

Onward: With Absolute Confidence
Romans 8:26-28, 35, 37-39
August 15, 2021
Pastor Steve Richards

The final message in our summer movie series is Onward. Onward was released in 2020, a week before we went into quarantine. It was only in theaters for a couple of days and then moved immediately to Disney's streaming platform where it became one of the most popular movies of 2020. I want us to look at this movie, not to be entertained, but to look for gospel themes and how we might grow in our faith. Disney has a way of creating movies at two levels with a message for children and at the same time a deeper message for adults – and that's where I want to begin.

This is the story of a quest shared between two brothers as they go in search of their late Dad. They want to bring him back to life. Ian and Barley are the two brothers. They live in the fictional suburban town called New Mushroomton. It is a town that lost touch with its magical past and has become a plain, comfortable suburban town relying on modern technology. We see winged unicorns that have lost their magic, pixies that no longer fly but ride motorcycles, a dragon slayer that now runs a family themed restaurant. This town has forgotten who they are. They have lost wonder, lost their magic – we might even say, they have lost touch with the power of faith. This is also true for Ian and Barley. They lost their magic because at a very early age they lost their Dad. Ian never had a chance to meet his dad, and Barley had only a few memories. This is their story. Let's meet these two brothers – Ian is the younger and Barley the older.

[video#1]

Ian and Barley are very different. Barley is outgoing, energetic, a risk-taker, and he has taken a gap year in an effort to find his place in this world. Ian is shy and cautious. He makes lists and weighs the risks. They are very different, and the question is: Which one are you? Which one resonates with you?

I think I identify with Ian, and yet I'm drawn to Barley. He's an adult, but he has this free spirit, ready to take risks – and he's bold. On Ian's birthday, Barley says to his brother, "I know you are stronger than that. There is an inner warrior inside of you that you have to let out." That's Barley. He's an encourager. He lives for other people, loving others so they can be better. We all need something of Barley within us. As people of faith, we ought to be focused on other people. Last Monday, Amanda and I were tourists, walking through Fisherman's Wharf in San Francisco – and if you were working in one of the tourist shops, selling food, or responding to the repeated questions of tourist, I'm sure it gets monotonous. It's a job but not very fulfilling. But then I met one woman who was working in a booth, selling tickets for the ferry to Sausalito. I asked her the same questions that I'm sure fifty other people had already asked – where and when and how long and where can I find a restroom – but she patiently answered each question as if I was the most important person in her life. I want to be like that – to be able to love every person. In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said to his disciples: **Don't be like the hypocrites. They love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners so that people will see them.** In other words, don't pretend to be something you are not. Our faith, our love for others is not intended to be a show. Last Saturday, in a ceremony to bless the marriage of Dan and Andrea, I used a golfing analogy. It feels good when you hit the ball 250 yards or you make a 25 foot putt, but if those are the only times you find happiness in golf, you won't be playing very long. If our happiness is dependent on the external thing, we are going to struggle. What's truly important is what's on the inside – this inner strength that comes from faith. When we live out of that inner strength, we are able to make others better.

And that's who Barley is. Wherever he goes, he tries to make other people better. Throughout the movie, we see how his encouragement changes the people around him for good. A dragon-slayer finds the courage to reclaim her past and once again slay dragons. A group of pixies that were resigned to riding motorcycles find the courage to use the wings they have been given and fly again. He even encourages his step-dad to stop riding and start running, using his legs and God-given ability. Everywhere Barley went, he encourages, but Barley is just a character in a movie. Isn't this what Jesus did? He called ordinary people to live a life of faith. There was nothing extraordinary about the disciples – not until they let faith empower them to become what God created them to be. Jesus heals the sick, befriends the lonely, lifts up those who are broken – and that's our task as well. In John 15, Jesus says: **This is my commandment: love each other just as I have loved you.** When you let that love loose in your life, you will have the courage to let your inside match your outside – and your outside match your inside.

In the movie, Ian is not like his brother. Ian is stuck. He keeps reliving what might have been or should have been if his Dad had not died. There's this hole in his life. He's overcome by grief. Here's Ian on his 16th birthday. **[video#2]** He was stuck, longing for a conversation that would never happen. He was stuck. Have you ever been there? Suffering through a loss, haunted by thoughts of what might have been or should have been? (a relationship that's gone, health that's not what you want, a career that's not what you hoped it would be, an opportunity that slipped away) The Good News is this is where God does God's greatest work. God is ready to give us hope and point us toward a new tomorrow. That low point in life is only the beginning of an adventure when we trust in God's faithfulness.

