
What Does the Joy of the Resurrection Look Like?

A sermon by the Rev. Canon George Maxwell
The Third Sunday of Easter – Year B

I heard a story recently about a young doctor who on his first day in the hospital walked into the delivery room just as a young mother was giving birth to her new son. As he walked into the room, she began to shout, "Joy, joy, joy," and he was amazed. He could not believe that she had such joy at a moment like this. Several hours later, he went to see this woman when she was sitting with the young new child in her lap, and he told her how amazed he had been that she was experiencing this in that moment. She looked at him and she said, "You have a lot to learn. I was in absolute agony. Joy is the midwife's name."

Easter is a church's moment of joy. You might say that it's the holiest day of the year. It's as if all of the other holy days have been gathered up, bound together, and given new life. It's like the first day of creation. God's imagination gave the world its start. Easter gives it a fresh start. It's like the Exodus, Moses and his people were freed from slavery. But on Easter, all people are liberated. It's like the day of the covenant when God gave Moses the 10 best ways to draw close to God. But on Easter, God shows us that nothing, not even death, can separate us from God. It's like Christmas when God became one of us, despite our efforts to turn away from him. On Easter, God stays with us in bodily form, despite our efforts to remove him from our lives forever. It's like Good Friday when God gives himself to us like the shepherd, laying down his life for the sheep. On Easter, God reassembles that flock, making it clear that nothing can ever separate us from God. Easter is the day that the Lord has made. It is a feast of victory for our God. There's nothing left for us to do, but rejoice and be glad in it.

But this is not exactly what the disciples were experiencing when they saw the resurrected Jesus. Mary did not recognize him in the garden thinking he might be the gardener. The disciples in the upper room didn't recognize him when he passed through the doors to join them. The disciples on the road to Emmaus did not recognize him, despite his opening Scripture to them. The disciples who had been out fishing all night, catching nothing, did not recognize him when he told them to cast the nets on the other side of the boat. Easter did not feel like a moment of joy to them.

But if you stop and think about it, their reaction makes a whole lot of sense. They were overcome by grief and frightened, scared for their very lives. They had lost the man who had brought them together and given them hope. They had lost that hope for overturning the Roman political system. They had lost that hope for making a new economic system possible. They had lost that hope of a new world as they had imagined it. Instead, Jesus was promising them a world that they could not imagine. It makes perfect sense that they weren't experiencing the joy of the resurrection in any other way.

But I think maybe the joy of the resurrection is not so much about avoiding pain or suffering or having to walk into a future that you couldn't imagine, that it's more about how you do those things. Not avoiding them, but learning how to work through them.

Take grief. I think of grief as love with nowhere to go. Grief is love with nowhere to go. Perhaps you've lost someone who is dear to you. The pain is excruciating. The sense of aloneness cannot be left behind. You may find yourself in despair, but underneath that despair is love. The love you had for them, the love you still have to give, the love that has nowhere to go. Or maybe you are feeling grief at the pain and suffering of those around you, people that are oppressed or marginalized or can't seem to find their way through life. Get below that grief and you may find despair, but get below that despair and you will find love. Love which has nowhere to go.

The joy of the resurrection in this moment may be trusting that God is present, may be feeling some sense of

gratitude that you are feeling this pain, some sense of gratitude that you are not so numb. You are missing the pain. It is that gratitude, which will let you get to the love. And when you find the love that has nowhere to go, you will know what to do with it.

On Thursday night, we did something here that we do very well. We had a party. And we didn't just get together and have a party. We had a party to benefit the Thrift House and a new beneficiary, Motherhood Beyond Bars. So the executive director of this nonprofit told us her story. Her name is Amy Ard. She told us that when she had her first child, she had a doula that helped her through the experience. She didn't say her name was Joy, but it probably was. She was so grateful for that doula's presence when her young child was born that she decided that's what she wanted to do with her life. She wanted to be available to other women the way that woman had been available to her. So she started what later became the largest doula agency in Washington D.C.

And then, one day, she was in a hospital having just successfully midwifed a new child into the world, when she walked out into the hallway and ran into a police officer who was coming out of the adjoining room. Gun on his hip, she looked into the open door and saw a mother there getting ready to give birth while shackled to her gurney. And at that moment, Amy decided she really wanted to be available to that woman too. She wanted to do for her what she was able to do for her clients. So she gave up her business and moved to Atlanta, Georgia, where she was from, and began asking questions.

What's amazing about Amy's story is that of all of the accomplishments that she can cite, she's advocated for new laws against shackling of pregnant women, for example. She's created this very successful nonprofit. Invariably, what she talks about is staying curious and asking questions. It's a profound respect for other people, other agencies already doing the work, women who are there who know what they need.

It strikes me that the joy of the resurrection requires curiosity, not just gratitude for being able to feel the pain that draws you into places of engagement, but curiosity that God is there. And if you ask enough questions, if you pay enough attention, if you're present enough, you will see God there and a new way will open for you that you could not have imagined before. That, I think, is the joy of the resurrection.

Amy has continued to do this, and this operation is truly wonderful, but as more as people have encouraged her to get bigger and do more things, she continues to stay with one thing that not everybody thinks she ought to be doing. She makes sure that every mother that she's in touch with has enough diapers. The mothers in prison are not with their children, of course, those children are with a caregiver outside. Often they run out of diapers or can't afford diapers or something happens, and that so upsets the mothers that nothing else can occur. Amy was curious. She asked questions. She knows that diapers are the right place to start.

The joy of the resurrection, having the gratitude to feel the pain, having the confidence to have curiosity about answers, which you can't envision on your own, in order that you might midwife yourself and maybe someone else into a future that you could not have imagined.

Amen.