

- The gospel for this Easter Sunday is from the Gospel of John. Now on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early while it was still dark and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. And so she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and she said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, "and we do not know where they have laid Him." Peter then came out with the other disciple, and they went toward the tomb. They both ran, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. And stooping to look in, he saw the linen clothes lying there, but he did not go in. And then Simon Peter came following him and went into the tomb, and he saw the linen clothes lying and the napkin which had been at his head, not lying with the linen cloths but rolled up by its own place. And then the other disciple who reached the tomb first also went in, and he saw, and he believed. For as yet they did not know the scripture that he must rise from the dead. And the disciples went back to their homes. Before any of you mention it to me, I want you to know that I did not write this sermon, or I did not think up the title of it after last night's basketball game. My text for this morning is Psalm 118. If I had written a sermon after the game, I would have taken as my text Psalm 37, oh Lord, why do the wicked prosper? (congregation laughs) So that out of the way, well, the game was over. The stadium was now emptied of cheering fans. It was a forlorn place of crushed popcorn boxes and empty drink cups and trampled programs. And the coach entered an even more silent locker room. Helmets piled up over in the corner. Jerseys piled in a wash bin. And the coach said, I want you guys to know that I am real proud of you, real proud. We didn't win the game, but I really believe that we impressed a lot of people today. I think this was a kind of moral victory. Later, as they were leaving the stadium, the second string tackle turned to the quarterback and asked, what's a moral victory? The quarterback said, well, it's the kind of thing coaches tell you when they don't want you so feel so bad. It's what the coach says when he thinks may be his last season. I tell you, if you can't fool a 17-year-old about failure, who can you fool? I know when the scores are put up at the 6:30 sportscast, they put up the numbers, and those with the largest numbers are called winners and those with the lowest numbers, losers. I don't recall a sportscaster ever speaking of a moral victory. Oh, they'll tell you anything to get you to go out on another Saturday afternoon and bash your heads together. Moral victory. The score really didn't show what happened in the game. If we had only made that first down back in the third quarter. No, Vince Lombardi was right. Show me a guy who really believes all that stuff about failure not being failure and losing not being losing, and I'll show you someone who's played too long without a helmet. A coach remains a coach only when the win-loss record tallies in his favor. Failure. The corporate president stands up before the stockholders and presents them with a drooping sales graph, and he says, well, we lost six million this year, but we're calling it a moral victory. It was a year of character-building for our company. A year later, there's someone else's name on the door out front. I sit on the university's commencement committee. And to my knowledge, we have never nominated anyone to speak to our graduates at commencement who is known for being a failure. We look for the people who are achievers and doers and movers and succeeders because we know that our graduates do not want to hear a commencement address on the reasons why my last three marriages ended in divorce. They do not want to hear a talk on the day I was asked to clean out my desk and turn in the key to the executive washroom. And yet I bet our graduates know that there's a lot more of life lived that way than in

the tents of victory. Now I don't know whether they teach people in the Fuqua School how to go bankrupt gracefully. I don't think they teach in the biology PhD program what to do when you've spent your whole life working on a cure to some virus, and somebody gets there three months before you do. I suppose the divinity school doesn't tell you what to do when you go to some dying little inner city church where the roof leaks and membership is in decline. But I bet you know that much of your life will be spent there. Failure. It's that sinking emptiness in the stomach when you look at the exam grades, and you follow, and there are your initials right there on the bottom, that breathless expectation as the numbers are being tallied, and you realize that the numbers will not tally in your favor. It's that time when the doctor comes in from the operating room, and he takes off the surgical mask, and you say, how did the operation go? And you can read the words on his face before he speaks. I see I don't have to ask, do I? It is the packing up and moving from the one house to separate apartments. And the last thing you pack is that book of wedding pictures that you know will never be opened again because this book of joy has now become a book of failure. It's the morning after the election and looking at those unused boxes of campaign buttons and bumper stickers and balloons not needed. I wanna thank all of you who have been with us through this election. We didn't win, but I really think that we made our point, and we really got a lot of good discussion of the issues. And I really think if this had lasted just a couple of weeks longer, we might have turned this thing around. And I know that someday, we'll all look back on this as a significant experience in our lives. Failure, defeat. And what to do with defeat? It could be one of the most important questions we ask in our lives, what to do with defeat. One modern response is rationalization. It was a moral victory. I can still remember as a young pastor going into a home where her husband had just suddenly died, and she met me at the door, and she said to me, "I don't want any cheap preacher talk "about he's gone to a better place, "or he's better off now. "I don't want it." She knew. He was gone. It was over. She wasn't up to any of this preacher talk. Today in the face of failure, a typically modern response is to claim no knowledge of it. I'm sorry, Senator, I really don't remember exactly what I said at the time. Let Ollie take the heat. I didn't know anything about it. And he said, "It was this woman whom thou gavest me. "She's the one that gave me the fruit and bid me to eat." And Eve said, "It was the serpent whom thou created. "He gave me the fruit and bid me to eat." This is not new. What to do with defeat. It's in the Bible. It's in a story as old as the Exodus, a story told about Moses, the first great leader of Israel. God comes to Moses in a burning bush and says I want you to lead my people out of slavery into freedom. And Moses said, Lord, are you sure you've got the right address? I'm not good on my feet. I don't do well speaking before a crowd. Moses wasn't being humble. He was being realistic about the possibilities for success. Because you find out in life sometimes it's better not to try to achieve too much lest you fail. And there are many who believe that life is better as a kind of string of insignificant successes rather than one great, big ugly failure. You go speak, says God. I'll tell you what to say. I'll show you what to do. Moses goes to the pharaoh. Thus says the Lord God of Israel, let my people go. As it turns out, everybody got word about the exodus but pharaoh. He says to his advisers, do I know the Lord God of Israel? I don't believe so. Not recognized over here. Each time Moses is refused. The pharaoh responds not with liberation but by increasing the workload of the Hebrew slaves, and this makes the people murmur against Moses. And they said, if it hadn't been for you, Things are worse off now than they were before. Pharaoh is going to kill us. And Moses turns his own frustration and resentment towards God himself. Oh, Lord God, why have you done evil to these people? That's a harsh words to say to God. But when it comes down to it, when you've really experienced failure, who else is there to blame? Oh God, why did you even put ideas of freedom into our heads? We got uppity. We should have been more content. Religion, the

