I heard of a pastor who was involved in a conversation with a church member that became heated. Apparently, the church member was a prominent financial contributor to the church, and had given much to the church over the years. The following Sunday, after the heated conversation, everyone shows up for church only to discover a surprise. The carpet in the Fellowship hall, which that prominent giver had paid for, was literally pulled right off the floor. There were several other items which were missing, including some tables and decorative paintings. A note was found taped to the wall, informing the congregation all these things would be returned once the pastor was no longer minister of the church. Until then, the church member wanted no part of the pastor’s ministry on any level.

This story is true and recently happened in our conference. As a gathering of pastors heard the story, one spoke up, “It sounds like this relationship has past the point of no return.” What else could we possibly think? Anytime in life when the rug gets pulled out from under us, figuratively or literally, there’s the suspicion we’ve past a point of no return. After hearing the story, the pastors were invited to share their own personal story about an incident from their own experience where the rug got pulled out from under them. There were pastors at the room who were still early in their career, but everyone had at least one story. We could all identify.

This season we’ve been going through a series, “Words With Lost Meaning.” Each week we’ve looked at different words that dropped out of Christian vocabulary after Jesus was raised. So far, we’ve looked at “Goodbye,” “Impossible,” “Failure,” and “Waste.” Today we turn our attention to “Unfixable.” Whenever we think anything in our life has past “the point of no return” there’s an assumption it’s unchangeable, unfixable, beyond repair. There’s one law firm that has an amusing announcement on its website, “How to know when you’ve past the point of no return.” Included in the criteria are a number of items that represent when a relationship has progressed to the point of unfixable. Perhaps there’s a business partner or someone we’ve entered into contract with. After all the options of mediation and negotiation have been attempted, the law firm is there to help the client dissolve the contract. They will employ legal channels to sever all relations.

We’ve had the rug pulled out from under us. It happens in every area of life. People fail to live up to the terms of business contract. People fail to live up to the terms of their marriage
vows. People fail to live up to the terms of spiritual covenants in a church. We say “for rich or for poor.” We say “for better or for worse.” We say “in sickness and in health.” Sometimes things get severed and the dishonor is deemed unfixable. We’ve crossed a bridge too far. There are checklists out there, and if you meet the conditions, it’s generally agreed there’s only a single feasible option. You must cut all relations, accept it, and move on.

Paul’s letter to the Romans represents some of Paul’s most mature thoughts. It comes later in life after he’s had time to live into the Christian faith. Romans is Paul’s magnum opus. If there is a single book of the Bible that is responsible for inspiring more revivals, then Romans is the one. St. Augustine claimed in the 5th century this book represented a turning point in his life. Martin Luther claimed in the 16th century this book represented a turning point in his life. John Wesley claimed in the 18th century this book represented a turning point in his life. Karl Barth claimed in the 20th century this book represented a turning point in his life. When Paul offers an Easter sermon to the Romans, Paul turns back to the Old Testament for inspiration. He tells the story of Abraham and Sarah. They each had bodies that were as “good as dead.” In other words, they were well beyond their child bearing years. If there was a point of no return, they crossed it long ago.

Just when they’re ready to accept losses, just when they’re ready to accept there was no going back; Paul insists their obstacle became an opportunity for God. Abraham and Sarah “believed God had power to fulfill the promise.” Everything hinged on believing that God specializes in bringing people back from the point of no return. This incident was a grand occurrence in the Old Testament. Paul insists that now that Jesus is raised, Easter represents standard operating procedure for dealing with points of no return. When we’re tempted to think we’ve crossed a bridge too far, and there’s no going back, this is when Easter is ready to emerge.

Look no further than Paul’s life for an example that confirms Paul’s own words. In Acts 13, Paul, Barnabas, and Mark are on a critical missionary journey together. The times were fraught with danger. Prison was always a threat and getting physically harmed was constantly a real possibility. Persecution was on the rise. It was crucial that the three of them could count on one another. Christianity was hard enough as it was. Survival required assurance that your comrades had your back. You could count on them when the heat got turned up. Everyone played a vital role. When one person bailed, it meant their work got spread out on whoever was left. When one person bailed, it meant
lower morale would happen. This wasn’t only about the person who bailed. It was about the
domino effect their leaving triggered on everyone else. There is always collateral damage when
someone jumps the ship.

