

# Failure is an Option

A Sermon by Rev. Joel Christian Glenn

5 April 2026

## Children's Talk: Unmet Expectations

Who here has ever been let down by someone? What does it mean to be let down? It means that someone said they were going to do something but then they didn't, and it makes you disappointed. Disappointment is when you are sad because something you hoped would happen did not.

On the first Easter morning, two thousand years ago, there were many people who felt let down. They felt let down by the Lord: He had said that He was going to rescue them from all the bad things around them, but then He had gone away. In fact, they thought that He had died and was never coming back! So they were very disappointed.

Among the people who were disappointed were a few women. These women decided they wanted to say one last goodbye to Jesus, so they came to His tomb where He was buried. But when they got there they found something very unexpected. As I read, think about if they were still feeling let down or disappointed by the end. Here is what happened:

Now on the first day of the week, very early in the morning, they, and certain other women with them, came to the tomb bringing the spices which they had prepared. But they found the stone rolled away from the tomb. Then they went in and did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. And it happened, as they were greatly perplexed about this, that behold, two men stood by them in shining garments. Then, as they were afraid and bowed their faces to the earth, they said to them, "Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but is risen! Remember how He spoke to you when He was still in Galilee, saying, 'The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and the third day rise again.'" And they remembered His words. Then they returned from the tomb and told all these things to the eleven and to all the rest. (Luke 24:1-9)

So when they came to the tomb did they find the Lord's body like the expected? No.

What did they find? They found two angels. What did the angels tell the women?

That the Lord wasn't there at all! He had risen from the dead! Later He even

appeared to them personally and told them that He would never leave them. The story ends with everyone overjoyed and happy.

Now think for a moment about things that have happened to you. Have you ever felt let down or disappointed? Have you ever felt like things aren't going your way? It can feel like the Lord is not giving us the things that we want, or need, or hope for! But that won't last. Remember how the disciples' disappointment turned into joy? That can happen to us too. Even though it seems like the Lord doesn't give us everything we want, He's actually working really hard to make us as happy as can be. He *never* lets us down. Remember that every time you feel disappointed or let down: the Lord never leaves you, and He is doing everything He can to make you happy. That's how much He loves you. *Amen.*

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We began this week talking about the triumph of Palm Sunday. Now here we are on Easter morning to celebrate the Lord's Resurrection. Yet if we were to go back nearly two thousand years to the very first Easter, early in the morning, the feeling would not have been one of triumph or celebration at all. What would there be to celebrate? Jesus was dead. The Romans were still in charge. The chief priests and scribes had not been overthrown. The expectation that Jesus would take charge as king had not been fulfilled. In short, Jesus had failed. Everything His followers had worked for and sacrificed over the preceding three years was all for nothing. Jesus' life had ended in failure.

Looking back today we know how the story ends. We know that the Lord did not fail; we know that He had succeeded beyond the wildest dreams of the disciples; but if we don't sit with the experience of failure that they had we will not be able to appreciate the power of the resurrection. If all we focus on is the happy ending then we will be disappointed when we encounter failure. We need to be prepared for the sense of failure. And we will find failure. Even when we put all our trust in the Lord, He fails us: Loved ones die, a house burns down, you lose your job, natural disasters strike, poverty persists. We fail too: we try our hardest to do good and still end up falling far, far short of our aspirations and we screw things up with poorly chosen words and knee-jerk reactions. And if that weren't enough other people fail us too: friends betray us, those we trusted don't live up to our hopes, people don't show up when we want them to or in the way we want. Failure is all around us. The story of Easter speaks to all of these experiences because it is not just a story of the triumph

of life: it is the story of the triumph of life even when all seems lost. If we are then going to talk about Easter, we have to begin by talking about failure.

Failure can be such a frightening possibility that we will do anything to avoid it. That might seem like a good thing: after all, failure is bad, so avoiding it must be good. The problem is that in trying to avoid failure we end up avoiding a lot of opportunities for good things too. Consider how the disciple Peter reacted to even the suggestion that the Lord might die. In the Gospel of Matthew we read that the Lord tried to prepare the disciples for that possibility:

From that time Jesus began to show to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day. (Matthew 16:21)

Peter, one of the most faithful disciples, has an interesting reaction to this statement:

Then Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, "Far be it from You, Lord; this shall not happen to You!" (Matthew 16:22)

Jesus, far from appreciating Peter's concern, offers a stinging rebuke:

But He turned and said to Peter, "Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men." (Matthew 16:23)

What had Peter said that was so wrong? The Lord's harsh reaction does not seem to fit Peter's concern for Him. But notice how the Lord finished His rebuke: He said, "you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men." In other words, Peter's focus on avoiding worldly suffering was blinding him to the godly or spiritual purpose. You could even say that he was risk averse to such an extent that he couldn't see past the possibility of failure in worldly terms to see the possibility of success on God's terms.