Moments after this scene with Ian, his mom presents him with a gift that his dad planned for Ian's 16th birthday. The gift is a wizard's staff, and when he speaks the magic spell, it will bring back his dad for 24 hours. Ian will be able to meet his dad for the first time. But the spell doesn't work – not completely. They manage to bring back only the bottom half of dad, and for the rest of the movie, they are on a quest to find the solution that will restore the top half of dad before the 24 hours end. They face adventure and obstacles. They come in contact with different people, and after nearly 24 hours with the sun beginning to set on their day, Ian loses hope, realizing he will never meet his dad. He gives up. He takes the bottom half of his dad and decided he will spend the remaining minutes with what he has. It's not what he hoped for, but it's all he has. At this low point, something amazing happens. **[video#3]**

In the hardest moments of our lives, we feel the pain and see the clouds. For 16 years, Ian was consumed by the thought of what could have been and what he missed – and he didn't realize what he had. Everything he had been longing for – his brother had been giving to him. It turns out that his brother had been sharing with him the love of his father, a love that would not let him go and would be with him wherever he was. And that's the Gospel message. Jesus is Emmanuel – God with us, promising to be with us to the end of time. When God is with us, nothing can defeat us. Whenever Ian leans into faith, it unleashes an inner strength that enable him to be more than he thought he was. In Romans 8, Paul describes this: **the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans.** If you've ever felt these inner groans – too deep for words – that's the Holy Spirit of God already working within us. Who or what can separate us from God's love? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? We may experience all of these things and more. Will any of those things keep us from God? And Paul shouts a resounding: **No! In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither**

height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. God is. God is love. That love will never leave us. Lean into that love through faith and you will be able to live into a future filled with hope.

Ian suddenly recognizes what he has, and it changes him. He becomes inspired. He unleashed his inner warrior. **[video#4]** He thanks his brother for being there for him, for helping him, loving him, encouraging him. And as he thanks his brother, he gives away the one thing he's been longing for his entire life. He has this opportunity to say goodbye to his dad, but he's never met his dad and his brother had. Ian knew how much that would mean if his brother could say goodbye. This is love, sacrificial love.

This movie is actually a true story. It's the story of Dan Scanlon, the creator and author of this movie. He grew up in Michigan and when he was one and his brother was three, their father died. He had no memory of his dad but his older brother was just old enough to have a memory. But Dan grew up knowing that hole in his life had been filled by his brother's love. He says, he wrote the movie to say thank you to his brother for all the years his brother sacrificed for him. He says, "he gave of himself so I could become better." *Onward* is about recognizing what you have and giving thanks before it's gone. And I wonder – have you? Have you reached out to those who have shaped you and made you who you are?

This past year, I had an opportunity to do that – but not in the way I thought. For the past 31 years, Gordon Minehart was part of my life. At a low point in my life, he invited me to work with him. He didn't really know me, but he had heard about me and I had heard about him. And for the next six years we worked together and he helped me find the joy in being a pastor and experiencing the power of love when we let God work within us. After he retired, we continued to meet together every few weeks for the next 25 years. When I was down, he would encourage me. And when I experience great joy, he was ready to share that joy with me. The past year and half, we didn't see each other. There were phone calls – and his health began to decline as his kidneys failed him. So I began writing letters, thank you letters for all he had given me and the ways he had shaped my life. It was a privilege to be able to speak at his memorial service at the end of May. If it had not been for his love and how I experienced God's love through his love, I would not be a pastor today. Who has shaped you and made you who you are? Have you told them? Don't wait until it's too late.

Gordon had a benediction that he would speak at the end of every sermon, words that I have carried with me for over 30 years. These words seem an appropriate way to end this sermon: *There is a God. That God loves you and me! That God is with you and me in that love, now and forever more, world without end.*

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of August 15, 2021

Weekly Prayer: Eternal God, as we gather in this time and place, we give thanks for your incredible faithfulness. We praise you for never giving up on us, for loving us with a love from which nothing can separate us. May we become more aware of your activity and presence, that we will see you more clearly at work in the midst of all the pain and joy of our lives. Amen.

Monday, August 16

Scripture: Luke 5:1-11, 27-32

One day Jesus was standing beside Lake Gennesaret when the crowd pressed in around him to hear God's word. Jesus saw two boats sitting by the lake. The fishermen had gone ashore and

were washing their nets. Jesus boarded one of the boats, the one that belonged to Simon, then asked him to row out a little distance from the shore. Jesus sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. When he finished speaking to the crowds, he said to Simon, "Row out farther, into the deep water, and drop your nets for a catch." Simon replied, "Master, we've worked hard all night and caught nothing. But because you say so, I'll drop the nets." So they dropped the nets and their catch was so huge that their nets were splitting. They signaled for their partners in the other boat to come and help them. They filled both boats so full that they were about to sink. When Simon Peter saw the catch, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Leave me, Lord, for I'm a sinner!" Peter and those with him were overcome with amazement because of the number of fish they caught. James and John, Zebedee's sons, were Simon's partners and they were amazed too. Jesus said to Simon, "Don't be afraid. From now on, you will be fishing for people." As soon as they brought the boats to the shore, they left everything and followed Jesus.

