

Easter Joy

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Easter joy is not equivalent to pleasure. It is not the result of personal decision. It is neither the pay off of success in one's work nor the consequence of good health or happy relationships. No, human effort does not produce Christian joy. The joy promised in the Bible comes from elsewhere, from outside frames of human expectation. Joy comes unbidden, when least expected, when it is so far from possibility that the very idea of it seems worthy of laughter and scorn. In biblical texts joy is always a reversal, an overturning of weeping, of loss, of death itself. Easter joy is the gift of life in the teeth of death. It is the true inheritance of believers. It awaits us.

Many things masquerade as joy in this culture where we embrace freedom for the pursuit of happiness. The media, for one, daily presents us with a diet of pseudo joys, with unreachable wealth, super cars, dream homes, prefect bodies, flawless children, and sparkling celebrity. But in such a world, happiness is always one purchase away and deep abiding joy even more elusive. Perhaps even more harmful than promising bogus joy, this society also suppresses the very possibility of joy. It systematically denies pain, suffering, and loss and thereby cuts us off from awe, wonder, and profound joy.

Our society encourages us to displace our restless grief onto things, celebrities, and talk show therapies. It permits the displacement of fear and rage in violence against strangers. It urges us to overcome self-doubt and loss by working on appearances. It substitutes false emotion and cheap sentiment for true self-knowledge, both personal and communal. It invites us to compare our sorrows with the pain of others so that a divorce after twenty years seems like a trivial and dismissable grievance compared to the losses of people in the Venezuelan floods.

Denial thins out human experience by substituting lies for true awareness of our lives; it reduces our capacity to receive the gift of joy and to live with compassion for others. By denying pain, hopscotching over grief and despair, the culture closes us off from our full humanity. Paradoxically, the pathway to joy in the Bible is through suffering and death, not around it or over it. This observation is not a plea for a return to medieval asceticism that denied the body and sought to create suffering to join with the pains of Jesus on the cross. No, it is to assert the obvious: Life includes unavoidable pain and loss, suffering and grief. The way to joy runs deep through the heart of life. Joy comes in the concreteness of our circumstances, in what seems to be joy's opposite. Perhaps the significance of Jesus' suffering and death on the cross, in addition to all its other meanings, is to reveal to us our wounds, our suffering, and our death.

The biblical texts proposed in the common lectionary for the first Easter of the new millennium (Isa 25:6-9; Ps 118:1-2,14-24; I Cor 15:1-11, and John 20:1-18) are unanimous in depicting joy, life, and newness only in the aftermath of suffering and fear, despair and death. They offer no shortcuts. They do not even consider that joy might come for the contented because the starting place for each of the passages is disaster, weeping, doubt, long waiting, death. That the joy of new life will come is the

good news for the poor; for the numbed and frozen, it is more boring, humdrum religious rhetoric.

The Old Testament reading for Easter 2000 (Isa 25:6-9) is full of exuberant promises for the future of Zion, God's holy mountain in Jerusalem. The speaker addresses a community that lives in what Walter Brueggemann calls the "nullification of ordered, civilized reality."¹ Their city has been attacked and devastated. Although which historical invasion of the city lies behind the text is not clear in this passage, the people suffer from invasion in sorrow and shame. Yet amazingly, unbelievably, Isaiah promises that God will take away their disgrace and "will wipe away the tears from all faces" (25:8). God's tender caring has not been sudden and immediate rescue. The people have been waiting for salvation, perhaps waiting interminably, for the verb is repeated. "We have waited.... This is YHWH for whom we have waited" (25:9).

Isaiah uses vivid scenes of feasts and funerals to enact the joy God brings to the afflicted and brokenhearted. For this devastated people, there will be a festive meal of meat and wine, "rich food filled with marrow, well-aged wines, strained clear" (25:6). Delicious! The hungry can already smell the cooking, taste the wine, and feel the warmth of nourishment and communal life. And while they are feasting, Isaiah lays out before them a funeral scene with a corpse. This festive meal that nourishes and gives life celebrates God's triumph over death. God will destroy the shroud that covers the corpse and the sheet spread over all nations. The people of Jerusalem will need the funeral shroud and the winding sheet no longer because there will be no more death. God "will swallow up death forever!" (25:7). Death will be conquered; the people will live. In a poetic glimpse of reconciliation between the conquered and the conquerors, all the peoples of the earth will flourish together. "So let us be glad and rejoice in God's salvation" (25:9). Because death is so widespread and pervasive in this poem, joy at its destruction is all the more lavish and overflowing.

