

## CHANGED FROM COWARDICE TO COURAGE

Sixth in series: "People Can Change!"

Preached by Douglas Norris at First United Methodist Church, Palo Alto, California  
April 22, 1984

We're talking about change this Lent and Easter. People can change! When God gets hold of a life, dramatic change--from death to life, resurrection--can happen. Like the butterflies on my robe illustrate, a slow, ugly, gravity-bound caterpillar is changed into a colorful, soaring, free butterfly. Because God raised Jesus from the dead, that power of God has been revealed to us, offered to us, raising us from a humdrum, ho-hum, visionless existence to new life: free, soaring life in Christ.

A person whose life went through several metamorphoses and illustrates dramatically for us the Easter power of resurrection, is Simon Peter, a man who was changed from cowardice to courage.

When Jesus first got hold of Simon, Jesus changed his life. He changed his name. Simon the fisherman was changed into Peter, the leader of the disciples. Jesus saw innate leadership abilities in Simon and enlisted him in the cause.

Peter would have fit well in our 1984 America. He was full of bravado, fitting well the stereotype of the ugly American. Peter was full of salesmanship confidence: a big talker, all mouth, big-man-on-campus.

When Jesus sadly shook his head at the close of what turned out to be his last supper with his friends and predicted, "You will all fall away; you will all let me down," it was Peter who vehemently protested, "Well, I won't!" "I will never fall away. Even if I must die with you, I won't let you down. I'll be there with you." Bravado--big talk--all mouth! Jesus sadly predicted, "Peter, tonight before the rooster crows at the crack of dawn, three times you will deny even knowing me, much less stand with me." "Never!" cried Peter.

That night, events happened quickly. After the supper, Jesus went to pray. Peter and the others, with all their bravado, couldn't even stay awake, much less pray with Jesus, or share his worry, his apprehension. When Judas arrived with the soldiers, big-shot Peter grabbed a sword and cut off a soldier's ear. Peter was a hothead, impetuous; but, when it counted, he was cowardly. Peter ran.

The soldiers first took Jesus before the Sanhedrin, the high priests. It was a cold night. A maid had a fire going, and the soldiers were warming themselves. Peter, cold, inched out of the darkness up to the fire. The woman said, "You must be one of his disciples." Peter, afraid of the soldiers listening, replied, "Not I." The woman then said to bystanders, "I think he is one of them." Peter nervously replied, "I don't know what you are talking about." The woman persisted, "You talk like a northerner, like one from Galilee. Are you sure you don't know this Jesus?" Peter shouted, "I told you, I don't know the man." Silence. Then, a rooster crowed in the distance. Dawn was breaking. And Peter, with all his bravado, Peter, a coward when the chips were down, went away and wept bitterly. Jesus had put his faith in people like Peter. These were the people who would turn the world upside-down and bring in God's kingdom?

Have you ever let anyone down? Have you ever let your spouse down? Promised loyalty, love till death do you part?

Have you ever let your children down? A seven-year-old boy eagerly asked his father during dinner, "Dad, will you help me build a fort?" "Sure, son," replied the father. To a seven-year-old, a "sure" means now. "Not tonight, son, I'm just too tired. Later." The days went by with Dad's legitimate excuses: I've got to work,

I've got to go to a meeting. Finally, Dad said one morning, "This afternoon, son, I've got time to help you build that fort. You hurry home from school, and I'll be waiting." Can you see that boy in school, wishing the minutes by, telling his friends, "My dad is going to build a fort with me." When the bell rang, he raced out of the room, out the school door, down the walk, looking neither to the right nor to the left, eager to get home. The driver of the car that hit him cried, "Officer, I couldn't help it. He didn't look. He didn't stop." The neighbors came out; the ambulance was called; the parents were notified. They rushed to the hospital, and the little boy, just before he slipped into a coma and died, looked to his father and said, "Well, Dad, I guess you won't have to build that fort now." Have you ever let your kids down? How will that father handle the guilt?

