
Joy?

Luke 24:44-53

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on Ascension Sunday, May 28, 2017,
by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

It may seem delusional, dishonest, or even crazy to talk about experiencing joy amid our current world situation. A deadly suicide bomb after an Arianna Grande concert in Manchester, England. Theories of and investigations into White House corruption and cover ups. A Venezuelan economic crisis as their citizens try to escape the despair of their country. And Duke student Michael Doherty's recent death in Massachusetts. Joy? Not the assertion of it or even a commitment to it. But joy with a question mark after it, interrogating its possibility and presence at such a time as this. Joy? Really? The experience of joy can seem to be disconnected from reality and reason. Yet in the realm of resurrection, it is possible and fully reasonable. To borrow the words of Frederick Buechner, "something [can] Easter up out of the dimness" when we least expect it so to take his advice, I won't "try to recount the gospel with the high magic taken out, the deep mystery reduced to a manageable size." I'll "tell the truth that is beyond telling."

Luke is definitely the Gospel of praise and joy, using the word, 'joy', more than any other author. Luke was a physician but I don't think he used joy when describing colonoscopies! He begins his Gospel with an angel in the temple foretelling joy to Zechariah, and then at the birth of Jesus, we hear angelic praise and the statement, "I bring you good news of great joy." And at the end of the Gospel, at the ascension of Jesus, we hear that the disciples worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem "with great joy." The bookends of Luke—joy—should be the ends of our lives, the purpose of our being and doing in this life.

Yet you should know that the disciples' joy comes amid sadness, fright, doubt, disbelief, and wondering. This is the actual context for joy. A solitary lectionary reading will make you miss the larger narrative of when joy occurs. This is why I continue to tell my students that the lectionary is not the whole Bible. Only reading today's lesson, will make you think that there was only "great joy" from a happy, smiley, go-lucky group of disciples. This is anything but the truth. The truth that is beyond telling is that joy comes in the midst of sorrow, never apart from it, always affiliated with it, just as the resurrection doesn't erase from Christ's hands and feet the wounds of the crucifixion (Amy Plantinga Pauw). Just as "the grounds of our thanksgiving are found in a crucified man" (G Lathrop). Just as the 'yes' of God doesn't instantly make the 'no' of our doubts and struggles disappear. The joy, of which I speak, doesn't deny sorrow, failure, or doubt. This is true for the disciples too. Just three verses earlier, we get a fuller picture when we are told that the disciples "while in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering..." It's possible to have joy even apart from a perfect, unblemished life. Even earlier, the two disciples on the road to Emmaus were "looking sad" and then later on Jesus asks the disciples, "why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?" Great joy comes even when you have great doubts and sorrow. Something, like joy, can Easter up when you least expect it out of your dimness.

This is why Princeton historian, Al Raboteau, calls his memoir a "sorrowful joy." This is why retired Methodist professor, William McClain, says this about African American singing:

“In our melancholy, our songs are not always mournful songs. Most often, they are joyous, lifting the spirit above despair. Yet, our sad songs sometimes come in the midst of our joy, in moments of jubilation and celebration. Without warning caution emerges to remind us that songs of joy must be tempered by the stark realities of the plight of our people. In the midst of our joyful singing the soul has not forgotten depression, pain, and expressions of hopelessness on the face of our young. Laughter turns to tears and our glad songs into laments. But we refuse to give up or give in.... At the moment of our deepest despair we sing, ‘sometimes I feel like a motherless child a long way from home.’ Then in the midst of our sadness, we sing with assurance, ‘I’m so glad that trouble don’t last always’”

This mixed texture of sorrow and joy, this faithful bifocal expression of Christian faith is so keenly voiced in the spiritual, “Nobody Knows the Trouble I See.” “Nobody knows the trouble I see.... Glory, hallelujah!” “While in their joy, they were disbelieving and still wondering,” even singing nobody knows the trouble I see. Great joy can come even in great sorrow. This is the Christian way.

In her novel, *Praisesong for the Widow*, Paule Marshall depicts the mix of festivity with solemnity in a cultural celebration known as the Big Drum. When the drum is beaten, she writes:

“... the single, dark, plangent note this produced, like that from the deep bowing of a cello, sounded like the distillation of a thousand sorrow songs. For an instant the power of it brought the singing and dancing to a halt—or so it appeared... The note was a lamentation that could hardly have come from the rum keg of a drum. Its source had to be the heart, the bruised still-bleeding inner-most chamber of the collective heart. For a fraction of a second the note hung in the yard, knifing through the revelry to speak to everyone there. To remind them of the true and solemn business of the fete.”

A solemn fete. A somber party. A sad joyfulness. Sadness can be a part of gladness and joy.

Joy? Joy can be such an elusive quality and beyond definitions so much so that Yale University started a research project on joy in order to explore it from many perspectives. Though there are differences, there is agreement that joy is fundamental to human existence and well-being. The ascension of Jesus reveals that as a disciple waiting for Christ, joy is critical to what it means to be a Christian. Just as the end of Luke closes that way, our end should also be joy, or as it says, “great joy.” The good life from a Christian perspective is the way or life of Christ and joy is a necessary aspect of this way as we see with the disciples. A genuine encounter with the risen Lord ignites praise and joy as well as questions and uncertainty.

