



# SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

March 17, 2019

"Falling Into Freedom" - Hope Restored Sermon Series

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**W**e're continuing our sermon series through the Gospel According to Mark that we've called "Hope Restored." Over these weeks, as we walk through the momentous events of Holy Week, we are approaching the event that is the source of our hope: the death of Jesus on the cross for your sins and for mine. Because of what he did for the world on the cross, the cross is the ground of our hope.

What happens in today's text takes place as Jesus is being unjustly tried and brutally assaulted in the High Priest's home.

*Mark 14:66: While Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant girls of the high priest came by. 67 When she saw Peter warming himself, she looked closely at him. "You also were with that Nazarene, Jesus," she said. 68 But he denied it. "I don't know or understand what you're talking about," he said, and went out into the entryway. 69 When the servant girl saw him there, she said again to those standing around, "This fellow is one of them." 70 Again he denied it. After a little while, those standing near said to Peter, "Surely you are one of them, for*

*you are a Galilean." 71 He began to call down curses, and he swore to them, "I don't know this man you're talking about." 72 Immediately the rooster crowed the second time. Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken to him: "Before the rooster crows twice you will disown Me three times." And he broke down and wept.*

A lot of us can see our own lives mirrored in the life of Peter. Peter was a guy who liked to be in charge. Peter was a man who liked to call the shots and define the ways things were going to be. When Jesus tried to wash Peter's feet at the last dinner they had together before Jesus' crucifixion, Peter refuses. "Lord, you're not going to wash MY feet." But Jesus say to Peter, "If you don't let me wash your feet, you'll have no part with me." So impulsive, no internal editor Peter says. "If that's the case, then give me a bath."

And then there was the time Jesus talked with his disciples about what was going to happen to Him in Jerusalem. That time Peter said to Jesus, "Oh no that's not going to happen." And Jesus had to rebuke Peter.

Sometimes when Peter takes charge he overpromises. A few weeks ago we heard Peter tell Jesus that he would never, ever, ever desert Him EVEN if all of his other disciples did. And after making that promise, which I believe Peter really believed, we see Peter and his fellow disciples, doze off in the Garden of Gethsemane while Jesus was in agony about what he was about to do. Then, when Judas and the soldiers come to arrest Jesus, Peter pulls out a sword to defend his Lord and ends up cutting off a guy's ear while trying to take off his head.

As I read today's text, I have a lot of compassion for Peter. Last Sunday, Pastor Dan spoke on the passage that just proceeds the one for today. Peter can see and hear the abuse Jesus is experiencing. He can surely hear the blows and the taunts and the derision being heaped upon Jesus.

So, understandably, he's scared. I would be. So, when he is confronted by a servant girl he panics and ends up denying that he is one of Jesus' disciples. Peter denies any association with Jesus when confronted in the courtyard of the High Priest.

**P**eter's name used to be Simon. And Simon can mean "shaky" and "unstable". That seems like it might be a pretty good name for this guy. Do you know this guy's name? What's his nickname? (picture of Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson is shown.) He voiced the character Maui in the film Moana. His nickname is "The Rock"

Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson shares a nickname with one of the characters in today's text. That's right. Peter means "rock". Peter is the new name Jesus gave to shaky, unstable Simon. How in the world will Mr. Unstable, become The Rock?

Well, we're watching that process of transformation unfold in Peter's life in these stories we're studying. We're watching Jesus transform "Shaky" into "Rocky". At this point in Peter's story I would not let him lead a Rooted small group, but Jesus will have him lead the whole church. How does this transformation take place? Peter is in the process of falling into freedom and he is doing that by entering a dark night of the soul.

It is there that God will begin to set him free from all his efforts to try and save himself, to prove himself, to try and show that he can be good enough to merit God's love. He is falling into freedom and it will be in the dark, dark night of his soul, when he feels like a complete loser that God will set him free.

I want to read Luke's account of Peter's denial of Jesus because of one thing Luke points out that Mark does not mention. I want

you to listen very carefully to this reading because I've got a question for you when I'm finished.