The Easter psalm response comes from Ps 118 (verses 1-2, 14-14), a hymn of thanksgiving. Again death appears imminent and inescapable. Enemy nations threaten the psalmist like bees, like a blazing fire (118:12). "I was falling," he cries as the end looms before him (118:13). Yet in the midst of disaster he discovers the power of God, "the right hand of God does valiantly." Now he can sing, "I shall not die but live to recount the deeds of YHWH." (118:16-17). He will live in exuberant joy and evangelical thanksgiving because he has been saved. The urge to announce the good news accompanies and expresses the joy of his rescue from distress.

Then he recites one of the more famous scriptural lines in Christian biblical interpretation. "The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes" (118:22-23). The psalmist, of course, is speaking of his own rejection, suffering, and hopelessness. He is the cast-away stone now joyously brought into the center of the community. But something more is hidden in these verses. He testifies not only that God brings life in the face of death but that rejection and hopelessness themselves become the place of divine revelation.² There God's "steadfast love" is manifest (118:1-2); there sorrow turns to joy. Denial of suffering, then, is a destructive lie. The practices we follow in our families, in our communities, and within our own spirits that keep us from knowing our own grief, loss, and pain, also blind us to grace.

When Jesus uses the psalmist's words about himself (Mt 21:42; Mk 12:10-11; Lk 20:17), he claims that his rejection by his enemies becomes the very circumstance that

evokes and reveals divine love. God's love is overturning love, reversing love, life-giving love. Reversals, overturnings, and new life may be familiar and comfortable movements to assert about Jesus' life, but they are terribly difficult to accept in our own lives and in those of individuals and groups among our contemporaries. The list of the stones to be rejected is long and particular to our small worlds: the despairing failures among us, the mentally ill, immigrants, gays and lesbians, the homeless, peoples of other races, the imprisoned, despised aspects of ourselves, life events too painful to revisit. Will these become the cornerstone? Impossible. But the failed ones are the center, the rejected are exalted, the dead live. When we know that we rightfully dwell among them, the only appropriate response is joy. "This is the day the Lord had made; let us rejoice and be glad in it" (118:24).

How can we know joy unless we know we are broken, or that we have been dead and are brought back to life? Paul embodies this awareness in his testimony to the Corinthians (15:1-11). He describes himself as one "untimely born," "the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God" (15:8-9). Three times he says it is the "grace of God" that has made him what he is, an apostle, made new, made whole, made so thoroughly in the image of the one he follows that, like the psalmist, he can do nothing but proclaim that newness.

Many interpreters study Paul's creedal statement listing the order of Jesus' appearances (15:3-8) because of its importance for the spread of the Christian belief and for the institutional matters concerning church leadership. Paul tells how Jesus appeared first to Cephas, then the twelve, then the five hundred brothers and sisters, then James, all apostles, and lastly to Paul himself. The struggles over church politics that follow, however, seem of little importance when compared to the blazing, paradoxical good news these verses express. The dead one lives; the buried one breathes; life once again has replaced death "in accordance with the scriptures" (15:4).

Paul's creedal statement in chapter fifteen responded to disbelief among the Corinthians. His final theological chapter in the letter (chapter sixteen concerns practical matters) is devoted entirely to resurrection because it created huge problems for believers. It still does, although for different reasons today. Whatever the resurrection of the dead means in any literal sense, resurrection is the heart of Christian faith. Paul's testimony states in short form what the Gospels portray in Jesus' life. The God whom we worship is the God who wipes away tears, who reverses suffering, who spreads a banquet for the hungry and breaks into the world to swallow up death forever. That Jesus lives is our joy because it promises us that we will live, no matter how dead we are now, no matter how final our losses seem to be. That Jesus lives means death has no ultimate victory (15:54), suffering will end, and divine forces for life overpower their opposite. "Let us be glad and rejoice in it."

The reading from the Gospel of John (20:1-18) follows the same pattern as the other Easter readings. It moves up from impossibility, from loss and death, blindness and weeping, toward life—toward finding, seeing—toward joy. The passage never uses the word "joy" to describe human response to Jesus' resurrection. John tells the stories of Peter, John, and Mary Magdalene at the empty tomb economically, artistically understating the climax to his Gospel, letting readers respond on their own to the drama before them.

