

Yes, You Can

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell

Easter Sunrise Service

When I was ten years old and in the fourth grade I played my first year of Little League Baseball for a team called the Lake Shore Lakers. It was team actually sponsored by my church and it was filled mostly by church kids. Which meant, we were bad. Really bad. I'm pretty sure we lost every game that season. Personally, I led the league in strikeouts.

About two thirds of the way into the season after my father could see that I was growing rather discouraged in my pursuit of becoming a professional baseball player he took me out to the backyard to throw me a little batting practice. A time honored father/son tradition. So first he kind of helped me with my stance and helped me with my grip on the bat, he showed me a little bit about eye contact and swinging through the ball. And then he started pitching. He pitched and I missed. Pitch, swing and miss. It was a little discouraging. Dad would check my stance. Adjust my grip. Remind me to keep my eye on the ball. He pitched. I missed. And then there came this little exchange between father and son – another time honored tradition. “I can't do this!” I exclaimed, with the bat slumped over my shoulder. “Yes, you can,” cried my pitching father. “No, I can't.” “Yes, you can.” “No, I can't!” “Yes, you can.” I can't quite remember, but my guess is that my father at that point made a deal with me (another time honored parental tradition) --- something like the next time you hit it, we'll stop. A little incentive. I think it took him thirty more pitches before I got my bat on the ball.

“No, I can't.” “Yes, you can.”

It has been that way probably since the first moment when we contemplated taking our first step. We don't remember it but probably we stood there holding onto the coffee table weaving back and forth and our mom or our dad or both saying, “Come on sweetie --- walk over here.” And to ourselves we say, “No, I can't”. “Yes, you can!” “No, I can't” Learning how to ride your first two-wheeler. After your sixteenth fall, “No, I can't.” “Yes, you can.” Your first day of school: “No, I can't.” “Yes, you can.” Jumping into the deep end of the pool: “No, I can't.” “Yes, you can.” Getting stuck on a math equation: “No, I can't.” “Yes, you can.”

It's always good, isn't it to have someone in your life who when you have convinced yourself ... or when you want to convince yourself, “No, I can't” is there to say, “Yes, you can.”

John Feinstein in the Washington Post wrote once about a day when Joe Torre, then manager of the Yankees was down in Philadelphia for an inter-league game and just as he was about to walk into the clubhouse a middle-aged man called his name. Thinking it was an autograph seeker Torre stopped to sign. He was wrong. The man said, “I met you almost 30 years ago, I was in high school and I wanted to drop out. My parents asked you to talk to me one day because they thought I might listen to a ballplayer. Well, guess what? I'm a lawyer now and I just wanted to say, thanks.” The manager was a little surprised at how such a little thing had made such a huge difference. Torre went to step into the clubhouse but before he could he heard another voice, “Mr. Torre!” It was a younger man, “Twenty years ago I had cancer,” he said, “They thought it was terminal. You were with the Mets. You came to see me and gave me a pep talk. I never forgot it.” Torre later said that it takes so little to give people that little extra something they need to get by.

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You know, if there was ever a group of people who had

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the right to say, “No, I can't.” it was the early church. This little band of believers, about 120 or so, who had been given the commission to make disciples of everybody --- all nations --- led by some less than reliable apostles --- the feeling I'm sure was clear: “No, we can't.” But then one day the Holy Spirit came and the apostles began to preach and teach and Luke tells us that the early believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching.

Now when you examine the early teaching and preaching of the church ... it is amazing to find how much time the apostles spent talking about one thing --- the resurrection of Jesus. At the beginning of the church's life --- the vast majority of what the apostles preached and taught about was the resurrection. That's pretty much what the apostles did was sit around and tell resurrection stories. Peter and John talking about their run to the tomb, Mary Magdalene talking about the earthquake and not recognizing the resurrected Jesus, Thomas talking about his original doubts, the men on the road to Emmaus and how they too didn't recognize him at first, all the apostles talking about that breakfast they had with the resurrected Christ on the shore of the sea of Galilee. I mean the stories probably went on and on. And not

only did they tell stories of how they encountered the resurrected Christ --- but they also told stories on themselves. They probably told stories of what they were like before the resurrection. Peter told about how he sank into the sea of Galilee after he had tried to walk on water --- and about how he denied Jesus three times just as he predicted. James and John probably told the story about how they once tried to angle their way onto the left and right seats beside Jesus in the kingdom. All of them probably told of how they were worried about who Jesus thought was the greatest --- this same group who didn't show up when Jesus was crucified. Likely, the disciples told stories about what they were like pre-resurrection ... about how they were a bunch of bumbling fools --- in order to show what the resurrection can do. These apostles now who were preaching and healing and performing signs of wonder --- they wanted people to see what a resurrection could do to a person and what it meant to have Jesus' resurrected life within you. So maybe that is why the early believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching --- they wanted to hear more resurrection stories ... more stories of what the resurrected life, Jesus' resurrected life – could do inside a person. “Awe came upon everyone,” Luke tells us, “because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles.”