opiate of the people. Make them happy being slaves. Why did you ever put this notion into our minds? Moses has failed, therefore God has failed. My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? That's in the Bible too. But God responds by saying to Moses, you go back over there. I've got something else in mind. Wait till the pharaoh sees this. And Moses goes back. He fails. God says, go back this time. Try this. Again and again, he fails until finally God comes up with something so radical, so drastic and terrible. Something new, resourceful is needed. God comes up with the Passover, which our Jewish brothers and sisters celebrate this very weekend. And so the story tells us that our God is a resourceful, persistent God who isn't stumped by failure. And the Hebrew children pass over from slavery to freedom. And yet as you probably know, that is not the end of the story. They get out in the wilderness. When they get in the wilderness, they grow hungry, and they murmur against Moses and God, and they say we were better off as slaves in Egypt. At least there, we got three good meals a day so we could work. We're going to starve out here. And God comes up with the bread from heaven, water from the rock. But then Moses goes up on the mountain to get the commandments, and while he's up there, where are the people? Down in the valley making an idol for themselves. We will have another God, they say. And Moses says to God, if I were you, I would wash my hands of this people, this stiff-necked people. Some kind of gratitude this is for delivering them from slavery. They're down there bowing before a golden calf. But God tells Moses, you go back down in the valley, and you say to this stiff-necked people. And Moses dies, and God picks another leader to bring the people into the Promised Land. But I tell you the Promised Land, still failure is confronted. One leader after another comes up before Israel, Joshua, and then the judges, and then Samuel. And if you know the story, it's a story of setbacks and failures and disappointments, and finally God comes up with a radical new plan for Israel. A king will be selected, the greatest one in Israel, King David, anointed to bring peace and justice to all the land. David, King David, is God's own chosen instrument. Yet if you know that story, David also fails with his adultery with Bathsheba and his murder of Bathsheba's wife, Uriah. And if David, God's own hero, his anointed one has failed, what hope is there? And you would think maybe at this point God would wash His hands and say enough, enough. But then God comes up with yet a new plan. There is another Moses. There is a new king coming out of the House of David, a new prince bringing with Him hope for all the world. Under the reign of Jesus of Nazareth, all the world will experience peace and goodwill. And at His birth, there is a birth of hope for the world. And yet at His birth, from the very first, there is still failure. In the screaming of the mothers of slain innocent children whom Herod massacred at His birth, the taunts of the hometown synagogue at Nazareth, the scoffing of the Bible scholars at the temple, the screams of the mob in Jerusalem, this new king David meets failure. It gathers like storm clouds over His whole ministry. He preaches. He says, "Blessed is he who takes no offense in me." And yet from the first, many were offended. And He preached away more people than He won. I remind you that it was just a few months ago when we gathered here. And we felt hope surge within us as we listened to the angels' songs about God's renewed determination to deliver us from evil and war and the things that beset us. But how quickly those angels' songs were overwhelmed by the screams of the crowd, overwhelmed by the facts of failure to have peace on earth. It was a short journey, wasn't it? From the singing of the angels at Christmas to the shouts of the mob on Good Friday. Were we really so surprised, therefore, to stand on Friday on a lonely windswept hill where this Son of David, this new Moses, this king, this liberator, this savior was killed? Were we really surprised? We knew the story. We killed Him just as we had killed all of God's prophets before Him. We had become so adept at extinguishing hope, that it was all over by mid-afternoon, and we went home, and we rested. Just as the people had wanted to kill Moses before him, they killed this would-be liberator. So much for God's

plan. So much for the angels' songs. So much for hope because the greatest failure of all are not just our failures but when God fails. And if God fails, what hope is there? And so as He hangs there on that cross, He stands for us as a symbol of all the closed doors and all the broken promises and the dashed dreams and the brick walls and the dead ends that we must experience in life in our failures and defeats. And you could hear death laugh as they sealed His tomb shut with a great stone. So let us not mock the Good Friday tragedy with a bunch of preacher talk about moral victory. Don't give me any empty consolation that He will live on in our memories. There's no nourishment in that. Could we be honest enough to call death death, defeat defeat, failure failure? And who would blame God if now in this last failure, in the death of His very own beloved son, God should at last be done with us and go? Who would accuse? Now on the Sabbath, toward the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. (organ music)