified Messiah. Surely, in the hours leading up to and after Jesus' crucifixion, Peter would have thought that his declaration of Jesus as Messiah was simply, though inexplicably, wrong.

<sup>2</sup>Peter was in no less danger at Pentecost than he had been during Passover. Not longer after Pentecost, Peter was arrested for the first time. He would be arrested and jailed at other times in his ministry. The early Church held that Peter was executed by Nero in Rome in the late-60's AD. The Roman Catholic Church teaches that Peter founded the church in Rome and was its bishop (overseer) for 25 years. The Pope is the Bishop of Rome.

## Daily Bible Readings

*(more on Jesus' last hours with Peter; Peter's experience with the risen Christ, and Peter at Pentecost)*

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p><b>Day 1</b> Mark 14:12-25 <b>The Passover meal and Jesus' institution of the Last Supper</b></p>	<p><b>Day 2</b> Mark 14:26-51 <b>Jesus and the disciples on the Mount of Olives. Jesus predicts Peter's denial.</b></p>
<p><b>Day 3</b> Luke 24 <b>Jesus' resurrection appearances in Luke's Gospel.</b></p>	<p><b>Day 4</b> Acts 2 <b>The day of Pentecost</b></p>
<p><b>Day 5</b> Acts 3 <b>Peter heals and then preaches again.</b></p>	<p><b>Weekly Prayer Concerns</b></p>

## Sermon Notes

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### **Spring Bible Academy info and registration is now on-line! To learn more and to register, simply go to [www.standrewccl.org](http://www.standrewccl.org)**

We have another great line-up of classes, including two women-only classes to be led by Rev. Kathryn Self. Classes include *Get a Life: Debunking the Six Myths in the Quest for Contentment* (with Rev. Self), *First Place: Bringing Balance to the Physical, Emotional, Spiritual and Mental* (with Rev. Self), *Christianity and Other Religions* (with Eric Roberson), *Acts: A New Spirit and a New World* (with Scott Engle), *Genesis: In the Beginning, God* (with Frankey Commer), *The Gospel of John – Part 2* (with Monty Moore), and *The Spirit-Filled Life* (with Scott Engle).

Most classes will begin the week March 28. Please register early.

#### **March Book Recommendation**

*Your God Is Too Small: A guide for believers and skeptics alike*, by J.B. Phillips  
Writing more than fifty years ago, Phillips explains that the trouble facing many of us is that we have not found a god big enough for our needs. We insist upon shrinking God down to a size we can manage and control. But the god we create is only a shadow of the God-Who-Is! For Phillips, this is a “Fact of history” and opens up for us the peace and freedom from fear that we seek.

### Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Failure. Who doesn't fear it. Who among us hasn't failed. If success is defined as getting straight-A's and making the varsity, keeping a well-paid job with good benefits, staying happily married to one person for your whole life, having well-adjusted children who are themselves successful, staying thin, avoiding wrinkles . . . well, if that is success, then who hasn't failed. In a recent essay, Barbara Brown Taylor suggests that we need an adequate theology of failure. After all, though the cross marks God's victory, it was a symbol of failure in Jesus' day. Crosses bore those who had failed in their opposition to Rome. Peter's life as a disciple was marked by one failure after another. If, as we proclaim, the gospel is about a world turned upside-down, what does it mean for our notions of success and failure?

You might begin by sharing a few stories of failure from your own life. What have you learned *from* failure? What have you learned *about* failure? How might our failures take us closer toward God? How might our successes take us further from God? Before you answer, consider this. Many Christians came to genuine faith in Jesus Christ only when confronted by failure and tragedy. I am one of those. Though I had gone to church for most of my life, it was only after my wife had left me and it seemed that my life had amounted to nothing, that I fell on my knees and asked God to pull me close. And he did. Out of the worst time in my life, God pulled me toward the very best time in my life. God brought me to Patti. God brought me to St. Andrew. Out of my own failure was born my own victory, for it was failure that delivered me into God's arms.