

“Don’t Lose It, Lean In”

I Peter 2:13-3:7

Series: Hope Rising Week 4. Humble Hope

The Rev. Dr. Douglas C. Hoglund

The Woodside Church

April 25, 2021

What do you do when you lose it? What do you do when you are stressed, pushed or crushed beyond the breaking point? Everything is leaning on you. Rick Kalinowski knows the feeling. The Coronavirus shut down his plumbing and HVAC business. Like all of us, Governor Wolfe’s orders required Rick to stay home. What was the 43-year-old native of Bryn Mawr to do? At that moment some may truthfully say Rick lost it – that he went a little squirrely – or maybe a lot squirrely. Rick took some old scrap wood, a few screws and a red plastic cup and made a tiny picnic table for squirrels. After posting a few pictures on social media, he went on with his day. Eventually those posts received 400,000 likes, 77,000 retweets and over 3,000 comments. So now Rick has a site called “All About Squirrels” where he fills orders for Squirrel sized picnic tables from the US, to the United Kingdom to Malaysia. The question is: how soon will it be before my wife orders one? Instead of losing it, Rick leaned in.

In a normal year there’s a lot leaning on you: school work, bills, home projects, work demands, child rearing, caring for parents, health concerns. Each one feels like a weight pressing down on you. That’s in a normal year. This has not been a normal year. Add to all that, the oppressive weight of Covid, the massive unrest in our nation, the loss of friends and loved ones, the fear or reality of losing your job, the possibility of losing your marriage, the tension and stress in your family when you are all forced to be together or when you are forced to socially distance. All that weight, all those forces leaning on you can drive you squirrely...and cause you to lose it.

Right about now, you could use some hope. Since Easter, we’ve been learning about hope is rising in the first letter of Peter. The Resurrection of Jesus means we get a new birth, a new start. He gives us a loving power to deal with problems on earth and a lasting inheritance waiting for us in heaven. Peter tells believers in Turkey and us we are resident aliens, this world is not our home. We look forward in hope to our true home in heaven. Don’t get stuck to the stuff of this world. Don’t be squeezed into the mold of this culture. As Joe taught us last week, God chose you to be a precious living stone in His living Temple of the Holy Spirit. We are to live differently everywhere and love deeply everyone. That makes Hope rise!

Then suddenly all that Hope comes to a screeching halt when we hit chapter 2:13. Peter starts saying shocking stuff to modern ears.

Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every human authority: whether to the emperor, as the supreme authority, or to governors... I Peter 2:13

Slaves, in reverent fear of God submit yourselves to your masters, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh. I Peter 2:18

Wives, in the same way submit yourselves to your own husbands... I Peter 3:1

Submit, submit, submit. In our time that word is blasphemy and heresy. The slogans we hear are “Question Authority” and “Fight for your Rights!” Critics of Christianity say passages like these are designed to keep the common people under control, to keep slaves in bondage, to keep women in their place. They have certainly been used that way for ages. Yet this is definitely not what Peter meant. To capture the original message we need to see the world as the first Christians did.

The culture of the 1st century is not the same as ours. They were ruled by an emperor with no rights. We live in a democracy with rights. Slavery is outlawed in our day. It was unquestioned and accepted in theirs. They lived in a hierarchical society ruled by men. We are trying to live in a society of equal women and men. We are not there yet but we work for it. Why point out these differences? Though Peter accepts these cultural realities, he does not approve of them. He does not mean cultural realities like tyranny, slavery or patriarchy are to be the rule for Christians. These cultural realities are caused by sin. They are not God’s will. Paul makes this point in Galatians:

For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. Galatians 3:27-28

This is a picture of the kingdom of heaven. The barriers, prejudices, divisions and hierarchies in this world do not exist in God’s kingdom. Imagine a world where there is no prejudice, no racism, no trafficking, no hierarchy, no dictators, no genocide, no segregation, no poverty. That is how we will live, that is who we will be. We are citizens of that world not this world. That is where we belong. Yet we still live as resident aliens in this world. So why didn’t Peter call for the overthrow of the empire, of slavery, of male hierarchy?

