

IN THE LIFE OF FAITH FAILURES NEED NOT BE FINAL

John 21:1-19

The author Steven King tells of Doodoo Franklin. (1)

She was a classmate of King's in Liston Falls, Maine. Her tragic life was the inspiration for his horror classic, *Carrie*. She was one of the loneliest and most derided girls in her school. Doodoo was not her real name; it was the nickname her classmates stuck on her. She wore the same outfit to school every day – a long black shirt, gray knee socks, and a white blouse. The other girls teased and taunted her, not even trying to cover their revulsion. She embodied everything they feared becoming, a scapegoat laughing stock.

After Christmas during her sophomore year, Doodoo came back to school with a makeover. Her old wardrobe morphed into a knee-length cranberry skirt, nylon stockings, and a soft wool sweater. She even had a permanent. She was transformed.

The new clothes and hairstyle changed nothing, however. “The teasing that day was worse than ever,” King writes. Her peers had no intention of freeing her from the box in which they'd imprisoned her. Her smile faded. The first period sparkle in her eyes dimmed by noon and extinguished by afternoon. At the end of the day, she was the girl she'd been before Christmas. She scurried through the hall with her head down and her books clasped to her chest. “Doodoo made a break for the fence and had to be knocked down,” writes King. “Once the escape was foiled and the entire company of prisoners were accounted for, life could go back to normal.”

The good news of Easter is that the risen Christ desires to free us from the prisons in which we are incarcerated. Be they prisons of despair, depression, or disgrace, loneliness, guilt, or regret, addiction, or sin, Jesus died and rose to unlock the chains that imprison us. The first person he frees is Peter.

On Maundy Thursday in the Upper Room Jesus tells the Twelve he'll be betrayed. Peter loudly and emphatically insists that he is willing to lay down his life for Jesus. However, Jesus predicts that when tested Peter will deny him three times. Later, in the courtyard of the high priest, next to a charcoal fire, Peter tries and fails. He follows Jesus as his betrayal unfolds, but things go terribly wrong. Accused of being a disciple of Jesus, Peter denies it. Then, instead of slipping out quickly, he stays and fails again and again – three denials.

Think back to that chilly evening in March with the smell of a charcoal fire wafting in the air. Think of Peter leaving the courtyard, ashamed and angry with himself, knowing that Jesus knew he'd denied him, as did John. Then remember Peter watching in disgrace the next day as Jesus is crucified. Not even the resurrection could erase that memory. Maybe it even increased Peter's regret. When he had the chance to back the victor, Peter's confidence in Jesus crashed and his courage deserted. Nothing could free him from his emotional/spiritual incarceration, until he revisited his failure and bathed in God's grace. (2)

The charcoal fire on the beach was the start of Peter's release. Perhaps Jesus planned it that way. Some days after Easter and prior to Pentecost, Jesus appears to seven disciples. Peter, Thomas, Nathaniel, James and John went

fishing. Why not? They were fishermen and needed to make a living, resurrection or not.

After fishing all night for a meager catch, they hear a voice from the shore instructing them to try once more on the right side of the boat. They must have cast into a school of fish, because their net fills immediately to the point of overflow. John recognizes that voice. “It’s the Lord!” he exclaims. This is Jesus’ third resurrection appearance to his disciples.

As they come ashore, Jesus says, “Bring some of your fish. Let’s have breakfast.” Next there is an interesting exchange between Jesus and Peter. In this conversation we discover how Jesus frees a person from prison. With balanced moral symmetry, Jesus asks three times if Peter loves him. For each denial Peter declares his love of his Lord. In the process Peter’s deep unhealed wounds of humiliation, regret, and shame are gently exposed, cleansed, and healed. The imprisoning of his moral failure falls away and Peter is renewed.

In the life of faith failures need not be final. The risen Christ refuses to allow Peter to remain in his prison, incarcerated in guilt and lament. In forgiving Peter as he does and reconciling with Peter, Jesus transforms Peter’s failure into understanding and conviction of the gospel Peter is experiencing.

In this story we observe the God of grace who wishes to free us from the prisons of our lives. Christ calls all of us break out of the boxes we create for ourselves, or others create for us, or we create for others. Easter’s empty tomb and the actions of the risen Christ reveal that

transformation and renewal can be ours. Second chances abound with God.

A college senior approached his campus chaplain one afternoon firmly believing God had given up on him.

The student told how he'd been raised in a religious home, but during his college years he'd gotten into some serious trouble. He said what bothered him most was how he kept repeating wrong behaviors. He was convinced God had cast him off and he was beyond hope. The chaplain pointed to Peter. He related how Peter had been the disciple upon whom Jesus had most relied but who abandoned Jesus in his hour of need. Yet, after his resurrection Jesus had gone to Peter and gave him another chance. The chaplain promised that if God's grace so extends to Peter, it so extends to him. It so extends to us as well. In the life of faith, failures need not be final.

Perhaps you have failed Jesus. By your words or actions, perhaps you've denied him once, twice, or more. Perhaps you've failed your spouse, or child, or friend, or colleague, or a whole slew of people you don't even know, or perhaps you've failed yourself. The risen Christ is present at his communion table to bring reconciliation and renewal to you and to them.

Now note what Jesus does after he frees Peter from his imprisonment. He puts Peter to work in the ministry of reconciliation and renewal. "Do you love me?" Jesus asks Peter for the third time. "Lord, you know I love you," Peter answers. "Then feed my sheep," Jesus directs. Jesus tells Peter he's been freed from his incarceration in order to free others from theirs. The risen Christ calls Peter and us to offer rebirth in place of condemnation, to reconcile rather

than dwell on past sins, and to care for one another rather than to isolate the Doodoos of our lives. Jesus' resurrection is for our redemption and through us for others.

The film *Tender Mercies* exemplifies how failures need not be final in the life of faith and how we can free one another from the prison cells of life. It's the risen Christ who frees Peter and it's the Christian motel owner Rosa Lee who stands in for Christ for Mack Sledge in the film. After his divorce from Dixie, Mack incarcerates himself in a prison of dissolution. He winds up drunk on the floor of Rosa's motel. She offers him a mix of tough love and grace. He works off his debt, finds sobriety, and assumes fatherly responsibility for Rosa's young son. Eventually Mack and Rosa marry. Through her Mack finds a faith that survives stern tests. That faith and love free him from his imprisonment to despair and kindle in him a desire to compose and sing again. He's renewed and used in the care of others.

That kind of renewal is available to us through Christ and through us for others. Through this text from John, Jesus asks each of us, "Do you love me?" If our answer is "yes," he invites to receiving his blessing in Communion and then to feed his sheep. He asks us to do whatever we can to free one other from chains of despair, disgrace, guilt, or sin that binds us. Sadly, no one offered such grace to Stephen King's classmate, Doodoo Franklin. She died young and alone. It need not have been. She could have been reclaimed and renewed. Such redemption is the purpose of Jesus' resurrection, and no one is beyond Jesus' capacity to redeem.

In the life of faith, failures need not be final. What Jesus did for Peter, he'll do for anyone.

Sources:

1. Stephen King, *On Writing: A Memoir of Craft*, as cited in *Connections*, April 2004, p.4
2. Tom Wright, *John for Everyone*, Part Two, SPCK, p.159