



It's Never Too Late



A Sermon By
The Rev. Andrew W. Walter

April 1, 2018
Grace Episcopal Church
Silver Spring, Maryland

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The Sunday of the Resurrection
April 1, 2018
Mark 16:1-8

Many years ago now, back when I was a freshman in college, I decided to do all of my studying in the library. I'd like to tell you it was because I was dedicated to my work, that I wanted to focus and really commit to my studies, be the best student I could possibly be, but the real reason was: I was interested in a girl.

Through mutual friends, I met a young woman who was smart, articulate, engaging and just about the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. I was pretty shy at the time and didn't talk very much around people I didn't know, particularly a girl who was clearly out of my league. But I heard she studied in the library.... and so, that's where I went.

The first night, I walked all around the building, looking in every study room and cubicle, peering through stacks and stacks of books, until I found her, sitting at a large table in the main reading room. I sat at another table, toward the far end of the room, in a seat with a direct line of sight toward the young woman. I had all of my books out in front of me, as if I was studying, but I couldn't take my eyes off of her. At one point, she looked up and saw me, gave me a wave and a smile, and that was it for me - that smile. I knew she was the one. I knew she was the woman I was going to marry.

For the next few weeks, I kept going back to the reading room. The young woman was always there, sitting in her usual spot, but I strategically switched tables, slowly making my way closer to her place, until one evening, I arrived before she did, and I purposely sat in the seat directly across the table from where she would sit. When the young woman arrived, she smiled at me again, and with that, we became study buddies.

Every night, we would meet in the library and do our work, sometimes helping each other with assignments. We would laugh and talk. After a while, I felt like she looked forward to these study sessions as much as I did. I felt like she cared for me as much as I cared for her. So, I knew the time had come, and I resolved to walk the young woman back to the dorm one night, and when we got there, I was going to kiss her.

As we left the library that fateful evening, we paused for a few minutes under the clock tower. It was cold and dark, but the moon was shining and the stars were out. "Why don't I walk you back?" I said.

"Oh, that would be great," she responded.

My heart began beating faster and faster, as we walked through the quad. I had a huge lump in my throat, and even though it was late fall, early winter, I was clam-y and sweaty, none of which was very attractive. When we reached her dorm, we stopped at the door, as she pulled out her keys, and then we just stood there, looking at each other. The light above doorframe cast a glow all around, and I knew it was time. After all these months, this was the moment I had been waiting for, the moment I had been anticipating. "Okay, well, goodnight," I said. And, just like that, I turned and walked away.

As soon as I did, I began kicking myself: What I was doing? What was I thinking? I just had the perfect opening, and I blew it! The woman probably thought I was an idiot. I completely chickened out. Now, there was no going back. There was no trying again. It was too late for that. I just missed the opportunity of a lifetime, and I knew it. It was a mistake, a huge mistake, one of the biggest mistakes of my life, and as I walked away, I felt the regret... The regret washed over me like a tidal wave.

Life is full of regret. It doesn't matter who we are; we all carry it around with us: things we said or didn't say; things we did or didn't do. Maybe we didn't study as hard as we should have or get the kind of education we wanted. Maybe we didn't pursue our hopes, and dreams and aspirations, because we were too busy living the life someone else wanted for us. Maybe we worked too hard and didn't spend enough time with the people we care about. Maybe we didn't speak up for ourselves or take care of ourselves, didn't let ourselves be happy or allow ourselves to love. Maybe we weren't there in the end, for a beloved family member or friend.

Whatever it is we regret, those things have a way of following us around. Even if we try to hide from it or shake it, regret has a way of finding us and haunting us. We think about the missed opportunities and big mistakes. We yearn go back and do it all over, to fix what was broken and right what was wrong, and yet, we know we can't go back. As much as we might like, we can't turn back the clock, and so the regret lingers and lingers.

Karl Pillemer is a gerontologist at Cornell University and the author of *Thirty Lessons for Living: Tried and True Advice from the Wisest Americans*. Pillemer interviewed 1,500 adults over the age of 65 and asked them what their biggest regrets in life were; and, the things that came up over and over were:

Not being careful enough in choosing a life partner
Not resolving a family estrangement
Not telling people how you feel
Spending too much time worrying
[And] not being honest, with yourself or with others.

Regret has a way of staying with us. Even as we get older, it casts a shadow over our lives. It's like the playwright, Arthur Miller, once said: Maybe all one can do is hope to end up with the right regrets.

If anyone ever knew about regret, it was the disciples on that first Easter morning.

A week earlier, the disciples were with Jesus when he entered Jerusalem in triumph. It was such an incredible day. Everywhere the disciples looked, there were people, waving and cheering, welcoming Jesus into the city. But then, on Thursday night, while Jesus and the disciples were in the Garden of Gethsemane, Judas appeared with a crowd of people, carrying swords and clubs. Before the disciples knew what was happening, there was a scuffle, people pushing and shoving, yelling and screaming, and when it was over, Jesus had been arrested. Fearing for their lives, the disciples disappeared into the night, trying to find a place to hide, trying to find a place where they would be safe, all of them that is, except Peter, who tried following Jesus at a distance, until he was recognized by some bystanders, and then, Peter disappeared, as well.

So, the disciples weren't there when Jesus was beaten and flogged. They weren't there when he appeared before Pilate. After three years of living together and travelling together, being closer than any family, the disciples weren't there in the end when Jesus died, to look him in the eye and hold his hand, to say thank you, or "I love you." The disciples weren't there to say goodbye to Jesus, and it haunted them.

Then, as dawn broke on Easter morning, some of the women came running up from the tomb, saying something about Jesus being alive. The disciples didn't believe them, of course. There was no way it possible. It was incomprehensible, beyond all categories of reason. "Maybe it's April Fool's," the disciples thought. But then, suddenly, Jesus was there, standing right in front of them. And, in that moment, all of the emotion the disciples were carrying was lifted. The guilt and regret was all gone, and the disciples knew – they knew deep in the hearts – everything was going to be okay.

That's the power of God's love. God's love bears our burdens and forgives our sins, and it wipes away every tear. While we can't go back and change the past, God can help us change the here and now, and give us a new future. Like the disciples, we can experience the power of Christ's resurrection, walking

through the shadows of our Good Fridays and into the light of Easter morn, because God's love can save us, if we embrace it. We can be the person we are intended to be, have the life we hope to have. We can be deeply, and truly, and finally fulfilled.

As the theologian, Paul Tillich, puts it in writing about Easter: Salvation means healing, and healing is an element in the work for salvation.

So, there I was, all those years ago, walking off into the night, feeling embarrassed and dejected, when suddenly, I stopped. Some might say I just got up the nerve, but I think it was God. I think God made me turn around and, just before the dorm door closed, shout: "Susan!"

The young woman stuck her head back out, and she smiled. So, I walked back, and I kissed her... and, we've been together ever since.

Today, we are reminded that it's never too late. Healing, and wholeness, and new life await, because Jesus is alive, and anything's possible.

Happy Easter!