*Luke 22:54-62: 54 Then seizing Jesus, they led Him away and took Him into the house of the high priest. Peter followed at a distance. 55 And when some there had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and had sat down together, Peter sat down with them.*

*56 A servant girl saw him seated there in the firelight. She looked closely at him and said, "This man was with him." 57 But (Peter) denied it. "Woman, I don't know Him," he said.*

*58 A little later someone else saw him and said, "You also are one of them." "Man, I am not!" Peter replied. 59 About an hour later another asserted, "Certainly this fellow was with Him, for he is a Galilean." 60 Peter replied, "Man, I don't know what you're talking about!" Just as he was speaking, the rooster crowed.*

*61 The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word the Lord had spoken to him: "Before the rooster crows today, you will disown Me three times." 62 And (Peter) went outside and wept bitterly.*

After Peter denies Jesus for the third time Luke records in verse 61 something that Mark did not include. Luke tells us that at the moment when Peter denied that he knew Jesus for the third time, "The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter."

Here's the question I want to ask you. What do you think was the expression on Jesus' face when he looked straight at Peter? Obviously, none of us know for sure. We're just going to do a little speculating. What do you think was the expression on Jesus' face? I want you to turn to your neighbor and make that face and then explain to them briefly why you think that was so.

Here's what I think. I don't think it was a look of disappointment. I don't think it was a look of hurt and anger. I don't think it communicated shame to Peter. Instead, I think the look on Jesus' face was one of love and compassion and understanding. It was a look that communicated to Peter, "We're still together, don't be afraid".

After Jesus rises from the dead and the two of them have a little chat on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, Peter is going to understand in a new way the depth of Jesus' love for him and Jesus' plan for his future. But right now, Peter feels like a miserable failure, a coward, a person who could not live up to what he promised.

Peter is going to again discover that Jesus is committed to taking Mr. Unstable and turning him into a rock. When Jesus rises from the dead the angel who meets the women at the empty tomb directs them to go and tell His disciples AND Peter that the risen Jesus wants to meet with all of them in Galilee. Tell His disciples AND Peter.

**A**s Peter fails in his efforts to live up to his promises, when he realizes that he cannot save himself by trying to be very, very good he begins to be open to a truth that will change his life. That he will discover is that the only way to live is to trust in what only Jesus can do to save us.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke chapter 15 reminds us that there are three ways to live. You can look to God for your salvation. Or you can try to save yourself. And there is an irreligious way of self-salvation and a religious way of self-salvation. You can see all three of those strategies in the parable of the Prodigal Son.

The British Library has an exhibit that displays the Sacred Texts of the world's religions. Out of all the stories in the Bible they could have selected to illustrate Christianity, they selected the parable of the Prodigal Son. You many not realize it but the common name of that parable is not accurate. To call it the parable of the Prodigal Son doesn't capture the breadth and challenge of that story.

You see, it's a story about two lost sons and not just one. One of the sons gets lost by being very, very bad and the other son is lost by trying to be very, very good. Both sons are estranged from their father. Both want the Father's things and not the Father. They had different strategies to get the Father's things.

One son's strategy was to be very, very bad and the other one

tried to get control of his father's stuff by trying to be very, very good. One is lost away from home and the other is lost at home. And the Father has to come out of his house to seek both of his boys.

It is easy for most of us to understand how the younger brother in the parable is lost. We look at what he does with his life, squandering his inheritance in wild living and say, "Yep, that boy's lost. He's living a sinful life." But it's harder for us to see that the older brother, who has tried to be very, very good, is also lost. The pride of the older brother in his good works is keeping him away from the Father's heart. His love of his own righteousness is separating him from his Father.

One of the challenges of the Parable of the Prodigal Son is the amazing assertion that we need to repent of the reasons we do the good things we do when we are doing those good things in order to try and save ourselves.

When Peter goes out and weeps bitterly, he begins to give up on his self-salvation efforts. As he realized that he had utterly failed at living up to his claims that he will be very, very good, he breaks down. But that is precisely his moment of salvation. We have watched Peter unravel in the texts we've studied over the last few weeks.

Peter falls into the freedom of the gospel as he comes to the end of himself. It all started when Peter confidently declared that even if everyone else deserts Jesus, Peter never will. We then

see that he can't even stay awake and wait with Jesus in the garden as Jesus wrestles with the weight of what he is about to do. Then when Judas and the soldiers arrive, Peter the fisherman tries to kill one of the soldiers, misses his head and cuts of the man's ear. And now finally, in this passage Peter will fail in precisely the way that Jesus said he would.

Peter has been trying to save himself by being very, very good. He's been trying to save himself by promising to be something he fails to be. He is a broken man at the end of this passage, but that is his moment of liberation.

You see, there is a third way to live. We can stop trying to save ourselves by being very, very bad or by being very, very good. We can receive and accept what Jesus has freely done for us on the cross as a gift of grace. You and I will never stop being younger brothers or elder brothers in our hearts until we truly see what was done for us on the cross. It is only then that we can stop trying to save ourselves and rest in the salvation that is offered to us for free.