You know, the Bible is ultimately a resurrection story. The Bible is a story with many actors and scenes and acts and stories --- but at the end of the day it is story about resurrection. From Abraham through the apostle Paul --- it is one resurrection story after another. Moving from the “No, I can’t” to the “Yes, I can.” God calls Moses in the burning bush and Moses says, No, I can’t. And God says, Yes, you can. The Israelite trying to cross the wilderness say, “No, we can’t.” And God says, “Yes, you can.” David lines up against Goliath and the people say, “No you can’t”, and God says, “Yes, you can.” Mary chosen to bring the Messiah into the world, “No, I can’t.” “Yes, you can.” Peter invited to walk on water, “No, I can’t.” “Yes, you can.” So it was the apostles with their resurrection stories and their resurrected lives who were there to say, “Yes, you can!” And so they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching.

Oh, I wonder what it might mean if you and I just simply devoted ourselves to the apostles’ teaching? If we just kept listening to the resurrection stories?

In one of my former churches a man started attending our worship as a visitor. I will call his name Tom. Tom had some cognitive challenges. He was kind of simple. He was rough around the edges. Wore ragged clothes and always had a little bit of a smell. After attending for a while he came to our new members class and after completing all the sessions said he had decided to join the church. When it came time to meet with the church board Tom asked if he could meet with me before the meeting. We did. It was there that he told me when he was a younger man he had committed a heinous crime. And he went on to explain all the details and how he had spent twenty years in jail but now was out. And then after telling me all this Tom said these heartbreaking words. He said, “I suppose you knowing all this means I can’t join the church.” Interesting. I said, “Tom, do you believe that Jesus died on the cross for your sin?” He said, “Yes.” I said, “Have you confessed that sin to Jesus?” He said,

“Yes.” I said, “Do you believe that Jesus rose from the dead and wants now to live in you?” He said, “Yes.” I said, “Well then yes you can.”

So often I hear people say that the Bible is just a bunch of do’s and don’ts. But I think the Bible is a bunch of can’ts and could’s. Our can’ts and God’s could’s. “No, I can’t.” “Yes, you can.”

Quite a while ago I read in the New York Times about a woman named Kathleen Gooley who, two months from her wedding day was told by her fiancée that he didn’t want to get married. Worse than that he stuck her with the deposit on the reception -- \$4500. Typical man. No wedding, no husband, and no \$4500. Had anyone told her to look on the bright side, she would have slugged them. No, I can’t. But then she got the idea – that the day was still hers. No one could take the day from her. The reception hall was still hers, no one could take the reception hall from her. The food was still hers; no one could take the food from her. So she decided to throw a party anyway. And she invited only people who don’t get invited to parties. She invited the homeless of her town. So with a \$4500 party to throw and no husband to show for it she went to some businesses and got them to donate flowers and invitations and transportation and she sent invitations out to all the homeless shelters of the city and invited to them come ... one and all ... to celebrate with her. And they came. A couple hundred came. And Kathleen danced. She danced with the people who were happy to dance with her. She ate with the people who were happy to eat with her. She celebrated with the people who were happy to celebrate with her. And hundreds of people who hadn’t had a hot meal in ages were fed. One guest remarked, “It’s been a long time since I’ve been at something like this. It makes me feel like a real person again.” As for Kathleen – “This is the happiest day of my life.” No you can’t. Yes, you can.

There will come a time for all of us when we know

we can’t. That’s just the way life is. The world will convince us that we just don’t have it in us. And the truth is, all by ourselves we don’t have it in us. But today all that changes. Today the resurrected Jesus is not in the tomb anymore. They said, He can’t. He said, I can. And today he lives inside us. We can do all things through Christ who strengthens us.

“Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.”

No, I can’t? Yes, you can. The Lord is risen! He is risen indeed!



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Church of the Palms

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