Have you ever let yourself down? Those dreams, those pledges, those promises. Church newsletters cross my desk regularly. One of the most pathetic headlines I've read: "Diet Class to Begin Again." Again! Have you ever let yourself down? You who were going to set that company on fire. Bravado.

Have you ever let God down? The church is called to be the future hope of human-kind. We've been given the task of peacemaking, feeding the hungry, saving the lost and lonely, loving the children, enabling the teen-agers to succeed, a force for good, with the power of Easter inherent in our structures, our relationships, our people. We are the church, yet we fight, squabble, quit, get our feelings hurt. "I'm not going back to that church as long as so-and-so is there!" My, what God has to put up with! People like you and me are the hope of the world?? Have you ever let God down?

If you have ever let anyone down--spouse, children, yourself or God--then you can understand how Peter must have felt when he left Jesus to face the judge alone. When Jesus carried his cross to Golgotha, Peter wasn't there to help. They enlisted a stranger. When Jesus died on the cross, crying for water, Peter wasn't there. Cowardly, blustering, impetuous Peter. Oh, the guilt, the burden Peter must have carried!

Yet, Jesus did not let Peter go. Jesus did not let Peter down, or put him down. That is the gospel, the good news. God is love. Jesus loves us to the extent of suffering, sorrowing, dying for us. The resurrected Christ appeared to Peter and the disciples. Jesus appeared and instructed them to go to Galilee and wait.

Peter responded by doing what he knew. He went fishing. While waiting for Christ, he went fishing, he did what he knew. While you are waiting for Christ, the power of Christ to change your life, do what you know. You know what you should be doing with your life while you wait. You know you should be going to church, working in the church, serving in the community. You know you should be loving the lonely, befriending the suffering, freeing the oppressed, fighting for justice, working for peace. Peter and the disciples went fishing.

And Jesus confronted him. Christ found Peter, confronted him with his life, confronted him with his cowardliness, let Peter look in the mirror, face the guilt squarely, repent and be renewed. Christ sat next to Peter on the beach as they broiled fish over an open fire. Peter said nothing; what could he say? Jesus looked at Peter and said, three times--one for every denial (Oh, how Christ confronts!), "Simon Peter, do you love me? And three time, Peter, contritely, humbly, confessed, "Yes, Lord, I love you."

Then, several weeks later, the change came. They were waiting again in the upper room, soberly praying and waiting. Peter had faced his guilt, been confronted by Christ, realized he was still loved. Jesus had not let him go. On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came upon those disciples like a mighty, rushing wind. The power of the resurrected Christ overpowered them. And Peter was changed, changed from cowardice to courage. Peter changed from the one who cowardly denied even knowing Jesus, changed from one who ran from his side, changed into a leader of courage.



It was Peter who preached on that day of Pentecost, and 3,000 people were converted, baptized, and came into the church. It was Peter who, fearless of Jews, fearless of local opposition, traveled, preached, organized churches. The book of Acts tells of Peter's boldness. Arrested after healing a lame man and causing confusion in the temple, Peter's boldness convinced the leaders to let him go. From cowardice to courage.

It was Peter who, tradition tells us, was a leader of the church in Rome and was martyred for his faith during one of the persecutions. Tradition tells us that Peter told the authorities he was not worthy to be crucified like Jesus, so they hung him on the cross upside down until he died. A man, a leader, of courage.

The glorious, good news of Easter is that you can be changed. There is hope for you and for our world. God forgives. Jesus will never let you go nor let you down, regardless of what you have done or not done, regardless of your sin or your laziness, regardless of your bravado or false humility. Jesus will never let you go. Wait on the Lord, confront yourself in the mirror of Jesus Christ, receive forgiveness, and wait for the power of God, the power of the resurrected Christ, to fill you, change you, empower you, beyond your wildest conceptions. Christ is risen! Christ is alive, and because Christ lives, you too can be made alive, can be a butterfly, colorful, soaring, free, and courageous.

CHANGED FROM COWARDICE TO COURAGE

DOUGLAS NORRIS  
FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH  
PALO ALTO, CALIFORNIA

APRIL 22, 1984