Peter and the apostles believe Jesus will right these wrongs very soon when He brings His Kingdom. Peter frequently mentions the Second Coming is coming soon. He often talks about “the coming salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time” (I Peter 1:5). It’s cued up, set up, ready to launch. Jesus will soon return to make everything right. The first Christians did not see the need to fight and change these wrongs in society since they believed Jesus would be back any minute to end oppression and set people free. We still believe Jesus can return anytime. We still hope and pray tomorrow is the day when God’s kingdom comes and His will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Yet Jesus also wants us to start living His Will here and now while we wait. This is why the Word of God has moved disciples of Jesus through the ages to oppose despots, topple tyrants, end slavery, remove racism, and elevate women.

The Christians in western Turkey who first read Peter’s letter were mostly poor, slaves or women. They had no rights and no power. Yet Peter calls them something unbelievable: “free.”

Live as free people, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as God’s slaves. Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honor the emperor. I Peter 2:16-17.

Since we received freedom and rights at birth, we cannot imagine how it feels to suddenly be set free. At the end of the Civil war, when Abraham Lincoln rode into Richmond, Virginia the former capital of the Confederacy, slaves thronged to him and knelt at his feet. Lincoln replied,

Don't kneel to me. That is not right. You must kneel to God only and thank Him hereafter for the liberty you will enjoy. I am but God's humble instrument. But you may rest assured that as long as I live no one will put a shackle on your limbs and that you will have all the rights which God has given to every other free citizen of this republic. My poor friends you are free, free as air, you can cast off the name of slave, even trample upon it. Liberty is your birthright.¹

This is the freedom Peter proclaims to the first believers. Yet he cautions them to use their freedom God's way. Reading between the lines these first Christians may have planned to use their freedom to plot revolts and uprisings. As glorious as this may sound, there were two Jewish revolts in the century after Jesus which led to the destruction of God's Temple, the annihilation of Jerusalem, the slaughter of thousands and the deportation of Jews from the Holy Land.

We see and know people today who use their freedom to go wild and selfishly indulge themselves. Others use freedom to attack, riot and destroy. We witnessed both extremes of the spectrum do that this past year. Some don't know how to handle freedom and let others tell them what to do. What people call "freedom" turns out to be more slavery. These are forms of losing it.

"Don't Lose It!" Peter cautions. Use your freedom to Lean In. Patiently, persistently, peacefully follow Jesus' example.

To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth." When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. "He himself bore our sins" in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; "by his wounds you have been healed." I Peter 2:21-24

When they insulted and beat Jesus He did not lose it. When they crucified Him, He did not lose it. Though He could command a storm and call down an army of angels with a word, He did not lose it. He sacrificed Himself. He offered up His body to bear our sins. He leaned into it all the way. There is no other way for us to be saved. By His wounds we are healed. None of us can repeat what Jesus did. Yet each of us, in a small way, can patiently follow in His steps and peacefully lean into the troubles of this world and do God's will. The Greek word for "submit" is a voluntary attitude of cooperating, taking on responsibilities and carrying a burden under the leadership of Jesus. Peter focuses on 3 relationships which still apply in our world today. We could do a whole message or message series on each one of these. For now, let's look at a way to lean in like Jesus.

Government. Peter writes,

Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human authority: whether to the emperor, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people. I Peter 2:13-15

¹ James Swanson, *Bloody Crimes: The Chase for Jefferson Davis and the Death Pageant for Lincoln's Corpse*, (New York, NY: Harper Collins) 2010.

This is surprising since Jesus was put to death by a Roman governor Pilate and Peter and Paul were imprisoned and executed by a Roman emperor Nero. Clearly, the first Christians did not support or obey everything the empire did. Yet they also realized governments bring order and prevent chaos which made it possible for them to spread the Good News.

The non-Christians in Turkey may have accused their Christian neighbors of gathering in secret meetings for cannibalistic rituals where they ate flesh, drank blood and plotted the overthrow of the empire. This is the ignorant talk of foolish people Peter mentions. To silence this silly talk, Peter tells believers to lean in, do good and bring good to their community.

While some governments are clearly evil and others good, none are perfect. Every government needs Christians to peacefully lean in: to oppose wrong and do right, to non-violently overcome evil with good (Romans 12:21). Have you contacted your state or congressional representatives and senators recently? Have you read about the candidates in the upcoming May election so you can make an informed vote? Have you participated in one of our mission projects to improve our community? Silence or violence cause evil to spread. If God lays a mission on your heart, stand up and speak up. Persistently, patiently, peacefully lean in.

