Listen for God’s Word:
“He appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve, and then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at once—most of them are still alive to this day, though some have died.”
I Corinthians 15:5,6

Some of you are aware that about two weeks ago my wife and I returned from a Caribbean Cruise on the Princess Cruise Lines. On the first morning of our cruise we met the person who would be our waiter for the entire cruise. His name was Christian. On that first morning, as he was taking our order, he took notice of the cross ring on my right hand. He complimented the ring and I said, “Yes; I am a follower of Jesus Christ. I am a Christian.” I looked up at his name badge and saw that his name was Christian. Just below his name, the name of country he was from was identified: Macedonia. Now if you have ever cruised, (I know many of you have), you are aware that many of the cruise lines hire people from all over the world. It is part of the richness of cruising to meet people from various countries that perhaps you will never have the opportunity to visit. And here was a member of our wait staff that morning, Christian, who was from Macedonia.

After I identified myself as a Christian, and taking note that he was from Macedonia, I said, “The Apostle Paul went from Macedonia!” His eyes lit up and he responded, “Yes! And it’s because things didn’t work out for him!” “What?” I asked. “You know the story, certainly”, he said.

“Paul wanted to go to Bithynia and it didn’t work out for him. It was closed to the Apostle Paul and he couldn’t get in. He waited for God to tell him what was next in his life. And God sent him to my country, Macedonia. I am a Christian today because God sent Paul to Macedonia.” And in that brief conversation, I realized the message I would preach for Easter morning.

We need not fear the failures in life.

The message is simply this. Take note of it. Write it on the blackboard of your mind. Pencil it into your worship bulletin. Remember it all this week. The message that I want you to hear this morning is the message that I believe becomes resoundingly clear to us in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This is the message that we need not fear the failures in life. We need not fear the things we lose in life because God has a greater plan for our future. Hear it again: We need not fear the things we lose in life. Because God has a greater plan for our future!

The Apostle Paul felt a deep conviction to go to Bithynia and plant a church for Jesus Christ. It is all laid out for you in the Sixteenth Chapter in the Book of Acts. And wanting to be faithful to the Gospel, and wanting to be faithful to God’s claim on his life, he strived to go to Bithynia and the doors never opened. So he went back to Troas. And when Paul went back to Troas he had two choices, the same choices that you and I have today. When something doesn’t
work out for you, you have two choices: You can give up. You can recline. You can despair. You can pity yourself or you can keep your eyes fixed on the risen Christ and wait for God’s direction for what’s next in your life.

Things didn’t work out for the Apostle Paul when he tried to get to Bithynia. Christian was absolutely right that morning. But rather than recline and groan and complain that life was not going in the direction that he wanted it to go, the Apostle Paul kept his eyes on the risen Christ and received a vision: A man from Macedonia came to Paul and said, “Come! Come and help us.” In the tenth verse of the Sixteenth Chapter of Acts, Paul made immediate plans to go to Macedonia. Paul did not need to fear the lost opportunity to go into Bithynia for God had much bigger plans for Paul.

I want to take a moment and be very honest with you about my own sense of call to ministry. Five years into my ministry, (that was 27 years ago), for whatever reason, I felt a certain sense of call from God to serve a church in the City of New York. That call continued to grip me, and embrace me, and I became more and more convicted year after year. I wish I had the time to walk among you and lay out for you what happened in my life that made me convinced that I was to serve a congregation in New York City. Suffice it to say that I anticipated the day when that call would arrive.

Seventeen years after feeling that call to New York, while serving a congregation in Bucks County Pennsylvania, I received a phone call. The man identified himself as the chairperson of the Senior Pastor’s Search Committee for the Central Presbyterian Church in Manhattan. “Dr. Hood, your name has been given to us as a possible candidate for the next Senior Pastor of our congregation. Our search committee has watched a number of your sermons on Live Stream in the past month. We would like to invite you to New York and have a conversation with us.”

I shared with him that just that week, the Trustees of the church I currently was serving in Pennsylvania signed legal papers to begin construction to expand and update our church. We had begun a $1.5 million capital campaign to pay for the construction. We were renovating and expanding our church and we would be moving the congregation out of its Sanctuary for at least six months to another space as the Sanctuary was gutted and reimagined and rebuilt. I said, “We are just now beginning that process. With all my heart, I cannot believe that God would ask me to leave this congregation just as we take the risk of a major expansion and renovation program.” He said that he completely agreed and understood. But he asked me to understand that they could not stop their process. The chair of the search committee had a responsibility to his own church. He had to move forward in their search for their next pastor. I thanked him for his call and continued my ministry in Bucks County.

Two years later the renovation of our plant was complete. We had a beautiful church. The Stewardship Campaign was successful. We were debt free. We had raised and collected all $1.5 million. The congregation had grown and all the staff of the church, except for the secretary, had retired or moved to other opportunities. Things were going brilliantly.

Then one day I was walking with my wife as we did each evening around George Bush Park in Doylestown, PA. She asked me this question. “Do you sense that God has finished God’s work for us here?” I said yes. It was unmistakable. God had finished what God had intended through me in Pennsylvania. So I began the process of looking for what was next in my life. I do know that my eyes went immediately to the City of New York.