Karl Barth said, “Joy is the simplest form of gratitude.” Others describe joy in different ways: as a feeling that responds to something else; happiness plus gratitude; a sense of contentment with one’s choices and paths taken or not; an act of resistance against despair and its forces; a temporary experience linked to someone beyond ourselves; an inner strength; an immediate response to creation, redemption, and salvation; a deep seated sense of well-being with oneself and life; something rooted in faith, hope, and love; a work that can become a state that can become a way of life.

Joy is beyond definitions but it’s a virtue of Christian discipleship and a fruit of the Spirit. It is not of our own making; it is God’s doing, Christ-initiating, and Spirit-perpetuating. And we can’t take this deep mystery of joy and reduce it to a manageable size because if the resurrection tells us anything, it

tells us that the risen Lord is unmanageable. We can't explain joy fully but we know it's real, this "great joy" promised and given by Jesus.

Joy isn't happiness. Miroslav Volf, the head of the Yale study on joy, argues, to define joy as a "feeling of great pleasure and happiness" is like describing champagne as a bubbly liquid, but forgetting all about its golden color, whiffs of ripe pear and fresh baked bread in its aroma or traces of apple, vanilla, yeast, and nuts in its flavor, and, of course, its capacity to intoxicate. Volf defines joy as "emotional attunement between the self and the world—usually a small portion of it—experienced as blessing." Joy can be exuberant or a calm delight but it's the experience of something as a blessing that initiates it. In the case of the disciples, the departing blessing of Jesus does this. His blessing, his benediction, his *bene-dictio*, his good speaking/word and good deed, pronounces God's favor on them and worship and joy are their faithful responses. His blessing touches the earth and its impact ignites great joy in the lives of his followers. Christ's rise to the heavens is a call for joy to rise in us, for it to Easter up within us. One commentator notes, "The bells rang in heaven to greet the return of Jesus there, but he set the carillon of joy to ringing on earth in human hearts...." (Archibald Robertson)

Do we hear this 'carillon of joy' ringing in Christian lives? That should be the case since Christianity has been called a religion or proclamation of joy where faith abides in the Christian feasts. Of course, the cross and suffering and death are crucial but the crucifixion and death of Christ are eclipsed by his resurrection and life, thus climaxing in joy and praise. "Pains are passing while praise is everlasting" (Jurgen Moltmann) such that the culmination of the Christian faith is eternal worship and joy in the communion of the Holy Spirit. What might have been considered a dead end with the death of Jesus was transformed into a beginning through the resurrection and ascension, making great joy possible as a credible witness to life in Christ. Without this joy, any effective witness is lost or at least impotent. The Church can talk about new methods for outreach, fresh ways of doing church, social justice ministries, how to reach millennials, seven habits for a stress-free life, ten ways to use your money more wisely, but if we don't talk about nor experience the joy of the risen Christ, something has gone awry and it's all in vain, for joy, in the context of Christian discipleship, is a sign that one has met the living ascended Jesus. Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann said, "Of all accusations against Christians, the most terrible one was uttered by [philosopher] Nietzsche when he said that Christians had no joy."

I wonder if this is true because I find that Christians are more known for their divisions and infighting splattered all over the news, more known for bickering, meanness, and being judgmental, than for love and joy. Sometimes it seems as if 'joy' is the antonym of the word, 'Christian.' Where is the "great joy" of the disciples today? Where is the "great joy" in the Church?

In one of his Eastertide sermons at Duke Chapel, former Harvard minister Peter Gomes said that the real question Jesus asks us is not "Do you believe in life after death?" but "Do you believe in life before death? Do you have any life in you now? Is there anything in you that would demonstrate to anybody else that not only does Christ live but Christ lives in you?" Do you believe in joy before death? Do you have any joy in you now? If not, why not?

The ascending Christ desires for his joy to ascend in you, to Easter up out of the dimness of your soul, so that an inward coronation can take place among sadness, fright, doubt, disbelief, wondering, and even "great joy." People will not only know we are Christians by our love; they will know we are Christians by our joy. So may the hymn and prayer of our lives be:

*Joyful, joyful, we adore thee,
God of glory, Lord of love;
Hearts unfold like flow'rs before thee,
Opening to the sun above.
Melt the clouds of sin and sadness;
Drive the dark of doubt away;
Giver of immortal gladness,
Fill us with the light of day!
All thy works with joy surround thee,
Earth and heaven reflect thy rays,
Stars and angels sing around thee,
Center of unbroken praise;
Field and forest, vale and mountain,
Flowery meadow, flashing sea,
Chanting bird and flowing fountain
Call us to rejoice in thee.
Thou art giving and forgiving,
Ever blessing, ever blest,
Well-spring of the joy of living,
Ocean-depth of happy rest!
Thou our Father, Christ our Brother,
All who live in love are thine;
Teach us how to love each other,
Lift us to the joy divine.
Mortals, join the mighty chorus,
Which the morning stars began;
Love divine is reigning o'er us,
Binding all within its span.
Ever singing, march we onward,
Victors in the midst of strife;
Joyful music leads us sunward
In the triumph song of life.*