

Easter Day C - 4 April 2010
Acts 10:34-43; 1 Corinthians 15:19-26; John 20:1-18
Jim Stockton

"I've got joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart; down in my heart, down in my heart. I've got joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart, down in my heart today." This old folk hymn expresses well, I think, the meaning and the point of Easter Day, of this Resurrection Sunday. There is much that can be said, that needs to be said, to make this statement intellectually credible. And such credibility is important. Nonetheless, the fact that joy is at the heart of the day, the fact that joy is at the heart of the resurrection of Jesus, deserves to be noted first of all.

Someone has written the following. "Green the grass. Ripe the bud. Warm the sun. Scented the rose. Beautiful the birdsong. Risen the Lord." Yes, it is simple. It is even simplistic. But on this day of days I think the simplicity of what we recall commends itself to humanity, so that people everywhere might find it to be a blessing and truth that can be grasped by the fullness of their being, in heart and soul and body, as well as in mind.

Joy: in heart where joy sings; in soul where it connects one to God; in body where it inspires action and calls forth calm; and, joy, in mind where it assures one that trust placed in God is indeed trust placed where and in whom it belongs.

The apostle Peter is one who was blessed to witness personally all these things of which we hear and read in scripture today and each week through the year. They are for us inspiration. For Peter, inspiration, but also for him these are experience and personal history. He can say to people, as he does to a Roman soldier named Cornelius and to those gathered with him, that what he tells them about Jesus comes to them first-hand. 'God raised Jesus on the third day,' Peter tells them, 'and he appeared to us; he ate and drank with us after he rose from the dead.' And 'we are witnesses to all of this.'

Peter is most certainly a witness. As the Gospel relates today, Peter races to the tomb of Jesus, apparently literally racing a fellow disciple who outpaces Peter and beats him there. But the other disciple only peers into the darkness to see what he might see. He

wants to check out the accuracy of the story that he has heard from another follower of Jesus, Mary Magdalene.

Perhaps unable or at least unwilling to stay in hiding, Mary Magdalene comes to the grave of Jesus. One wonders why. Other gospels mention that it may have been to dress properly and ceremonially the body for its entombment. Though he was hung upon a cross as a criminal, she and other women who followed him will not allow Jesus' remains to be cast aside, dismissed, and disrespected. Whether they are putting themselves at risk with either the Roman guards or the Temple rulers, all of whom colluded to execute this innocent man, we cannot know. What we can know is that the other disciples are making themselves scarce while these women, these ladies of the Kingdom of God among us, are open and unashamed of their devotion. Good for them. Thank God for their example.

Mary's story to Peter and the other disciples is confused and alarmed. 'They've taken the Lord,' she says, whoever 'they' are, 'and we do not know where to find him.' As minister and author Henry Sloane Coffin once noted, "If Jesus' career had ended in defeat, then we might have concluded that he had been mistaken; that ours is a godless universe." How scary is it, how disturbing, to suppose that Jesus' calls to trust in God were all expressions of a huge error? The implications are hard to ponder, though worthy of thoughtful reflection.

But notice that they first occur to Mary, perhaps also to you and to me, in body, soul, and heart, well before the mind can even attempt to fathom them. Panic seizes her. Panic seizes Peter and the other disciples. Driving need to calm the fear pushes Peter to enter the tomb, where a more discreet disciple fears to go. The hard stone of the entrance to the tomb; the cold air inside of it; the scent of damp earth and clay; the empty carved shelf where the body should now be; angels in white, asking questions whose answers are so obvious that they can hardly be uttered; all these fill the followers of Jesus with a sea of sensation.

Moving less from reason and more from passion, Peter, the other disciple, and Mary Magdalene herself are desperate to connect what they see with their eyes, what they hear with their ears, what they touch with their hands, and what they feel in their hearts, with what they are only beginning to understand with their minds. And there is something here instructive here for all of us who follow them in the basic experience of being Christian.

You may be here today on Easter Sunday as the single day, or as one of two or three, that you attend a Church service. And if this is so, please have no embarrassment about this; instead, please just remember that you are always welcome here at ECR. Would we like to have you return more often? Of course; it's always nice to have our efforts to communicate God's Love for all find a new home in someone's life, in heart, soul, body, and mind. Nevertheless you are here today, we are all here today, presumably at least in part, because each of us is responding to a desire to be here, to a need to be here, to a sense of belonging here on Easter Sunday.

And this is so whether or not you or I, or he or she behind or in front or behind, can say that we have a solid understanding of what happened at Jesus' resurrection. I confess to a great enjoyment at exploring the doctrine and mysteries of faith intellectually and academically. I know that many of us here share this interest, and I'm glad of it. If faith in Jesus and his resurrection and its expression of God's Love for all failed to pass intellectual scrutiny, I would find it difficult to hold to, much less to preach and teach it on a regular basis.

That we can grasp it at all is a blessing, and we can thank God for this. I also know, however, that my grasp, and with all due respect, your own intellectual grasp, of these mysteries is only slightly more than that of the infant Isabella who will be baptized here in a little while. In comparison to all that it is that fills us with joy, that causes soul to sing and body to breathe more rapidly with excitement and more calmly with peace, what we can grasp of this with mind is the smallest fraction of a fraction.

We do well, then, not to hold to Jesus, as he says to Mary in the garden. We do well not to insist that

he remain where we can contain him, restrain him, and figure him out; but instead, to let him go on with his mission and ministry, and to get on with our own. We do well to accept the joy that comes with the experience as well as the thought that Jesus is risen. We do well to welcome this joy on this day, here this morning. And we do well to welcome it, no matter how nonsensical, to seek it, on any morning, noon, or nighttime, when joy seems too distant, and confusion, fear, and desperation rule instead.

Jesus is risen. It is not enough that he rose, once upon a time. It's not enough that a few people experienced something inexpressible and framed it as his resurrection. Jesus rose, yes, and he is risen, still. The victory of eternal life over eternal death is secured. The victory of goodness over hatred lives on and on. The affect of your kindness or mine on the life of a fellow human being, persists because God's Love rose in person, and remains risen to love us still today. And the affect upon us of the kindness of those around us lives on for just the same reason.

Even when we cannot always hold onto it, Jesus' resurrection is that joy that holds onto us. Today, we find it, find it, find it, down, down in our heart. And the same is true tomorrow. When we are looking for it, we will find this joy. This week, when we are listening for it, when we are feeling around for it, and yes, when we are thinking hard about it, we will find this joy, joy, joy, joy deep in our heart.. And what is surer still, is that, when we least expect it, joy will continue find us.

It does not make sense, I know. But somehow I know, somehow you know, somehow we know together, that this is so. Because deep down in God's own heart, God has got you and me.

And so may Almighty God, whose Son our Savior has opened the way of life everlasting, grant that we who rejoice at his resurrection, may rise with him to eternal joys in his glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.