May I tell you that within the next nine months of beginning the process of looking
for what was next in my life, I received an invitation from a congregation in the San Francisco Bay area, an invitation from a lovely congregation on the east coast of Florida and an invitation from the congregation of the First Presbyterian Church of Delray Beach. Yet, I heard absolutely nothing from New York City.

May I share with you with all honesty and sincerity that I prayed one night and said, “O Lord, you raised Christ from the dead, but you do not know geography very well. The opportunities you are presenting me could not be further from the City of New York!” But as Grace and I continued to pray about the opportunities that came our way, both Grace and I felt the strongest call that we had ever felt in our entire ministry together. God’s “next” for us was at the First Presbyterian Church of Delray Beach. And that conviction is as strong now as it was seven years ago.

New York City became my Bithynia. I wanted to go into the city, but the doors were closed. But I didn’t need to fear the loss of opportunities or failures in my life, because God had something much grander for me and my future. With all my heart I believe that it is right here in Delray Beach.

Paul did not fear the things that he lost in life because he knew that God had something so much bigger for him. And the question that I place in your hearts this morning is this: What is your Bithynia? What are those opportunities that you’ve longed for, and worked for, and struggled for, that never came to fruition? Where are the failures in your own life? Where are the disappointments in your life? Those are the Bithynia’s in your life.

Do not fear the things you’ve lost in life. God has a bigger plan for you.

I ask you to ponder, where is your Macedonia? Do not fear the things you’ve lost in life. God has a bigger plan for you. God has for you your own Macedonia. We need not fear the things that we lose in life. For God has a bigger plan for us. Naturally, for us to capture that vision and to move into God’s future for us, we must keep our eyes fixed upon the presence of the risen Christ right here in the midst of our lives. We must pay attention to God’s activity as Paul did in Troas so we can hear the voice calling us to Macedonia where ever that may be.

N.T. Wright is probably one of the most prominent theologians living today. Many have called him the modern day C.S. Lewis of the Christian faith. N.T. Wright says that a strange thing happens in Christian churches on Easter morning throughout the world. We see the attendance swell. And among that large gathering of people, N.T. Wright says will be a large number of people who are skeptical of the faith. They are skeptical of the teachings of the Christian Church. They are skeptical of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. They are in church but are present for many other reasons. Maybe it’s important to their spouse. Maybe they feel it’s the right thing for their children. Maybe they are making mom and dad happy. Maybe it is because they live where there continues to be a cultural expectation that Easter is for church and family dinners. But whatever the motivation, said N.T. Wright, the church is filled with skeptics. And they’re the people who want the church to accept the burden of proving the resurrection of Jesus Christ before they believe. But then, Wright continues, Easter morning turns the tables on them. Rather than having the church prove the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the tables have been turned, and now the burden is on the skeptic to prove that the resurrection didn’t happen.

This is what I mean. How many of you this morning can remember what happened on September 11, 2001 in the City of New
York? Please raise your hand. Wow! And for those of you who were not born, I’m glad you’re here. How many of you remember exactly where you were when you heard the news of 9/11 in New York? How many of you would say that your life was changed in some way because of that attack on New York nearly 18 years ago?

Then you need to hear this: the resurrection story that I read to you from 1 Corinthians 15 was the first time the resurrection story was written down. It was written down before the Gospels of Matthew, Mark Luke and John were ever written. The first time the resurrection story was written down was right here in the 15th chapter of First Corinthians. And it was written down 15 years after the resurrection of Jesus Christ, less time than the time that has passed since the attack on New York City.

Paul says that when Jesus Christ was raised, he appeared to more than 500 men and women at the same time. They saw Jesus Christ, who was crucified, dead and buried, placed in the tomb, and now is standing before them. They saw the risen Christ and they could not stop talking about it. Because they began talking about this unexpected miracle of a dead man coming back to life, the church began to experience explosive growth. And the church continued to grow until today we have over 3 billion Christians around the world.

They couldn’t stop talking about it and sharing with others how their life had been changed by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

N.T. Wright says, the reason that the church grew so quickly is because when this resurrection story was written down there were some 500 people who remembered it happening and they couldn’t stop talking about it and sharing with others how their life had been changed by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. N.T. Wright says if you are a skeptic then you have to prove to the church why the resurrection didn’t happen. The burden is not on the church to prove the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The burden is on the skeptic to explain the testimony of 500 people who, when Paul wrote it down 15 years later, said, “Yes, this happened. It absolutely did and my life has been changed!”

Remember this that the promise of Easter is that we need not fear the things that we lose because of the living Christ who lives among us.

Friends, we never need to fear the things that we lose in life because God has something so much bigger for us. John Ortberg, that wonderful pastor in the San Francisco Bay area, said that the people here in the 15th chapter of First Corinthians are experiencing something of an endless hope. What John Ortberg means to say is that these people have experienced missed opportunities, disappointments, and failures in their lives as we all do. And yet they never gave up hope because they saw with their eyes the raised Christ in their presence. And if God could do that, they believed that God had something so much bigger for them as well. Mark it on your minds. Write it on your worship bulletin. Remember this that the promise of Easter is that we need not fear the things that we lose because of the living Christ who lives among us. God has something so much bigger for us. Amen