Acts 13 says Paul, Barnabas, and Mark enter into a city named Pamphylia. This area was
known for its high crime rates. When we walk over the wrong side of the tracks, it’s all the more
reason to remain close together. Mark picks the worst time and the worst place to abandon the
mission. He leaves Paul and Barnabas high and dry. Paul and Barnabas have the rug pulled out
from under them. Acts doesn’t give the reason Mark left because the reasons don’t matter, good
reasons, bad reasons, the effects on Paul and Barnabas are still the same. His bailing produced
cascading dominos that had consequence lasting far beyond his immature decision.

Fast forward to Acts 15, and some time has now passed, but Paul is still tremendously
wounded. It hurts to have the rug pulled out from under you in life. Someone abandons us when
we desperately needed support. Somebody walked out when they had promised to be there.
Paul considered Mark’s actions a clear case, beyond debate. Mark had past the point of no
return. The abandonment was so severe, it was so traumatic, it was so damaging to their cause,
there was no way they could ever open themselves to the risk of it ever happening again.
Barnabas comes to Paul, suggesting Mark is regretful, and would like to come back with a
second chance. Paul can’t chance it. Mark had demonstrated himself as unreliable. Acts says a
heated exchange occurred between Paul and Barnabas. Notice how the fallout still has
consequences. Whenever our actions pull the rug out from someone there is a consequence that
can last for weeks, for months, and sometimes, years.

It’s at this point Paul and Barnabas part ways. Commentators have noted that Paul and
Barnabas will never work together again. Paul will take on Silas as a partner and Barnabas will
take on Mark. Consider all this happens after Paul has written several letters of the New
Testament. Despite what he believes about Jesus, in Acts 15, Paul still believed in a point of no
return. He believed someone like Mark clearly crossed it. Paul could have supplied that
prominent law firm with the criteria for point of no return. There are common qualities these
behaviors have. We’ll know it when we see it. There are statistics we can consult for proof.

There are points of no return in friendships. There are points of no return in marriage. There
are points of no return in parenting. There are points of no return in business. We’ve tried
everything. We’ve attempted the intervention session. Nothing has worked and now we’re
down to the very last option. The only thing left to do is severe the connection, dissolve it, and consider it unfixable. In Acts 15 Paul was not willing to offer another chance. Mark had crossed the line. We wish him well, but this a clear breach of contract. He pulled the rug out from under us. Such a decision was surprising coming from Paul. Rewind the story of Acts and we find at the beginning of the story, some years before, Paul was making a living out of pulling the rug out from under people. He made a career doing it. Paul was traveling down the Damascus Road, on his way to pull the rug out of several people, and send many collapsing to their knees. Paul was a certified professional.

By the time we reach Acts 15, Paul was already an established preacher and teacher. He had made progress in the Christian faith. What we soon discover is that the times we are most at risk of pulling the rug out from under people is not when we’re dead set on doing the wrong thing. We pull the rug out from people when we’re convinced in our own heads we’re doing the right thing. Come hell or high water this rug is coming off the floor because I bought and paid for it. We excuse and justify whatever consequence exists because it’s not our problem. Mark didn’t mean to hurt anyone in Acts 13 and Paul didn’t mean harm in Acts 15.

Did it ever occur to Paul that he was once past the point of no return? The amazing thing about Paul’s story is that after the Damascus Road, no one could believe it. They considered Paul too far gone. God is speaking to people, commanding them to receive Paul, and these people are terrified out of their wits. Despite receiving divine knowledge, they considered Paul so far gone, they were too petrified to accept that it could be different. By the time we get to Romans 4, Paul has now discovered this. He’s realized the greatest Easter stories are the ones we actually get to live out with our lives. How do we know Easter is true? It’s when we find ourselves in life getting rugs pulled out from under us or pulling rugs out from someone else. It’s when somebody goes way past the point of no return. They’ve long crossed bridge too far, and yet, Easter has ways of bringing us back. There is nothing so broken that it’s beyond mending once God’s grace is involved.

