

The Discipline of Joy

Easter Service Sermon

The following sermon was given at Christ Church Cathedral, by the Bishop-Elect, Dr. Thomas Breidenthal, on Sunday, April 8, 2007.

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be always acceptable to you, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen.

Despite the cold weather, these beautiful flowers, this glorious music, and the majestic vestments leave no doubt that it is Easter. But I want us to back track a little to that moment before dawn when Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary, the mother of James, made their sad journey back to the tomb to complete their interrupted task of showing honor to the body of their crucified Lord Jesus. They returned to the tomb and there opened once again the wound of grief. Then came the discovery that the tomb was empty.

All the gospels begin their Easter narrative this way. But each of the gospels spins the story slightly differently. In Mark, there is a young man in the tomb who announces to the women that Jesus is risen; they are so astonished and afraid that they run away from the tomb then and there, not speaking to anybody -- and that is how Mark ends. In Matthew, the women arrive at the tomb, which is still closed, and a great angel descends from heaven and pushes the stone away and declares to them that Christ is risen. In John's gospel, Mary Magdalene peers into the tomb and sees that it is empty; she sees two angels sitting, one at the head and one at the foot, where the body would have been, and they turn to her and say, "Woman, why are you weeping?"

But in Luke's gospel, which we heard today, the women look into the tomb, and suddenly there are two men in dazzling garments standing to the right and to the left of them (Luke 24:1-11). Nobody is sure who they are supposed to be. Some think they might be Moses and Elijah, who also appeared in glory with Jesus on the mountain of the transfiguration (Luke 9:28-36.) But whoever they are, they announce the good news of the resurrection in a very peculiar way. It comes in the form of a question: "Why are you seeking the living one among the dead?"

This actually is a rather insensitive and inappropriate question, but it is not a question posed by unkind beings. It is a question that comes out of overflowing and overwhelming joy. These men are so caught up in the reality of the resurrection that they do not understand how the women can still be grief stricken. "Get with the program! Wake up! It's Easter!"

When we are full of joy, we cannot understand how anyone could be sad. It is exactly the opposite when we are grief-stricken. As you well know, when you are afflicted and heavy with grief, you wonder how anyone in the world could be happy. We have an example of that in the very next chapter of Luke's gospel, when the risen Christ meets up

with two of his disciples walking from Jerusalem to the suburban village of Emmaus (Luke 24:13-27). They do not recognize him when he asks them, “Why do you look so sad?” They reply, “Don’t you know? Haven’t you heard? We thought everyone knew what things had happened this last week in Jerusalem.” They go on to pour out their grief about the arrest and crucifixion and death of the Lord Jesus.

To be fair, it does not take the women too long to get with the program. In moments, they are running from the tomb directly to find their brother disciples – these women, the first apostles, the first messengers of the resurrection, full of the good news of Jesus Christ risen from the dead. They are able to make that shift, I think, because they have lived their lives looking at the world on the assumption that God’s power is present everywhere, living lives of self-sacrifice and devotion and hope on the basis of that assumption.

It seems to me that many of us, perhaps all of us, this morning, are like the women at the tomb. We all have some catching up to do. It may be that you are only here this morning out of habit -- because Easter, like Christmas, is one of those times it just doesn’t feel right not to go to church. Or maybe you are here because a spouse or a relative has dragged you here. You may be here carrying terrible grief in your heart, unresolved and unhealed. For you the alleluias that we sing may not be a comfort but may indeed be an affront. Or perhaps you come remembering many occasions when you have felt the power and the presence of the resurrection -- but that power and that presence always has more to teach us as we are drawn further and further into the heart of God’s love. And so you too feel that you are not ready to get your mind fully around the new revelation of the divine love that God has in store for you today.

For all of us, the challenge of Easter is the discipline of joy. Joy is more than a feeling. It is an attitude, a frame of mind, an orientation toward reality that chooses to see God at the center of everything and not to follow the world in seeing in the world a place devoid of hope. We have two choices before us as we face our lives. One is to see life irradiated with the life of God. The other is to see the world as a place that is the product of chance, where the only reasonable goal is to get what you can quick, for yourself, and the devil take the hindmost. We have the choice to see the world with God in it or to approach our lives as if God were not there.