John's chapter emerges from the world of rejection, hatred, and death. Preceding scenes portray the tragedy and finality of Jesus' death. They include a crucifixion, a

piercing with a sword, and a burial (19:16b-42). Religious authorities crucify him. Soldiers take his clothes and cast lots for them; he will not need them. Jesus gives his mother into the care of another man. He expresses all the longing of the dying body and spirit. "I am thirsty" (19:28). He announces his own death, "'It is finished' . . . and he gave up his spirit" (19:30). Then a soldier pierces his side with a spear. Friends anoint his body and lay it in the tomb. Whatever theological meanings can be drawn from these details, they all lead to one conclusion. Jesus is dead. All signs of life are gone. The stone has been rejected, the tragedy is complete, and despair, hatred, and ignorance dominate the world.

John's resurrection story in chapter twenty leaps out from these previous scenes of death. Only against them can the radical reversals of Easter emerge in all their power. Mary Magdalene frames the story in the reading (20:1-2, 11-18). The action begins when she comes to the tomb on the first day of the week in the dark. She is in the dark, the sunless, bitter death world of the previous chapter. Surely she expects to stay by the tomb and grieve, but new realities disrupt her expectations. The stone that sealed in death, that clamped it in place, that separated the living from the dead, has been moved. The world is rearranged, something has shifted, but Mary cannot see.

Mary thinks the worst, for death still has her in its power. She cannot imagine the new world that erupts before her. Alarmed, she runs to tell Simon Peter and the "beloved disciple," John. "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him" (20:2). Only foul play seems possible to Mary as she imagines a new insult to Jesus' body. Her experiences of trauma and loss have distorted her ability to see reality. Perhaps despair has become her religion. The idea of joy is laughable.

The Gospel leaves her briefly in her sorrow to focus on Peter and John who together run to the tomb to see for themselves. We know nothing of what they are thinking or feeling. We see only their actions, the urgency driving them to run, to see. John sees the linen wrappings, and when Peter gets there and goes in, he sees the same wrappings and the cloth from Jesus' head. Then John, "the other disciple," "saw and believed." (20:8). But belief is not understanding. They did not yet understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead (20:9). They did not understand that God has destroyed the funeral shroud and the winding sheet, that God has 'swallowed up death forever.' (Isa 25:8). They did not know the stone that the builders rejected had already become the cornerstone. They did not know that Jesus had risen from the dead. They went home.

By contrast, Mary is back at the tomb, and she is still weeping (20:11). Her tears are long, bitter, and important, for we learn of them repeatedly (20: 1 [2x's], 13, 15). Her tears mark the finality of Jesus' death. Her tears are her truth that reveal the world of grief in which she dwells at present. They punctuate her loss and the collapse of hope in Jesus' promises of life and truth in this Gospel. Ultimately, her tears stand in sharp and unstated contrast to the joy that is about to overtake her. While she is weeping she looks into the tomb, the place of the dead, and two angels in white ask, "Woman, why are you weeping?" Perhaps tears veil her vision, grief dampens her perceptions, or sorrow and hopelessness have so formed her thinking that she cannot see what is before her. The two apocalyptic figures provoke no astonishment from her. Still blinded by death's grip, she repeats the interpretation of the empty tomb that she gave to Peter and John, but now she speaks personally of loss by changing "the Lord" (20:2) to "my

Lord.” “They have taken away my Lord and I do not know where they have laid him” (20:13).

Could the birth of joy be more exquisitely understated than in the following scene? When Mary turns around she sees a figure whom she mistakes for the gardener. She does not know that it is Jesus, that God has destroyed the funeral shroud and swallowed up death forever. Jesus repeats the angel’s question, “Woman, why are you weeping?” Mary accuses the unrecognized Jesus of taking away his own body. She asks him to tell her where it is that she may take it herself and perform the proper duties of Jewish care for the dead. Then Jesus calls her by name, “Mary!” (20:16). She turns and calls him by his title, Rabbouni, “my Teacher”(20:16). Mary turns. She turns from blindness to seeing. She turns from despair to hope. She turns from the domain of death to the reign of life. Mary turns and sees, and her tears are wiped away, and like psalmist, she recounts “the deeds of the Lord” (Ps 118:17). “Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, ‘I have seen the Lord;’ and she told them that he had said these things to her” (20:18).

Unlike Peter and John whose story Mary frames, Mary sees the Risen Christ. She is the first witness to the empty tomb and now to her new relationship with the Risen One. But Mary is not only the first preacher of the good news, the “apostle to the apostles,” Mary is a stand-in for Christians. In her weeping, her blindness, her coming to sight, in her impulse to recount the deeds of the Lord, and in the joy beyond speech that overtakes her, Mary embodies Christian life. Her story imprints in our consciousness the paradoxical truth that joy comes from God, in relationship with Jesus, in the thick of suffering, loss, and in the face of death. Joy awaits us.

Notes

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 196.

² James L. Mays, *Psalms*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994), 379-80.