

Easter Vigil/Day
April 20/21, 2019

Some time ago I read a book titled *The Praying Life*. In the first chapter, the writer talks about being in Scotland and wanting to send mail back to the US. While in the post office, she saw that the Queen had declared a deep postage discount for cards sent in unsealed envelopes that had messages of 5 words or less. There must have been a long line, because she writes about all the ideas she came up with, including things like, “All well here – how there?” Or “All discovered-flee at once.” But then she turned to biblical texts and came up with God saying, “I will be with you.” Or Jesus saying, “I have overcome the world,” or, more relevant to tonight’s celebration, Mary Magdalen saying, “I have seen the Lord.” And then, of course, she tried doing this with even fewer words. And managed, finally, to get to just one: YES!

I was thinking about that in connection with our Easter celebration. If we were reduced to just one word, in talking about the Easter message, what would it be? Perhaps some would say grace, or

truth, or hope, or love. And all of those are right on. But I'd like to suggest there's another word that perfectly encapsulates the Easter message and that word is JOY.

St. Luke's people have heard me talk about this before. That joy is not the same as happiness. While happiness is an emotional state dependent on external circumstances, joy, by contrast, is an attitude toward life. And, perhaps most importantly, joy is that state of being that has known suffering and has transcended it. So while joy says "alleluia" it says it through tears. It's been said that the gospel is bad news before it's good news – so there's sin before redemption and suffering before healing, confusion before understanding, and physical death before eternal life. But ultimately and finally, it's GOOD NEWS. The news that finally, in the end, the Easter message is that God indeed is making all creation new and despite everything to the contrary, God's will for creation will prevail – and love will prove to be stronger than hate, justice stronger than injustice and oppression and God's peace stronger than exploitation and bitterness. Easter reminds us that in spite of the fact that, in the words of Frederick

Buechner, what we know best are “Anxiety and fear...wars and rumors of wars...We have heard so much tragic news that when the news is good, we cannot hear it. But the proclamation of Easter is that all is well. And, as a Christian, I say this not with the easy optimism of one who has never known a time when all was not well, but as one who has faced the cross, who has known one way of another what it is like to live separated from God. In the end, God’s will, not ours, is done. Love is the victor. Death is not the end. The end is life.”

So, joy and perhaps its close cousin, laughter. Both can take us completely by surprise. Like the disciples in the Easter readings, we have come to expect tragedy, but somehow are unprepared for the fact that beyond the darkness there shines a great light. I’ve read that in the middle ages in Germany, the church celebrated what was called the Risus Paschalis – the Easter laughter. The congregations would celebrate the fact that after Easter Jesus was alive and loose among us, and that all the forces that conspired to lay him in his tomb had been defeated. The fury, the hatred, the violence, the vaunted power of empire – all were made a laughing

stock by the resurrection. G.K. Chesterton, in his poem, *The End of Fear*, says: “In the night I broke the bubble of a great world’s jest and woke laughing with laughter such as shakes the stars.” The Resurrection upends all the world’s values – it’s a joke on the world, and a joke on death which is silenced and made impotent. And apparently in those churches that celebrated the *Risus Paschalis*, it was customary to tell one another jokes. So, let me share one – Presbyterian minister receives a call from a woman wanting a funeral for her cat. Sorry, he says, we don’t do that, but you might try the Roman Catholics down the street. She replies, “Thanks very much; and by the way, what would be an appropriate gift to the church for doing the funeral? Do you think \$30,000 would be sufficient?” And the pastor’s quick response – oh, you didn’t mention that your cat was a Presbyterian!

In a literary sense, the word “comedy” is a drama in which the central motif is triumph over adversity, leading to a successful conclusion. Hence, Dante’s masterpiece, *The Divine Comedy*. You’ll remember that Dante, who found himself wandering in a dark wood, finds a guide in the spirit of Virgil. They

journey together, beginning in the bowels of Hell, with sights gruesome and agonizing; but then they continue ever upward, to purgatory and finally to Heaven. When they draw near to Paradise, Dante hears a faint and distant sound. Cocking his head, straining his ears, he listens, then smiles, and proclaims, “It sounds like the laughter of the Universe.” Easter: joy and laughter.

So, what are the implications of all this for us? First of all, it means we are Easter people, that we can live without fear of death, that we can stand against all those things that snuff out joy, that threaten and work against full and flourishing life.

Basil Pennington writes about a meeting he had with a Buddhist Zen master. He said that the master sat before him, smiling from ear to ear and finally saying, “I like Christianity. But I would not like Christianity without the resurrection. I want to see your resurrection!” Pennington noted that the Zen master was saying explicitly what everyone else says implicitly to Christians: YOU ARE A CHRISTIAN. YOU ARE RISEN WITH CHRIST. SHOW ME

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOU IN YOUR LIFE –
and then I will believe.

Here's a meditation that gives us a sense of
direction to answer that challenge:

Every newly opened leper hospital is an act of faith
in the resurrection;

Every peace treaty is an act of faith in the
resurrection.

Every agreed commitment is an act of faith in the
resurrection.

When you forgive your enemy

When you feed the hungry

When you defend the weak

You believe in the resurrection.

When you have the courage to marry

When you welcome the newly-born child

When you build your home

You believe in the resurrection.

When you wake at peace in the morning

When you sing to the rising sun

When you go to work with joy

You believe in the Resurrection.

I invite you to think about your own words, whether five or two or one. But most importantly, I invite you to live in the joy of the Resurrection. **HE IS RISEN!**