One of my favorite Pixar movies is the one my friend Pete Docter wrote and directed. It's called "Up". Who's seen this film? Pete Docter and his family were a part of First Pres Berkeley when I served on staff as one of their pastors. In this remarkable film we see three characters who are each trying to save themselves.

**F**irst there's Charles Muntz, who tries to save his life by being very, very bad. Muntz will do anything he can to prove to his scientific colleagues that he had actually discovered a large, multicolored bird. He is determined to prove he was telling the truth about his discovery no matter who gets hurt in the process.

When Muntz first reported the discovery, he was laughed at and rejected by his peers. He believes that proving to them that his discovery was real will be his salvation. So, Muntz tries to save himself by doing everything he can to prove himself to others and he will do that by being very, very bad. He will exploit others to get what he wants.

Carl. Fredricksen, on the other hand, feels like a failure because he did not keep a promise he made to his wife Ellie about a great adventure they would take together to a place in South America called Paradise Falls. After the death of his beloved wife, Carl tries to assuage his guilty conscience by first floating and then dragging their entire house to Paradise Falls. Carl will try to save himself by being very, very good.

Russell is the young scout Carl meets when Russell shows up at Carl's house in an attempt to earn his last merit badge. He needs to do something to assist Mr. Fredricksen, to earn his "Help-the-Elderly" badge and become a Wilderness Explorer. Underneath all of Russell's efforts is a desperate attempt to get the attention of his absent father. He

thinks his dad will once again show him the love he needs if he can earn that badge. Because at the award ceremony, all the dads present the Wilderness Explorer pins to their sons.

Of these three characters, Russel will be the first to recognize that the self-salvation strategies taken by Muntz and Fredricksen (AND the one he was using) are empty attempts at resolving inner turmoil and guilt. They will not work to establish a sense of value and worth Russell, who has been trying to be good enough for his dad, finally rips off his merit badge sash and throws in on the ground and says, "Here, I don't want this anymore." He is no longer going to try and save himself.

In vain, we try to save ourselves by either being very, very bad and doing what ever we feel we need to do to reach our goals or by being very, very good in an effort to prove to ourselves and to others that we are good and worthy people. We need to turn away from these self-salvation efforts. We need to repent of our bad actions and we need to repent of the motives behind many of our good deeds if we are using those good deeds to save ourselves. That's what Peter needed to do and what he begins to do in his dark night of the soul.

Redemption breaks into the story of Up when Carl Fredricksen receives a gift of grace from his wife Ellie. When he finally opens the scrapbook they had set aside to record the promised adventure to Paradise Fall, Carl receives a gift of love

and grace from beyond the grave. What Carl discovers on the pages of that scrapbook is that Ellie wasn't disappointed with him. Their big adventure wasn't AHEAD of them. Their life together was the adventure she'd always wanted and all she needed.

So Carl, in a sense, is saved by grace. He is then liberated to live his life in strength, in confidence and with courage. He is going to become a man who will risk his life to do what is right.

*Here the congregation watched the scene where Carl realizes the emptiness of his self-salvation efforts and is saved by a gift of grace.*

There are three ways to live. We can try to save ourselves by being very, very bad or we can try to save ourselves by being very, very good. Or, we can give up on trying to save ourselves and let God save us. It's actually the only way we can be truly saved.

How do our lives change when we give up our self-salvation strategies? How are we different in our interactions with our families when our lives are grounded in God's grace and forgiveness and love? How does our approach to our work change? How does one look at our broken, struggling world if we know that we ourselves are only saved because of what someone else did for us?

**W**hen we're consumed by our efforts to save ourselves by disregarding God's ways, we hurt lots of people in the process. And the same is true when we are driven by our efforts to be very, very good in an attempt to save ourselves. With our holier-than-thou attitudes we are impatient with those we judge as less good or worthy. We bring havoc into our homes and our workplaces and we are little good to God and what he is doing to reach the people of the world.

There are three ways to live. Actually, there is really only one. And that one way is to accept the grace of Jesus and begin to experience the freedom and transformation that comes when we live in his grace. Jesus is the only one who can save us. Let's give up on our self-salvation strategies, whatever they may be, and instead, rest in the love and mercy and compassion and grace of Jesus.

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Note: Sunday sermon texts are also available at [fpchawaii.org](http://fpchawaii.org)  
The audio version can be downloaded from iTunes. You may also request the audio version by visiting:  
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