



Two Lessons to Learn from Failure Have You Ever Failed?

Several years ago I went with one of my best friends, a fellow pastor to teach in Russia. It was a great trip and I loved the students who were adult men and women going into Christian ministry. I was able to spend time with Olya who Mary Jo and I were trying to adopt and it was a great adventure. Pastor Mark and I got to the airport early when it was time to leave because we wanted to be sure not to miss our flight. We had been away from home for more than two weeks and it was time to get back to our families and our churches. As we waited in line to give our tickets to the airline representative, I thought about the great memories I had to keep for a lifetime and how excited Mary Jo and the kids would be to have me back. Finally I came to the front and pulled out the envelop with the ticket in it, but it was not there. My previous check-in passes for the flight to Moscow were there, but the ticket was not. The airline representative said I had to have my ticket if I was to board. And no, they did not have a computer record to prove I had a ticket. Frantically I searched through my bags without success. My friend watched sadly as I pulled out everything in my suitcases trying desperately to come up with the missing ticket. I never found it. At last, after waiting until the last boarding call, Pastor Mark left me behind in Moscow to try to figure out what to do.

Have you ever missed a flight, missed an appointment, missed a date, or missed an anniversary? If you have, then you know something of how Thomas the disciple felt. For some reason, that we don't know, Thomas was not present in the meeting room when Jesus suddenly appeared. The doors were locked because the group was afraid of being arrested by the very authorities who had crucified Jesus just three days before. It was a dismal time for them. Jesus, their Lord and Savior was dead. All their dreams of a new life were shattered. They were hopeless and purposeless. Then in an instant they were thoroughly reworked. **On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.** (John 20: 19-20 NIV) And with that, as soon as Jesus breathed on all of them the Holy Spirit, the group of disciples and friends of Jesus were transformed into joyful and courageous Christians. Everyone that is except Thomas...who wasn't there.

The despair over Jesus was gone. Hopes for the future were rekindled. Joy that they weren't wrong about Jesus came to life. That is, for all except Thomas. Who wasn't there. **Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!" But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it."** (John 20: 24-25 NIV) Just like that, Thomas was the odd man out, the one without blessing or spiritual power. He was in a sense lost in a crowd filled with happiness he could not share. Thomas blew it. He wasn't there. He missed the greatest opportunity of his life and it could not be relived and his decision to stay away was impossible to undo. It was gone. Whatever the other disciples and friends shared, he could never experience himself. That of course was how it must have seemed to him. We know now what Thomas could not know then. He would in fact the very next Sunday meet Jesus raised from the dead, alive and resurrected in power and glory. In the meantime, without that experience to build up His faith, he floundered in disbelief. He did what is a common psychological response to missing out on something great. He denied the reality of it. We all do that. The movie we didn't get to see probably wasn't that great. The restaurant you couldn't afford isn't that big a deal. The trip to the family reunion you weren't able to attend wasn't that much fun. How many who haven't personally experienced the wonderful transforming work of salvation downplay the goodness of Christian faith? The world is filled with those who have fallen into that psychological trap.

There are two lessons to be learned from Thomas's personal experience with disappointment and failure. First, failure is not future. Just because Thomas made the grave mistake of not being with the disciples the first time Jesus resurrected came doesn't mean his life was wrecked and that certainly did not determine the course his life would take. I found a list of people you might know who discovered failure is not future. Walt Disney got fired at a newspaper because he was told he lacked imagination. Steven Spielberg the Director was rejected from film school three times. Albert Einstein was labeled "mentally slow" in his permanent school record. The first two automobile companies Henry Ford started failed. Jerry Seinfeld was booed off stage in his first stand-up comedy appearance. Elvis Presley was fired from the Grand Ole Opry and told he should go back to truck driving. Colonel Harland Sanders was rejected more than a thousand times before he found a franchise partner in his attempt to start Kentucky Fried Chicken.

Perhaps you don't know the full story of Moses. He of course became arguably the greatest of all Israel's leaders. The miracles God worked through Moses were jaw-dropping. Moses was able to keep the nation together when they were in danger of splintering off from God and Moses' leadership. Rather, he led them out of the slavery they endured in Egypt into freedom. He wasn't always a great leader though. At first he was a colossal failure. **"When Moses was forty years old, he decided to visit his fellow Israelites. He saw one of them being mistreated by an Egyptian, so he went to his defense and avenged him by killing the Egyptian. Moses thought that his own people would realize that God was using him to rescue them, but they did not.** (Acts 7: 23-26 NIV) Moses spent the next forty years of his life tortured by his monumental flop as a leader. He took it so badly that when God spoke to him out of the burning bush forty years later, calling him to return to Egypt and lead the people out of the bondage Moses stubbornly refused to try again. He had failed before, why wouldn't he fail once more. Failure though is not future. The mistakes of the past are not the ruling force of our lives now or ten years from now.

You might not have the opportunity like Moses to do something so consequential that billions of people around the world know of it, but your life is just as important and meaningful to God. You are made by Him because He wanted you. Not a facsimile of you. Not a better or more complete version of you, but you exactly. You have the choice today to dedicate yourself to live fully for Christ, making yourself available to Him to do with as He pleases. Thomas could have let his life be defined by the mistake he made not being with the disciples the evening of Easter. He could have bemoaned not getting to be there when all the others saw Jesus. He could have tricked himself into believing it did not really happen, but he didn't. Failure is not future. Failure does not decide what comes next for you. Thomas made himself available to be a part of a future that God had planned, and it was spectacular. He, however, had to decide to join the others in the upper room and start again. It is then that he saw Jesus!

Never forget. Hope is Happiness. I do believe, and I think I am right, that although Thomas is cast as the doubting disciple, he also was the hoping disciple. It may have been just a slight hope, but something pulled him in with the others that next Sunday. Do you think in all his rough denials, Thomas somewhere inside him hoped that he too might see Jesus resurrected? Paul the Apostle said hope is eternal and always with us. We will enjoy hope forever and that is good. Hope is the stuff of dreams, of great plans and grand endeavors. Hope not only brings happiness, it is happiness. Hope brings joy to what you do. Hope is sometimes just the spark you need to beat back depression, overcome an impossible obstacle, get past a tough time. Paul gave this command and I think you will agree with me it is a wonderful one as we remember the greatest day of hope the world has ever known, the day the grave of God waited in anticipation of Christ coming to life and bringing salvation to the world. Here is the command and you should write it somewhere you can see it every day of your life. **Be joyful in hope...** (Romans 12: 12a NIV) Or as I think it is better translated, **Through hope, keep rejoicing!** No matter what you face, regardless how difficult and painful your troubles may be, as long as you live, you have hope to see you though it because as the Scripture promises, **If God is for us, who can be against us?** (Romans 8: 31b NIV) Hope is in the air today. Christ is Risen. He is Risen Indeed!