Afterward, Jesus went out and saw a tax collector named Levi sitting at a kiosk for collecting taxes. Jesus said to him, "Follow me." Levi got up, left everything behind, and followed him. Then Levi threw a great banquet for Jesus in his home. A large number of tax collectors and others sat down to eat with them. The Pharisees and their legal experts grumbled against his disciples. They said, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" Jesus answered, "Healthy people don't need a doctor, but sick people do. I didn't come to call righteous people but sinners to change their hearts and lives."

Observation: In Onward, Barley Lightfoot tells his brother Ian, "We are going on a grand and glorious quest." Who knows – if video games had existed in Jesus' day, he might have used similar language to invite Simon Peter, James, John and Levi Matthew (and others) to follow him. The response suggests that his call to "follow me" must have created a similar sense of excitement and possibility in those who received it.

Application: Most Israelites in Jesus' day despised tax collectors as traitors. The taxes they collected supported occupying Roman troops, not local entities that helped those who paid the taxes. Jesus' readiness to accept Matthew (and his friends) must have been an incredibly healing, life-changing moment. How can Jesus' way of offering love and kindness to outcasts help you see others not through negative lenses of bias or fear, but through Jesus' eyes of love?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, I love you, and I really want to love my neighbors. Thank you for calling me to join you in the grand and glorious quest of "fishing for people." Amen.

Tuesday, August 17

Scripture: Luke 6:20-24; Matthew 7:13-14

Jesus raised his eyes to his disciples and said:

"Happy are you who are poor, because God's kingdom is yours.

Happy are you who hunger now, because you will be satisfied.

Happy are you who weep now, because you will laugh.

Happy are you when people hate you, reject you, insult you, and condemn your name as evil because of the Human One. Rejoice when that happens! Leap for joy because you have a great reward in heaven. Their ancestors did the same things to the prophets. But how terrible for you who are rich, because you have already received your comfort.

“Go in through the narrow gate. The gate that leads to destruction is broad and the road wide, so many people enter through it. But the gate that leads to life is narrow and the road difficult, so few people find it.

Observation: From playing a video game, Barley Lightfoot learned that “On a quest, the clear path is never the right one.” Jesus’ disciples began to learn that, too, as soon as he began to teach. Of his words in Luke and Matthew, William Barclay wrote in his commentary: “They are a series of bombshells....imagine anyone saying, ‘Happy are the poor, and, Woe to the rich!’ To talk like that is to put an end to the world’s values altogether.”

Application: Jesus promised his disciples three things: that they would be completely fearless, absurdly happy and in constant trouble. The gospels show that the disciples did not see that clearly at first when they signed on to follow Jesus (Mark 10:35-38). How about you? Do these three things make you more or less eager to answer Jesus’ call to “follow me”?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, Resurrection is big and respected. But through this church, you call me to live above and beyond my culture’s values and wishes. Give me the spine to keep going through your narrow gate. Amen.

Wednesday, August 18

Scripture: Exodus 3:2-10, 4:1-5; John 6:5-9

The LORD’s messenger appeared to him in a flame of fire in the middle of a bush. Moses saw that the bush was in flames, but it didn’t burn up. Then Moses said to himself, Let me check out this amazing sight and find out why the bush isn’t burning up. When the LORD saw that he was coming to look, God called to him out of the bush, “Moses, Moses!” Moses said, “I’m here.” Then the LORD said, “Don’t come any closer! Take off your sandals, because you are standing on holy ground.” He continued, “I am the God of your father, Abraham’s God, Isaac’s God, and Jacob’s God.” Moses hid his face because he was afraid to look at God. Then the LORD said, “I’ve clearly seen my people oppressed in Egypt. I’ve heard their cry of injustice because of their slave masters. I know about their pain. I’ve come down to rescue them from the Egyptians in order to take them out of that land and bring them to a good and broad land, a land that’s full of milk and honey, a place where the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites all live. Now the Israelites’ cries of injustice have reached me. I’ve seen just how much the Egyptians have oppressed them. So get going. I’m sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.”

