

“Joy – it’ll make you ‘Jump, Shout - Knock Yourself Out!’”

+ Resurrection of our Lord C+

Acts 10:34-43; 1 Corinthians 15:19-26; Luke 24:1-12

April 4, 2010

Grace, mercy and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen.

While the Alleluias that first Easter were spoken in hushed disbelief it has been the foot-racing joy proclaiming task of the church to share the Good News of our Risen Savior to the world ever since. This is a daunting task. My cousin Carol and her late husband Gary went as missionaries more than 35 years ago to Hong Kong. After months of arduous study Rev. Gary Schroeder gave his first sermon in Chinese. The very respectful Chinese Christians did not tell him until after the service that every time he meant to say Jesus he said the word CHICKEN.

Translating God’s Word can be just as tricky. Many years ago, the Anglican Bishop of the Arctic put together a team to translate the Bible into the Inuit language. The stumbling block for the translators was the word “joy.” You see, while the Inuits have 37 words for “snow” they do not have one single word for “joy.” Talk about a challenge - the word “joy” appears at least 60 times in the New Testament.

So one day the bishop said to the Eskimo people, “Look at those huskies over there. They have finished their work for the day. The word we want is the word that describes what those huskies are experiencing right now.”

Well, some months later, the Inuit translation of the Bible was finished, just in time for Easter. The worshippers were anxious to hear the Good News in their own language and so, when it came time to read the Gospel, every last one of them was on the edge of their seat, straining to hear. And this is what they heard: The disciples were in the upper room, for fear of discovery and Jesus appeared to them. And when the disciples saw the Lord, they wagged their tails!”

Okay. Maybe not a perfect translation, especially since much of Scripture encourages us to “go and do likewise.” And you thought we were pushing Lutheran boundaries by ringing a bell with every Alleluia! But think of it – joy – the real joy of knowing Jesus is alive and death has been conquered makes you want to “jump – shout – tell them what it’s all about!”

As all dog owners and lovers know you can tell when a dog is happy; dogs wag their tails with absolute abandon. They are reckless with joy. They jump, woof, dance as if nobody’s watching. Their enthusiasm is positively contagious. They tremble with anticipation. While cats or bunnies see their owners as hired help to meet their every whim and what a dog doesn’t care how much money you make or how brilliant or beautiful you are or if you ever give them catnip or fresh romaine; they just love you so happily they are always ready to show it.

Contrast that with this morning's gospel. Yes, I know the circumstances were drastically different; the nightmare of Friday was still burning its way into the memories of those huddled in fear (that would be the men) and the brave women risking their safety to go to the tomb. Certainly that which gave them great fear, trembling, and ultimately joy was something so far out there it hardly compares to a quivering Chihuahua waiting for a treat. These people trembled as they whispered in disbelief, "can it be true?"

So I suppose it would be rather small of us to criticize their every response. But still, two dazzling men and the women are "terrified." Not "awed" or "astounded" or even curious, but "terrified." EMPHOBON is the word and, ok, it does mean "terrified" or "fearful" or "afraid." But the earliest meaning of that word actually describes the physical side of fear: heart-pounding, breath-holding, jaw-dropping, adrenaline-pumping, blood-rushing, ears-ringing, fist-clenching, muscle-tensing, gut-wrenching "get me outta here" terror; so many sensations flashing past that it becomes impossible to do or say anything. (Kittel, vol. IX p. 189) It is being caught between flight or fight.

That's what happens when humans encounter the hand of God. They don't know what to do, so like good Lutherans, they wait for instructions. Luke says "they bowed their faces to the ground," a sensory overload and then a voice so calm and still (it had to be—how else does God manage to get people to stick around long enough to look and listen?) A voice like no other asked the one question that makes that Easter and every Easter thereafter a gracious gift to those who will receive it: "Why do you look for the living among the dead?"

The truth of the matter is, we all look for the living among the dead by expecting dead things to give us life. We place our hopes in human goodness only to have those hopes dashed by yet another example of how cruel a species we can be. We trust our institutions way beyond their ability and often find that trust betrayed. We worship human heroes until they demonstrate that their feet are made of clay just like ours. We settle for spiritual band-aids when only a heart transplant will do. And far too often in doubt and fear we hesitate on the edge of celebration because we're just not sure; we're not quite ready to commit.

You cannot find the living Christ among the dead. You can only find Jesus where life is abundant: Here at the font where Water and Word re-birth us as children of God and heirs of eternal life. Nothing iffy about that! You meet Jesus at His Table, where we get a fractional foretaste of the feast to come; not a tentative taste but a teaser that tells "the best is yet to come." You are promised to find Jesus in the company of shaky saints and quivering Christians because it is not we who are seeking God after all. It is God who is always seeking after us. Always. Every day. On our best day, our worst day, our first day and our last day. You can even find Jesus among the dead. Remember that the next time you stand in sorrow as you lay a loved one to rest. Jesus is there right beside you, through the Spirit within you, and in the fellowship of believers to embrace and hold you in your grief.

On Good Friday life and death went to war! And Life won! Now is our time to rejoice in that victory! Wag your tails or ring your bells or whatever it takes. Just don't dismiss it as an "idle tale." (as those same huddled and hiding heroes, the disciples did when first they heard the "Good News.") You know an idle tale isn't a lie; an idle tale can be the truest of the true, but if it never gets in gear, if it never lets faith hit the ground running, it stays idle. Jesus is not less Risen when and if we doubt, but it is we walk away from the truth of the Resurrection that its power is lost on us – on us alone.

That's what happened, Luke said. "They did not believe them." Literally, the disciples stepped away from trust. Don't misunderstand me. I do not blame them. I do not fault them, any more than I would blame those, including myself, who struggle with faith and struggle even more to let faith overcome my fears.

I don't know if you ever noticed it, but every Gospel account of Easter morning begins with sorrow and moves toward confusion. Peter and John may have hauled their tails to the grave, but Luke doesn't find those tails wagging. He finds fear; he finds distrust; he finds amazement. I guess it takes a while for good news, I mean, really good news, to sink in. Maybe it takes a lifetime.

And that's okay. Who knows what tomorrow may bring us or where tomorrow may find us? When this hour is over, we'll all head home and guess what? The same dirty dishes are there. The same carpets need vacuuming. The same checkbook is stressed. The same bills pile up. What's different because of today?

Nothing! And Everything! Because Christ is Risen (He is Risen Indeed! ALLELUIA!) Because of that and that alone we have an alternative to despair; in our darkness there is light shining clear on to eternity. In our fear there is a strong and steady guiding hand and the sure and unfailing promises of God's love made real in water and word, in bread and wine. And should any Easter Christian this morning walk away from faith, know this with certainty the faithful One - the one faithful even unto death will follow you and calls you back – God is always seeking to meet with you to love you, to tell you that you are God's own!

So why waste a moment like this! Give sound to the Joy that is ours through Jesus - jump, shout - knock your self out! And that bell in your hand? Ring it like you mean it because Christ is Risen. He is Risen, Indeed! ALLELUIA!

Amen!

Now may our loving, leading God, guide us to follow His Son that we may walk safely through our wilderness until we reach the life that He alone can give.