I am not talking about the creationist vs. evolutionist argument right now. Let me be very clear. I am talking about two ways of looking at a world that has evolved in amazing ways. We can interpret what we see in one of two ways: We can see the evolving universe as meaningless, arising from nowhere and heading nowhere. On this view, we see the process of development and change as a process that is driven by the need to survive and to get the better of others. Or, like many scientists, we can see the evolution of the universe as having inscribed within it God’s own sacrificial and adaptive love, so that the movement from simplicity to complexity is nothing more than the unfolding of a universe set free by God to change on the basis of self-sacrifice, stepping out of the way so that others can take our place.

I'm thinking here of two good friends my wife and I feel very close to. The four of us raised our children together. They are unbelievers, and yet they are people whose lives, in my view, have clearly been touched by God from beginning to end. But because they do not believe in God, they do not interpret the movement of their lives the way I would interpret it. I have seen them go from loss of job to regained employment as the hand of God protecting them and taking them from something that was good, through a terrible and difficult time, to something that was better. But they would say "As luck would have it, it all turned out." Or, "As coincidence would have it, we lived and we made it through this time."

So it is all about the framework that you bring to what happens. You can look at it as empty or you can look at it as full. The discipline of joy is to practice looking for the power and grace of God everywhere in our lives and in the lives of others, because if we do not see the world as a place that is irradiated with the power of God, and if we do not see love at the heart of everything, then the world that presents itself to our diminished gaze will have no room in it for the risen Christ.

So the challenge of this Sunday, and for the rest of our Easter lives, is to take the risk of assuming that the world is in God's hands and to behave accordingly, taking the spiritual risks that allow God to guide us from whatever slavery binds us into the promised land that God always holds before us, taking the risk to live lives of reconciliation and forgiveness rather than bitterness and hardness of heart, and through it all, taking the risk of opening ourselves up to asking for a relationship, a friendship, with Jesus Christ. If we are not willing to take the risk of looking so foolish in our own lives that we talk to Jesus and ask him to reach out and pull us out of darkness into light, then we will not be in the habit of listening for him when he calls our name.

The discipline of joy to which we are called today is the practice and discipline of discernment and anticipatory gladness. We are not to seek Jesus among the dead, say the men to the women and to us. Rather, we are to seek Jesus among the living. What this means is that we are to press forward toward the goal of joy and life, knowing that God means and wants happiness for us. But the miracle of Easter is that when we even get a slight taste of the joy that God has in store for us, when we meet and encounter the joy of the risen Christ himself, we find ourselves empowered and gifted by his spirit to turn around and go back into the land of diminishment, into the place where we are surrounded by people who are as good as dead in their grief, or in their sin, or in their exhaustion, or in their hopelessness, or in their fear.

The glory of Easter is that we are raised to a new life of energy and joy whereby we, with Christ, can stretch out our hands to pull others to the side of joy and light. Do you know what the ancient icon of the resurrection is in Eastern Orthodox Christianity? It is not a picture of the empty tomb or of Jesus rising from the tomb. It is a picture of Jesus throwing himself headlong into Hades, into Sheol, into the land of the shadowed dead, with his hands outstretched, his left hand grabbing Adam and his right hand grabbing Eve, and beyond them Noah, Samuel, Sarah, Isaac, John the Baptist and all the countless

millions of the dead, the gates of hell being burst open by Jesus, and the people of God being brought out of darkness into light. That is what we celebrate today.

May God give us grace to stretch out our hands to grasp the outstretched hands of Jesus Christ, and may we discipline ourselves this day, and pledge ourselves to the discipline of joy for our sake, and for the sake of all those that Jesus came to save. Would you please pray with me in the words of Edmund Spenser:

Most glorious Lord of life that on this day,
Didst make thy triumph over death and sin:
and having harrowed hell didst bring away,
captivity thence captive us to win.
This joyous day, dear Lord, with joy begin,
and grant that we for whom thou diddest die,
being with thy dear blood clean washed from sin,
may live forever in felicity.
And that thy love we weighing worthily,
may likewise love thee for the same again:
and for thy sake that all like dear didst buy,
with love may one another entertain.
So let us love, dear love, like as we ought,
love is the lesson which the Lord us taught. Amen.