Then Moses replied, “But what if they don’t believe me or pay attention to me? They might say to me, ‘The LORD didn’t appear to you!’” The LORD said to him, “What’s that in your hand?” Moses replied, “A shepherd’s rod.” The LORD said, “Throw it down on the ground.” So Moses threw it on the ground, and it turned into a snake. Moses jumped back from it. Then the LORD said to Moses, “Reach out and grab the snake by the tail.” So Moses reached out and grabbed it, and it turned back into a rod in his hand. “Do this so that they will believe that the LORD, the God of their ancestors, Abraham’s God, Isaac’s God, and Jacob’s God has in fact appeared to you.”

Jesus looked up and saw the large crowd coming toward him. He asked Philip, “Where will we buy food to feed these people?” Jesus said this to test him, for he already knew what he was going to do. Philip replied, “More than a half year’s salary worth of food wouldn’t be enough for each person to have even a little bit.” One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother,

said, "A youth here has five barley loaves and two fish. But what good is that for a crowd like this?"

Observation: When younger brother Ian said they didn't have what they needed for their quest, Barley told him, "On a quest you have to use what you've got, and this is what we've got." Moses, sent to challenge Pharaoh's powerful army, asked what he should use for that task, and God asked, "What's that in your hand?" Facing a hungry crowd of 5,000 (with no supermarket handy), Jesus' disciples couldn't see what use a boy's small lunch could be. Turns out God is good at using what we've got!

Application: Moses didn't feel strong enough to carry out God's astonishing call. Go as one man, with no army at all, and demand that Pharaoh let most of his slave labor force go just because God told him to? But God responded, "I'll be with you" (Exodus 3:12). What limits do you see on your ability to live for God? How (if at all) does it change your view of those limits if you trust God will be with you?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, I want to offer you any gifts and talents I have, as the boy offered Jesus what he had. Use and multiply my abilities to bless others. Thank you that you bless me in the giving. Amen.

Thursday, August 19

Scripture: Matthew 14:22-33, 16:15-18

Right then, Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go ahead to the other side of the lake while he dismissed the crowds. When he sent them away, he went up onto a mountain by himself to pray. Evening came and he was alone. Meanwhile, the boat, fighting a strong headwind, was being battered by the waves and was already far away from land. Very early in the morning he came to his disciples, walking on the lake. When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified and said, "It's a ghost!" They were so frightened they screamed. Just then Jesus spoke to them, "Be encouraged! It's me. Don't be afraid." Peter replied, "Lord, if it's you, order me to come to you on the water." And Jesus said, "Come." Then Peter got out of the boat and was walking on the water toward Jesus. But when Peter saw the strong wind, he became frightened. As he began to sink, he shouted, "Lord, rescue me!" Jesus immediately reached out and grabbed him, saying, "You man of weak faith! Why did you begin to have doubts?" When they got into the boat, the wind settled down. Then those in the boat worshipped Jesus and said, "You must be God's Son!"

He said, "And what about you? Who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Then Jesus replied, "Happy are you, Simon son of Jonah, because no human has shown this to you. Rather my Father who is in heaven has shown you. I tell you that you are Peter. And I'll build my church on this rock. The gates of the underworld won't be able to stand against it.

Observation: Ian needed to hear his brother say, "You can do this. I believe in you." Peter showed faith on a stormy lake: "Lord, if it's you, order me to come to you on the water." Jesus said, "Come," and the next thing he knew, he was walking on the water! It worked – at least until the wind upset him and fear took over. Jesus also showed faith in Peter in Matthew 16, or rather faith in Peter's faith.

Application: Seeing Jesus walking on the lake terrified the disciples. Their own lack of power was frightening, but the idea of a power beyond their imagining was more so. Do you ever find the idea of God actually showing up a bit scary? In what ways does Jesus' divine power reach beyond our usual human ideas? What helps you trust that he always uses his power in ways that are good for you?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, at times I'm riding high, walking toward you in faith! At times in fear, I take my eyes off you. Teach me that your love and salvation are always within reach, even when I feel as though I'm sinking. Amen.

Friday, August 20

Scripture: Matthew 26:31-35, 69-75; John 21:15-19

Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Tonight you will all fall away because of me. This is because it is written, *I will hit the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will go off in all directions*. But after I'm raised up, I'll go before you to Galilee." Peter replied, "If everyone else stumbles because of you, I'll never stumble." Jesus said to him, "I assure you that, before the rooster crows tonight, you will deny me three times." Peter said, "Even if I must die alongside you, I won't deny you." All the disciples said the same thing

Meanwhile, Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard. A servant woman came and said to him, "You were also with Jesus the Galilean." But he denied it in front of all of them, saying, "I don't know what you are talking about." When he went over to the gate, another woman saw him and said to those who were there, "This man was with Jesus, the man from Nazareth." With a solemn pledge, he denied it again, saying, "I don't know the man." A short time later those standing there came and said to Peter, "You must be one of them. The way you talk gives you away." Then he cursed and swore, "I don't know the man!" At that very moment the rooster crowed. Peter remembered Jesus' words, "Before the rooster crows you will deny me three times." And Peter went out and cried uncontrollably.