School and Work. Peter writes,

Slaves, in reverent fear of God submit yourselves to your masters, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh. For it is commendable if someone bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because they are conscious of God. I Peter 2:18-19

The term slaves refers to household servants but it was still slavery. Thankfully slavery is outlawed although there is a disturbing growth in trafficking everywhere. It is wrong and it must be opposed. Now none of us are literal slaves but you may feel like a slave at school or on the job – especially if the teacher or boss is harsh. We think we have two choices – go along with the teacher or boss since they hold our grades or careers in their hands or fight back and take matters into our own hands. Peter counsels us to go a third way – be conscious of God – remember your life is truly in God’s hands. Your true teacher or boss is Jesus, not a human. You do not need to put up with practices which are unethical, inappropriate or immoral. Some of you have taken a stand and refused to go along with unjust practices. Some of you have paid the price. But you’ve told me it was better to suffer, sacrifice and pay the price rather than to compromise with wrong.

Marriage. Finally Peter adds,

Wives, in the same way submit yourselves to your own husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives, when they see the purity and reverence of your lives. Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives I Peter 3:1-2; 7.

Some women who became followers of Jesus may have felt they had to leave their unbelieving husbands. Peter advises them to stay and seek to win their husbands to faith not by pummeling them with words but through loving kindness. Then Peter does something unthinkable in Roman society – he tells husbands to be considerate and kind to their wives. In the ancient world, women had no rights. Men treated them as property. Yet Peter directs them to make their marriage a partnership – the equal partnership God planned when He split the first human into Adam and Eve.

What is the basis of good marriage? Each partner equally puts the other first. Too often couples pull back and ask, “What am I getting out of this?” instead of leaning in and asking, “What can I change, what can I give to make our relationship better?” Whether it is in the society, the community, the government, the classroom, the office or the home, Peter calls every follower of Jesus not to lose it but to patiently, persistently, peacefully lean in. This is the message he sends to the poor, struggling, powerless believers in western Turkey. This sounds weak and ineffective, yet by leaning in they brought the mighty Roman Empire to faith in Jesus.

Speaking of Turkey, yesterday, April 24 marked the 106 anniversary of the start of the Armenian Genocide in 1915. As many of you know I am Armenian. If my ancestors did not flee the Ottoman Empire, today’s Turkey, they would have perished with the 1.5 million Armenian men, women and children who were shot, forcibly converted or marched off into the desert to die. It wiped out all the Armenian Christian communities that lived in the center of Turkey since before the Turks arrived, before the time of Christ. It is called the first genocide of the 20th century. Hitler thought he could get away with the holocaust because the nations did nothing for the Armenians.

Today, over a hundred years later, the President of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdogan fervently denies there was an Armenian genocide. Turkey has warned our President and every previous President to not call it a genocide. 49 of 50 American states call it a genocide. The House and Senate of the United States passed bills calling it a genocide. Only the White House whether Republican or Democratic over the last century has failed to go on record and call it a genocide. They were afraid of how Turkey might react. Today the tiny country of Armenia is fighting for its existence sandwiched between Turkey and Azerbaijan. I could not stay silent. I had to lean in and do something. So I wrote and called our US Representative Brian Fitzpatrick asking him to sign his name to a letter with 106 other representatives urging our President to finally call it a genocide. I joined a million other Americans asking our President to finally tell the truth and call this horrific massacre by its true name. Yesterday, after a hundred years of silence from the White House, President Biden wrote

The American people honor all those Armenians who perished in the genocide that began 106 years ago today. Each year on this day, we remember the lives of all those who died in the Ottoman-era Armenian genocide and recommit ourselves to preventing such an atrocity from ever again occurring.

Today, as we mourn what was lost, let us also turn our eyes to the future—toward the world that we wish to build for our children. A world unstained by the daily evils of bigotry and intolerance, where human rights are respected, and where all people are able to pursue their lives in dignity and security. Let us renew our shared resolve to prevent future atrocities from occurring anywhere in the world. And let us pursue healing and reconciliation for all the people of the world.²

There is a lot leaning on you. Don’t lose it with silence or violence. Let us follow in Jesus’ steps and patiently, persistently, peacefully lean in.

² <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/04/24/statement-by-president-joe-biden-on-armenian-remembrance-day/>

