

Indescribable, Glorious Joy
1 Peter 1:3-9

I say,
“The Lord is Risen!”

You say,
“The Lord is Risen Indeed!”

This refrain in its various forms defines Easter, as the church gathers to celebrate the Risen Christ. Easter is a time of great Joy for the church; those closest to Jesus felt the weight of despair lifted when they realized that:

“The Lord is Risen!”
“The Lord is Risen Indeed.”

Today is the second Sunday of Easter, the season in the church year in which we look with even greater intensity at the experience of the disciples and the early church following Christ’s resurrection.

That experience of deep and resounding joy became a driving force in the lives of the disciples as they left the tomb and went forth to tell the story of what they’d seen. But some 30 years after that first Easter, the excitement of the resurrection had been tempered by time. This morning, we read Peter’s encouraging words to a congregation struggling to speak its message within hostile surroundings. For the churches in Asia Minor life was hard; circumstances were unpredictable, and Peter felt called to offer them something to sustain them in the midst of the struggle. He began by reminding them of God’s gift and promise in Jesus Christ; he called their attention once again to the Risen Lord and “an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading.” That is, he reminded them of life beyond this life. To his first century listeners, many of whom were living as slaves with little or nothing to call their own, the inheritance Peter described would have been a source of great comfort and assurance.

And comfort and assurance was just what they needed. Many were in these churches were recent converts, Gentile Christians, learning for the first time what it meant to be the people of God. Because of this, all of the old ways of doing things and coping with hard times were still readily available. Peter understood the despair of suffering and lost hope. He understood moments of weakness. He’d seen Jesus crucified, and given into the temptation of denial himself. Perhaps because of this, the energy and urgency in the choice of his words comes through even more strongly as he describes God at work in the very same world in which this young church is suffering. He reminded them in no uncertain terms that:

“The Lord is Risen!”
“The Lord is Risen Indeed!”

While the first several verses of the letter are an affirmation of God’s activity in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the promise of what is yet to come, the last several direct us to a response which reflects what we know to be true. Peter called on this community of faith, this struggling, scared, wavering church, to rejoice: “Rejoice,” he writes, “with an indescribable and glorious joy!” But how could they experience joy when they were living with that ‘Saturday between Friday and Sunday despair’? How can they believe in what they don’t see, when the visible, audible and tangible world is beating them down? ‘Rejoicing’ seems like a lot to ask of people struggling, in some cases, simply to survive.

One of the requirements of my education for ministry, at Pittsburgh Seminary, was to take part in at least one year of Field Education, and I think this is a fairly standard requirement for most seminaries. Field Education, as you might guess, was the process of getting students out of the classroom and into settings where we could actively participate in ministry, with supervision. For many of us, this meant that we would spend 9-12 months with a congregation in the area, under the supervision of the pastor.

I’ve always been extremely thankful for the setting I was placed. The congregation and pastor had fully embraced this opportunity as part of their ministry. Every year they invited a PTS student to come and join them, often providing a place to live during the summer months to ease the daily commute. The pastor was committed to giving his students the most complete experience of ministry he could. This meant that initially he brought me along just about everywhere he went, and later sent me out on my own. Not too long after I started he took me to visit one of the long time members of the church who could not come out to join the congregation in worship or fellowship. He took me to visit her for the very simple reason that he wanted me to experience her. Over the years he had made many visits to see her, ministering to her through hard circumstances in her life. But he had also discovered in the midst of these things, and in the midst of purely ordinary things, she was able to maintain a profound and abiding sense of God’s presence, God’s help and God’s promises. In fact it was so profound that he often found himself encouraged and refreshed as he left each visit. She provided a ministry to him – and to others - because of her strong conviction that what was happening to her or around her did not alter one bit that God was steady and sure during the hard times, and loved her deeply through Jesus Christ.

Over the years I’ve often thought about this woman when I read through passages such as this one in First Peter. She, and many others since that time, has lived out the joy which Peter describes, and to which the church is called even as circumstances remain difficult. They’re able to do this because they’ve come to understand that ‘Joy’ is a response to God at work in their lives; a response of faith and commitment; and they understand what joy is not: a feeling, an end in itself or something that can be achieved or acquired.

The challenge for us, of course, is that many of the wonderful moments and blessings in our lives are places where we do find great joy:

That perfect family moment;

A special holiday;

A church event;

Experiencing joy in those moments is natural and good, but joy is much more than a great feeling or experience. And if, 'getting that feeling back' becomes the goal or motivation for what we do, we will find ourselves disappointed again and again. Joy will elude us, and despair will be close at hand. The joy to which Peter refers is the faithful response to God, and what God has already done in Jesus Christ. While we might be delighted by the good fortune we have on occasion, 'joy' isn't reserved for that experience, rather it pervades all our experiences.

Throughout the season of Lent, and continuing into Easter, a group of us have been meeting here at the church as we read through the Chronicles of Narnia, a children's adventure series by C. S. Lewis. The most well known in this series is, The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe. In the Chronicles, the main characters, all children, are involved in a variety of adventures which lift up many elements of the Christian faith. A recurring presence throughout the narratives is Aslan, the Lion, who is at once large and terrifying, but also comforting, offering a distinctive peace through his presence. Aslan never physically stays with the children for very long, but his presence leaves an unmistakable mark on those who experience him and they are forever changed. The children are not perfect, nor are their lives, but Alan's arrival in their adventures steadies them and makes them bold to respond faithfully to the challenge at hand.

Although Lewis doesn't refer to their behavior with the word, 'Joyous' it seems a fair to say that he teaches us something about Joy through their adventures. He never uses the figure of Aslan to magically 'make things all better,' but he uses him to teach and call upon what the children already know and have experienced to face what's before them.

This is the power of our witness to one another. We can see it in the letter Peter writes to the Asia Minor churches: he teaches, reminding them of what they have already confessed and experienced in Jesus Christ - and he calls them to respond. This bears some similarity to our Easter Litany where I say:

"The Lord is Risen!"
and you say:
"The Lord is Risen Indeed!"

When we hear those words, we're reminded of what we've already experienced. The power of what Christ has done comes back to us and we respond, affirming what we've heard and know.

*Joy is the experience of allowing our faith in the Risen Lord,
and not the circumstances around us to direct our actions and activities.
Joy is God's gift to us and not anything we can create.*

Like the church to which Peter addresses his words, we need to hear again and again the testimonies of those who first believed, and the conviction that moved them through times of difficulty. We do this because we are not the same as we were a year ago, and we are not the same as we will be next year. For some of us life has become more certain, we are a bit more settled than we were before; for others, uncertainty has become far too familiar and we're not at all sure what tomorrow will bring. We might be desperately clinging to Peter's words of hope and promise because our own strength wavers; or we might be nodding affirmatively, because we are experiencing them so deeply.

Wherever we are in our lives, whatever circumstances we find ourselves facing, Peter's words call us to remember and embrace that:

"The Lord is Risen"
"The Lord is Risen Indeed!"

Amen.