We might think we can avoid that trap: unlike the disciples, we know that the Lord's kingdom is a spiritual one, and that His death did not signal failure but a victory over death. However, as is usually the case, it is easy to see in others the

flaws that we are blind to in ourselves. When the possibility of failure arises, whether it be us or the Lord or others who may apparently fail, we look at what we might lose and say, “the risks are too high, I can’t take the chance.” This is especially true when we have had bad experiences that lead us to think, “I’m never going to try that again, it hurt too much: I won’t trust the Lord again; I won’t enter another relationship so deeply; I won’t embark on a huge project that I’m passionate about; I won’t put faith in my employees; I won’t trust friends with the things I care about.” Our view of failure and success is limited by these thoughts that lead us to avoid all risk.

Contrast that with the Lord’s view of failure and success. He didn’t then and doesn’t now just let failure happen on a whim: He lets failure happen because sometime one thing has to be allowed to fail in order for other things to succeed. Three times after the resurrection He reminded His followers that these things *needed* to happen. The first was when the women came to the tomb and found it empty. While they were there two angels appeared to them:

Then, as they were afraid and bowed their faces to the earth, they said to them, “Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but is risen! Remember how He spoke to you when He was still in Galilee, saying, ‘The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and the third day rise again.’” (Luke 24:5-7)

Notice that it says the Lord *must* be delivered to His enemies, be crucified, and rise. Not that He might be or that He would be; that He *must* be. There was something about His death that had to happen. He had to go through this apparent failure in order to achieve victory. (See also Luke 24:26, 24:44-47).

To understand this we have to know what His real goal was. Many of His followers thought He had come to establish an earthly kingdom, and in this He was an obvious failure. But that wasn’t His goal. His goal was a spiritual one. In the teachings for the New Church we find the following:

It is a universal principle of faith that [the Lord] came into the world to remove hell from mankind, and that He did remove it by means of contests with it and victories over it, and thereby He subdued it and reduced it to order and made it obedient to Himself. It is a universal principle of faith that He came into the world to glorify His Human which He took on in the world, that is, to unite it with the Divine from which [are all things], and thereby He eternally holds hell in order and under obedience to Himself. As this could be accomplished only by means of temptations admitted into His Human, even to the last of them, which was the passion of the cross, He endured even that. (True Christianity 2)

The Lord's goal was to confront the forces of darkness. In order to do that He needed to come to grips with every evil that ever was or ever could be. And in order to that He needed to endure even the worst temptations possible, the absolute worst of which He experienced on the Cross: in that moment He needed to continue to face the hells even when self-preservation would have urged Him to do otherwise; He needed to resist the temptation to believe that humanity had abandoned Him, and so He should abandon them; He needed to let every selfish thought and feeling die on the Cross so that He could rise again as a perfect reflection of our all-loving God. In short Jesus had to fail His followers' natural hopes so that He could fulfill their true need.

What the Lord experienced two thousand years ago repeats itself regularly in our lives. Just as He had to die in order to rise again we must fail in order to live.

The teachings for the New Church talk about how a person is broken down and reformed anew through these cycles of failure:

...it is the state of distress and grief even to the point of despair that effects this change. What good is, and indeed what blessedness and happiness are, nobody with even the sharpest mind is able to perceive unless he has experienced the state of being deprived of good, blessedness, and happiness. (Secrets of Heaven 2694)

We could never know how much the Lord has blessed us if we never knew what it meant to lose those blessings. We would never know how much we have gained if it some point we had never lost it all. Failure breaks us free from apathy and teaches

us humility and compassion for others. All things that happen to us, good or bad, are bent by the Lord towards our eternal happiness. Ultimately we are allowed to fail because it is the only way to succeed.

Now this might leave you with the impression that the Lord callously makes us fail in order to make us grow. For those who have experienced true loss this seems an especially poor and cruel price to have to pay. The truth is that the Lord, while He uses failure, is never the source of it (See, for example, Luke 17:1-2, 22:21-22). He only provides goodness and love. To think that the Lord somehow wanted us to fail or made us fail or is in the failure itself is to seek the living among the dead, and He is not there. Remember the words of the angels: "Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but is risen!" (Luke 24:5-6). Why do you seek the living Lord among things that are dead? Why do you try to find the Lord in the wreckage of your own expectations? He is not there! The Lord is in the life and recovery following failure. No matter how badly you or your life fails the Lord will always rise from the ashes and offer you new life and new blessings.

So now that we know failure is coming and that the Lord always uses that to improve us, it's going to be fine, right? Well, sort of, but notice how that takes us right back to where we started: trying to avoid the hurt of failure, in this case by treating it as inevitable. But think of the disciples: again, they knew that all of these terrible things were coming. The Lord had warned them. Yet when the events preceding Easter occurred the Disciples were still devastated. It was only after the resurrection that they were able to look back and see the good that had come out of these events. It took seeing the risen Lord in person and having Him open their understanding to truly get why what looked like total failure was not such a failure after all. Likewise we cannot avoid failure, nor can we adequately prepare for it.

That's kind of the point: we become overwhelmed and our only option is to turn everything over to God. It will only be after the fact, after we have some space and distance, that the Lord will begin to open our eyes to the good that has come from our experiences.

So in the end, failures happen. Our job is neither to avoid all risks nor to become pessimistic. Our job is to remember that although we may fail, the Lord never truly fails: His will for us will come to pass. If we seek the living among the living, if we seek the Lord not in failure but in the opportunities that arise out of it, we will find our own personal resurrection, and rise with more love and joy and happiness than ever before. *Amen.*