When they finished eating, Jesus asked Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" Simon replied, "Yes, Lord, you know I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs." Jesus asked a second time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Simon replied, "Yes, Lord, you know I love you." Jesus said to him, "Take care of my sheep." He asked a third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter was sad that Jesus asked him a third time, "Do you love me?" He replied, "Lord, you know everything; you know I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep. I assure you that when you were younger you tied your own belt and walked around wherever you wanted. When you grow old, you will stretch out your hands and another will tie your belt and lead you where you don't want to go." He said this to show the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. After saying this, Jesus said to Peter, "Follow me."

Observation: Frustrated, Barley Lightfoot exclaimed, "It's not fair to call me a screwup if you don't give me a chance to do something right." After swearing he didn't know Jesus (despite boastfully swearing he'd never stumble even if everyone else did) Peter "cried uncontrollably" as he saw how terribly he had messed up. Jesus didn't discard Peter, though. He gave him a chance to affirm his love three times, and gave him the chance to do the crucial task of "feed(ing) my lambs." And Peter did it right.

Application: One self-examination question John Wesley, Methodism's founder, urged people to regularly ask (and answer) was, "Am I consciously or unconsciously creating the impression

that I am better than I really am?” Do you think Peter was, in some measure, trying to convince Jesus, the other disciples (and maybe himself) that he was better than he really was? When do you find the same tug at work in your own life?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you know me better than I know myself. Guide me today and every day, nudging and challenging me as you did Peter, to become more fully the person you call me to be. Amen.

Saturday, August 21

Scripture: Philippians 3:10-14; 1 Timothy 1:12-15; Romans 8:35-39

The righteousness that I have comes from knowing Christ, the power of his resurrection, and the participation in his sufferings. It includes being conformed to his death so that I may perhaps reach the goal of the resurrection of the dead. It's not that I have already reached this goal or have already been perfected, but I pursue it, so that I may grab hold of it because Christ grabbed hold of me for just this purpose. Brothers and sisters, I myself don't think I've reached it, but I do this one thing: I forget about the things behind me and reach out for the things ahead of me. The goal I pursue is the prize of God's upward call in Christ Jesus.

I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength because he considered me faithful. So he appointed me to ministry even though I used to speak against him, attack his people, and I was proud. But I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and without faith. Our Lord's favor poured all over me along with the faithfulness and love that are in Christ Jesus. This saying is reliable and deserves full acceptance: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners"—and I'm the biggest sinner of all.

Who will separate us from Christ's love? Will we be separated by trouble, or distress, or harassment, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written,

*We are being put to death all day long for your sake.
We are treated like sheep for slaughter.*

But in all these things we win a sweeping victory through the one who loved us. I'm convinced that nothing can separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus our Lord: not death or life, not angels or rulers, not present things or future things, not powers or height or depth, or any other thing that is created.

Observation: Worried by Barley endlessly playing a video game based on the past, his mother told him, "You need to start thinking less about the past and more about the future." The great apostle Paul recalled, in 1 Timothy, that he'd been a persecutor and described himself as "the biggest sinner of all." But he did that only to bear witness to the brilliant difference God's mercy had made in his life when "our Lord's favor poured all over me" (1 Timothy 1:14). To his friends in Philippi he wrote, "I forget about the things behind me and reach out for the things ahead of me" (Philippians 3:13). And in Romans 8, he looked past obstacles he knew well ("trouble, or distress, or harassment, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword") and focused on the splendid future he not only believed in, but he was counting on.

Application: In Romans 8, the Greek word translated "sweeping victory" (verse 37) was *hupernikaō*. "Huper" was like the English "hyper." "Nikaō" was a form of the Greek word for "victory"—"nikē"! Paul asked, "If God is for us, who is against us?" and "Who will separate us

from Christ's love?" He phrased both in such a way that the only answer was "Absolutely nobody and nothing!" In what ways does that confidence shape your daily life and point you to sweeping victory beyond all of life's defeats?

Prayer: All powerful God, whatever comes my way, hold me close in the shelter of your love. Thank you that, through you, I can win a sweeping victory in "all these things." Amen.