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Easter Sermon 2022

Easter Sunday. The most joyful day in the Christian year.

And yet. When the women discovered that empty tomb, joy was not their immediate response. Which makes sense if we think back to the two days prior. These women were witness to Jesus being nailed to a cross. They saw him draw his last breath and the soldiers taking him down from the cross. These women saw Joseph of Arimathea wrap the body in linens and take it to a tomb. They followed to see the tomb and knew that a heavy stone had been rolled in front of its entrance. They had witnessed the death and burial of Jesus.

So when they arrived to anoint his body with oil and spices on the day after the sabbath, they expected to find just that...a body. What they were worried about was being able to move the heavy stone on their own. But when they arrived, that wasn't their worry. To their great surprise, the stone had already been rolled away. Their worry, instead, became why the body of Jesus was not in that tomb.

So their first response to the empty tomb was not initially one of joy. Their first thought was not, "Alleluia, he's been raised from the dead!" In fact, they were *terrified* to discover that two men in dazzling clothes were suddenly standing next to them asking, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here. He has risen."

After hearing this proclamation from the angels, the women ran to tell the disciples. They also did not react with joy but with suspicion at what seemed to them an idle tale. In fact, at first, nobody seemed to really understand the meaning of this empty tomb.

Those jubilant words we sang just minutes ago... "He is risen. He is risen. Tell it out with joyful voice; he has burst his three days' prison' let the whole wide earth rejoice." Those were not the words falling from the lips of these first witnesses to the resurrection.

At least not initially.

I imagine that the faithful women and the disciples in this Gospel were not quite trusting of the news that Jesus is alive. They were suspicious of it. And who could blame them? After experiencing the anguish of the previous days. They must have been afraid to believe and to rejoice, only to be disappointed.

Joy is often like that, isn't it? Fleeting or not to be trusted? What right do we have to be joyful anyway, we might ask ourselves? We're beginning the third year of living through a pandemic. Sure, it's much better than it was, but people are still getting sick. Some people are dying. The best news that we can hope for right now is that we're shifting

from a pandemic to an endemic. The anxiety about how to be in community together and how to protect our vulnerable neighbor is still present.

On top of that, there's a war raging in Europe. We hear about the bombings and the deaths and the displaced people constantly in our twenty-four-hour news cycle. These events bring out feelings of grief and helplessness.

Then there's the threat of countries using nuclear weapons which seems more real today than it has in a long time, more real than ever before for people my age and younger, born after the Cold War ended. This fear is powerful because it feeds our anxiety and our communal angst.

So I am the first to say that joy may feel elusive in times like these...just as it felt to those disciples on Easter morning, at least at first.

And yet, the confusion and doubt and bewilderment of those witnesses to the empty tomb eventually turned to joy. The Gospels tell us of many of those intimate moments of rejoicing upon recognizing the risen Christ. Like when Jesus walked through the locked doors and his friends heard his voice and touched his wounds...or when he walked alongside them on the road to Emmaus and broke bread with them...and when he fed them grilled fish on the banks of the sea of Galilee. In these moments and encounters, they must have finally allowed themselves to experience the joy of the resurrection. Otherwise, what would have given them the strength and courage to go out into the world, spreading the message of Jesus far and wide, even when it was dangerous and meant risking their lives?

They became the first proclaimers of the power of the empty tomb. This morning, we must ask ourselves, what joy do we find in the empty tomb?

What I hope you find...what I hope you hear in the declaration, "He is risen" is that God is always doing something new. The stories in our biblical text are always challenging us to see the possibility of the unexpected and of the impossible becoming a reality. In the beginning, Genesis tells us, the spirit of God hovered over the formless void and light, water, and land emerged along with all the living creatures. Life from nothingness. In Exodus, the people of Israel walked to freedom through the sea on dry land. Slaves were freed from their bondage. And in the Gospels, upon the birth of Jesus, God became flesh to dwell among us. What seemed impossible became possible. Are we willing to believe on this Easter morning that nothing will be impossible with God?

We may be tempted to deny the impossible and instead to look for the plausible explanation for the empty tomb. After all, we're a church that believes in reason and science. But Easter is not the time for scientific and reasonable accounts. Not a time to try to prove the resurrection. It is simply a time to believe that God has done the incredible. To believe that even death does not stop God. To rejoice that God raises up that which has been cast down, makes new that which has grown old, and that God will bring all things into perfection in time.

For me, it helps to celebrate the impossible of Easter, when it falls later in the year as it did this year. Here in Maine, spring comes late and the harsh winter makes us long for it even more. But every year, spring—no matter how elusive it earlier seemed, comes. The crocus push through the dark and cold soil. The daffodils bloom. The forsythia brighten up the fencerows. The green haze of new leaves appears on the treetops. And we are filled with joy at the new life rising from the dead.

Joy—it is such an important part of the human experience. And so we must celebrate every moment of joy that comes into our lives. An unexpected healing. New love. Old love. The birth of a baby. A brilliant sunrise. Reunion with an old friend. A kiss from a grandchild. Puppies and kittens. Chocolate. Fried chicken. Being forgiven. Letting go of a grudge. The giggle of a child. And on and on.

And these are not just our joys. These are the joys of a God who wants us to be filled with light and love. Many of us in the congregation read over the Lenten season, Henri Nouwen's book, "The Return of the Prodigal Son." And when we gathered to discuss the end of that book, all of us, I believe, were inspired by Nouwen's message that while Jesus was always realistic about the evils of the world, and knew that the world's darkness would never be absent, he calls us to find joy in belonging to the household of God, a God who does the impossible, even in the midst of the suffering and sadness.

We don't have to deny the darkness in the world, but we can choose not to live in it. We can choose resurrection over the empty tomb. I think that's what Nouwen meant when he wrote that choosing joy over cynicism is a discipline. He said, "It requires choosing for the light even when there is much darkness...choosing for life even when the forces of death are so visible, and choosing for the truth even when [we] are surrounded by lies." (115-16). We can choose resurrection.

Let me say again...rejoicing in life every chance we can does not mean that we deny the suffering of the world. That would make any joy we experience shallow. "Joy never denies the sadness [we see around us], but transforms it to fertile soil for more joy." (116). I believe that it is joy that makes us whole enough to bear the suffering—our own and the world's. Joy feeds us and gives us the capacity for empathy.

There's a beautiful line in one of our Compline prayers that says, "give rest to the weary, bless the dying, soothe the suffering, pity the afflicted, *shield the joyous*, and all for your love's sake."

Shield the joyous—that is my prayer this morning. May our joys fill us with the light we all need to face the darkness. Joy may elude us at times, but we have to open ourselves up to it like those women and disciples.

So on this Easter morning, may alleluia be our song, and may we find joy in the empty tomb. Let us choose resurrection...choose life...choose to believe in our God who is making all things new. Amen.

Nouwen, Henri J.M. *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming*. New York: Doubleday, 1992.