I’ve been thinking much over these past several days about Kenneth Stancil, the young man who committed the murder at Wayne Community College. We look at someone like him as if he’s past the point of no return. How did he get there? His parents think their own son looks unrecognizable. As I hear this story, I can’t help but remember the story of Bryon Widner from only a few years ago. Bryon Widner was a neo Nazi who had tattoos of hate all over his face.
Dateline did a story on this man and told of how he experienced a conversion and went through 12 excruciating surgical procedures to reverse what many assumed was unfixable.

How often we look upon people and consider them a lost cause. They are too far gone. Paul once thought this, but he came to see the beauty of Romans 4. He came to see the greatest thing about Easter is the way it brings us back from those places of no return. In II Timothy 4:11, once of the last letters Paul will write, he announces to Timothy, “Bring Mark with you because he is very helpful in my ministry.” This was once the same person who had broken Paul’s heart. The rug had been pulled out from under him at the worst possible time. It hurt Paul’s dignity. It hurt Paul’s reputation. It hurt Paul’s well being. It made life difficult for weeks, months, years, time that he will never get back, all because someone pulled a rug, and it started a domino effect. Isn’t it amazing how one person’s seemingly small self-centered decisions can poison the waters for so long? There’s no debating wounds were deep. It seemed like it was beyond a point of no return.

“What could I have done differently?” That’s the question everyone is left with when the rug gets pulled out. Paul surely dealt with self blame. Any person who has been there knows the way the questions linger. These are the times that drive us closer into the arms of God. If God doesn’t catch us nothing will. Was it something I did? Was it something I said? We’d love it if there was a simple answer as to why people pull the rug out from under us. We’d love if there was simple answer as to what we could have done to avoid it. The truth is Paul realized these point-of-no-return experiences are part of life, so how do we move forward?

By the time Paul gets to preaching this Easter sermon in Romans 4, he’s inspired to see these experiences not as obstacles, but as opportunities. As we look over our lives, chances are, it hasn’t hard to find at least one area where somebody has pulled the rug out from under us. It’s left us in a position of great difficulty. Take encouragement from Paul. There was even a time when he couldn’t avoid the blame game. It was Mark’s fault we’re in this predicament. It was Mark’s fault we went through that living hell, living with a hesitation to ever trust others again. These situations can drive us into despair or they can drive us into dependence. They can drive us into confusion or they can drive us into commitment. They can drive us into perplexity or they can drive us into passion. Paul ran straight into the arms of God and found a source of inspiration he didn’t know until someone had pulled the rug. Easter now takes on brand new meaning.
Joseph surely knew what it was like to have the rug pulled out from under him. He would later look back on it with a remarkable perspective. “What you caused for harm God used for good.” Mark didn’t mean to harm anyone, but he did. Not everyone who pulls the rug out from under us means to. All they see at the time is their needs. Mark had to grow up and discover he was carrying more than his own weight in life. His decisions effected other people, drastically. Even still, Paul came to a different perspective. What had been a point of no return, proved to be an opportunity for Easter to showcase the power which brings back from the brink.

Mark was brought back from his point of no return by Barnabas. This is the person the New Testament refers to as “Son of Encouragement.” Barnabas took this damaged young man under his wing. This was the failure Paul at one time considered a lost cause. Paul would come to see that you don’t get any more far gone than an elderly couple beyond the point of child bearing. This Old Testament incident becomes a glimpse of what Easter now makes standard operating procedure. Whatever we look at in our lives that seems “good as dead” now serves as the testing ground to showcase the power of Easter. Yes we’ve been hurt, but Easter makes it possible to stand again after the rug has pulled out. Yes we’ve been disappointed, but Easter makes it possible to move forward again after the rug has been pulled out. Paul says, “Abraham was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God.” In the same way, Easter strengthens us, so that we’ll glorify God.

Paul says good things began to happen the moment Abraham became persuaded that God had the power to fulfill promises. What would happen to those point of no return areas of our lives if we became persuaded? What would happen in our marriages? What would happen in our parenting? What would happen in our work? What would happen in our church? This is not to say that we’ll never pull the rug out from anyone or never have the rug pulled out from under us. The glory for Easter is in the now what happens next? Paul came to see that the best sermons of Easter are not the ones with only words, but the ones we confirm with our lives.