

- By the way, during the Offertory Anthem all of our graduating seniors in the choir are going to be singing solos in that anthem. We bid them farewell this Sunday with our love. Well I want you alumni to know that it is a predictable Duke dilemma. You see it most predictably among Duke freshmen, or as we prefer to call them here at politically correct Duke, ignorant and uninformed first year students. That bright high school senior who has been tops in soccer and psychology and student government and swing, matriculates at Duke and becomes the first year student, who is for the first time in life second or even worse. He said to me, "I have never wanted anything that I couldn't get". He said this to me sadly after having been cut from the swimming team. You see, until that predictable freshmen year experience he had never fully failed. Well get ready, I tell them at commencement. Life is a lot like that. Second or worse, or in the words of the immortal Mick Jagger, you can't always get what you want. This is a sermon I always preach on this Sunday, the Sunday before final exams. (audience laughing) Anybody who attempts great things at a great place like Duke, may fail. Take marriage for instance, I ridicule them for waiting forever to put their money down on another human being and get on with it. They postpone marriage into their late '30s. But who can condemn the first generation of divorce for running scared? Marriage, they have noted, is a wild risk. It is prone to failure. I think that's the reason why many of them demand 50 hours of premarital counseling from me before their knot is tied. I wish I had some magic key to hand them, some sure fire steps to matrimonial success. But no, no, to link your life to another human being is to expose yourself to the possibility, some say the statistical probability, of failure. You show me somebody who can look back on his or her life and boast of a series of unqualified successes and I'll show you somebody whose aimed too low, who in life lowered the bar, whose dreams have been so modest that they always came true. That life which stays secure in safe harbors, it never tests the open sea, is a life that never fails. I asked this sophomore during one of our perennial discussions of our favorite subject the alcohol policy, I asked this sophomore, "Why do you drink so much on Saturday nights? You're only 19. How many failures could you have had at 19? I'm 50, I've got a reason to over drink on Saturday nights". But I tell you the fact that so many do over drink, that so many need a little chemical help to make it through the night suggests to me that even at 19 there is failure. I think that most of the counseling done by most pastors I know is the care, the guidance, the comfort amid the predictable pain that is occasioned by failure. Any life lived as it ought is gonna have a lotta failure by your 20th reunion. Oh I once thought when I was a young preacher that eventually my Sunday morning jitters would subside. I would gradually grow confident, sure, certain of what I could absolutely make happen in a sermon. But my Sunday morning Sabbath jitters got worse because an experienced, mature preacher is just simply somebody who has had a lot of Sundays to fall flat on your face, to fail. But curiously I believe that failure has gotten worse. Because of the world that we have wrought. Our failure, once a typical part of human finitude, failure has gotten to be worse because now we live in this hermetically sealed, closed, clockwork world of cause, effect, predictability, where everything can be explained and for 9.95 plus postage you can get some book that will tell you absolutely how to live your life as a success. The six habits or 10 habits of something of highly effective people. We got this world now where everything that happens, that happens here, happens because of us. There is no meaning in life that is not exclusively self-derived. Your life is solely your self creation. You are a self fabrication. The great goal of modernity, though we did

not know it at the time, the great goal of modern systems of knowledge such as one finds at the modern university is to render a world that is closed, closed to any action other than our own. In an atheistic cosmos. What we've got is a world where nobody has to worry about being surprised. This is what modernity wanted and thank you social sciences, this is the world we got. What I'm saying is that now in the modern world our failures are exclusively our own. If we're going to take complete credit for the world, then we're going to have to take the blame too. A person in trouble, a person who in life has failed, once upon a time could cry out, why God did you let this happen to me. But today in a godless world that person is merely evading responsibility. Why now that things have not worked out as you planned, why would you scream at God? Since the world is self-made, not only your successes but also your failures are self-induced. At the end of our rope in a vacant universe we're at a true dead end. Since there's no other rope to come to the end of but our rope. And there's no one now to take the rap but us. We're kind of sad as we strut around with our Promethean claims of omnipotence. A friend of mine was spending a night in an old hotel and he was in the shower that night and suddenly all the lights in the hotel went off and he was there in this hotel bathroom, no windows, completely dark. He said for the next 10 minutes I frantically searched for my glasses. It is really sad in the deep dark, fumbling for our, what are we supposed to do though when it's dark and there's no light to be had, there is no vision, there is no hope other than that which is exclusively self-derived. In a closed world where there is little surprise and no real newness and no forgiveness and no actions other than our own, there is no reprieve from the relentless failure. Everything is just fixed. An so, in this kind of world the failure gets to be very final. We make our claims for better living through chemistry. We sing the Beatles You Got to Admit It's Getting Better All the Time, now become a commercial. All of this is just a kind of fumbling in the dark for our glasses. C.S. Lewis was once asked by someone, why are all the atheists I know such really good people. C.S. Lewis replied, "Well they have to be don't they, because they don't believe in a God who forgives so they gotta get it right the first time." I tell them you who are young, you better get accustomed to failure. I'm not just talking about your grades in Organic this semester. Because there's not only lots of failure in life, but in a world without a loving God and a living God, there is a finality to our failure that is deadly. Walking through the Cleveland airport I saw this big billboard and it proclaimed you've got the whole world in your hands, Mastercard. I asked this student, I said, "Why in the world didn't you vote in the presidential election? Some of us worked hard to get the vote for 18 year olds." He said to me, "I think I've just given up hope that anybody, no matter how talented or able, that anybody can fundamentally change anything for the better." If it's all in our hands, if it's all left up to us, there's gonna be a lot of failure. Well you talk about failure, his 12 best friends having forsaken him and fled into the darkness when the going got rough, his 12 best friends despite their declarations of loyalty, Judas was not the only betrayer. Here were the ones who were with him every step of the way, who heard all of his teaching, who witnessed all of us wonders. But when the time came for his 12 best friends to show what they were made of, well they did. They failed. The cruelty of the Romans, for whom crucifixion was a particularly fond means of law and order, the fickleness of the mob crying one day Hosanna King and the next day crucify him, I'll tell you which of all the good Friday failures cut the deepest. It is that of his own disciples. Words, words worse than the mobs crucify him are the words that Matthew records, and they all forsook him and they fled. You talk about failure. You talk about failure's finality, all of his disciples, fully expected that their failure would be the last word, the end of the story. After all, have we not said it is up to us to make the story come out right or it won't. It's up to us to make history work out or it won't. It's all in our hands. Look at the mess we made. That week you could just write over all the millennia of human

history, failure. But then at dawn women went to the tomb, a light shone from the place of darkness and death. Surprise, our verdict upon Jesus was not the last word. Surprise, there is this power let loose, uncontained, unrestrained, God is not stumped by us or our failure. As Paul put it so well, if for this life only we have hoped, then we are most of all to be pitied, for as in Adam die, so in Christ shall all be made alive. Look at all our failures, but if there is a God who loves to raise the dead, if there is a God that will not be stumped by our sin, if there is a God just determined to write the last chapter of our lives, well then there's hope. Last Sunday we had a couple of big services here. We had a lot of music. We had some rented musicians. We had a sermon. We had the prayer. But in all that, if you asked me to try to define the significance of Easter in one sentence I guess it would be this, despite our sin and our betrayal our finitude and our failure, thank God it is not all left up to us. (religious music)