

The Discipline of Joy

Matthew 28.1-10

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A friend of mine went to medical school and at the tender age of 21 found himself, for the first time in his life, in a delivery room where a mother was giving birth to a baby boy. He'd always assumed that giving birth was a somewhat painful experience, so he was very surprised that the mother entered the final stages of the birth screaming "Joy! Joy! Joy!" A couple of hours later, with the baby safely born and the mother now holding the treasured new life, my friend had the chance to speak with her. "I was so moved," he said, "to hear you shouting for joy with all your heart." "You do have a lot to learn," said the mother. "I was shouting for Joy because I was in agony. Joy's the name of the midwife."

The good news of Easter is the best news any of us will ever hear. When the angel says to the two Marys, "He has been raised," he communicates the whole gospel. Look at what these four words tell us. They tell us there's a God who is at work in Jesus. The angel doesn't say "Jesus raised himself" – he says, "He has been raised." If we want a simple definition of God, we can say "God is the one who raised Jesus from the dead." The angel's words also tell us that death's total reign is over. One has been raised. So now it's possible that all may be raised. Death was unimaginable before Adam. Death can now be out-imagined because of Christ. And the angel's same words validate everything Jesus was and did in his life and ministry and death. If he had just died on the cross, we could look at his life as a beautiful tragedy. Because he has been raised, we can look at every aspect of his life as vindicated in a way no other life has ever been. God is at work, death is defeated, everything Jesus said and did is true.

Matthew gives us two parallel accounts of what Easter means. And that's incredibly helpful. Because in our faith we experience two parallel dimensions of what Easter means. On the one hand, Easter means joy, meeting Jesus face to face. Knowing the risen Lord, enjoying all the glorious possibilities opened up by his resurrection. On the other hand, Easter means discipline, holding tight to our Easter faith even when there are no lilies, no trumpets, no heavenly choir, and life doesn't look or feel very resurrected. Joy with a profound awareness of Jesus and the discipline of joy when we have the message of the gospel but we can't feel Jesus anywhere close. That's the two dimensions of Easter.

Matthew tells us about the discipline first. The discipline comes in the angel's appearance to the two Marys. The first thing the angel says is, "Be not afraid." That's the first step of the discipline of joy. Don't be afraid. Are you afraid, right now? Are you afraid of that strange lump under your arm you spotted in the shower last week? Are you afraid of a mysterious comment your supervisor made a month ago about the future of your department? Are you afraid your dreams of hopeful work and happy family and trusting friends are disintegrating around you or never going to come true? Be not afraid. That's the first step of the discipline of joy. It's not about euphoria that blows all your worries away. It's the discipline that says, in the end, God. My life is

hid with Christ in God. I never walk alone. Be not afraid.

And then the angel says, “Come, see the place where he lay.” In other words, check out the evidence for yourself. The discipline of joy isn’t all about blind trust. It’s about verification, scientific research, evidence-based strategic planning, and wise judgments. The Easter faith has nothing to fear from historians and scientists. “Come, see the place where he lay.” The discipline of joy takes us to the places of death, of despair, of distress, of desultory dilapidation. Do you avoid such places because they might make you feel uncomfortable, maybe even shake your faith? We don’t have to keep ourselves on a high of happiness. Disciplined joy takes us instead to forsaken places, knowing those places aren’t the whole story, but knowing also that those are the places where resurrection comes from.

And then the angel says, “Go quickly and tell his disciples.” In other words, this event, this experience, this faith isn’t just about you. The discipline of joy means not just reflecting on your own happiness, your own sense of certainty and exhilaration and clarity, but about a community experience, about a sharing and walking together and discovering from one another. You come to church on Easter Day not just to be filled to the brim with trumpets and lilies, but to look around you and see who else is in this with you and get a sense of where you can turn for comradeship when it doesn’t seem quite so happy or straightforward.

Lastly the angel says, “He is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.” In other words, the best is yet to come. Hope is the music of disciplined joy. It’s the conviction that for Christians, the future is always bigger than the past. It’s the determination that, whatever one’s feelings, circumstances, or fears, God is our destiny, and we are being drawn to him as fragments of iron to a colossal magnet. That’s what the discipline of joy means: hope, community, scrutiny, and living beyond fear.

Twenty years ago I knew a woman called Margaret who had two teenage children. One Friday her daughter didn’t come home from high school. There was no word all weekend. Only a message to another girl in her class saying, “Tell my mom not to worry.” Days turned to weeks, and still no word about her daughter. After six months, there was still nothing. I want you to imagine a time before cell phones and Facebook. There was no reason to suppose her daughter was dead. But no squeak from her. Then Margaret suffered an even more terrible blow. Her 17-year-old son came off the field after a soccer game complaining of chest pains, and there, by the side of the pitch, collapsed and died in front of his team mates. Margaret was alone in the world.

If ever there was a time for the discipline of joy, this was it. Margaret was devastated, but she was not afraid. She continued to check for evidence of her daughter’s whereabouts. She became a girl scout leader and poured her love for her daughter into a community of growth and support. And she kept her daughter’s bedroom immaculate, because she hoped with all her heart her daughter would come back. And one day her daughter did come back, carrying an 18-month old infant boy. She marked her return with the same lack of ceremony and apology as she had marked her departure. She simply moved right back into her old bedroom as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened. As a woman like Margaret later said to me, “Kids. They break your arm when they’re little, and when they grow up they break your heart.” But Margaret had no interest in discipline at that moment. All she had in her heart

was joy. Margaret showed me what it means to live by the discipline of joy. Hope, community, scrutiny, and living beyond fear.

But that's not the whole of the Easter life. Some of Easter truly is unbridled joy. And Matthew shows us this when Jesus appears to the two Marys. Jesus begins where the angel does: "Be not afraid." Fear gives way to joy much more quickly this time. Let's look at the joy of Easter through the two Marys' encounter with Jesus.

When did you ever hear of a ghost having feet? Ghosts have long gowns, hazy complexions, shivering voices – but never feet. Jesus has feet. The two Marys take hold of one each. They see the nail marks. It's really him. He's real. Easter's real. It's not a metaphor. It's not an idea. It's not a theory. It's real. It's tangible. It's a living, breathing person. It's the crucified Jesus standing right in front of us, on the other side of death, beckoning us to the other side of death. When you feel joy, I bet your first reaction is to check your eyesight and then hug someone. Joy is tangible. Joy hugs Jesus.

The joy of Easter is restorative. Jesus says, "Go and tell my brothers." The angel referred to the disciples, but Jesus calls them brothers. It's not 48 hours since they all deserted him and fled, since Peter denied him three times – but Jesus doesn't call them former colleagues, acquaintances, or even friends. He calls them *brothers*. Already we know he forgives them. Like Joseph of Egypt, the brothers have betrayed him, he has saved them without their assistance – and now he forgives them. There's no greater joy than the joy of forgiveness. If you've never truly experienced it, then you're still to discover what Easter truly is.

The joy of Easter lies in a promise you can put your life in. Jesus says, "Tell them to go to Galilee; there they will see me." Joy isn't an all-at-one-go thing. You know how it is. You hear a sublime piece of music, and you go out and get everything by that composer. And it's too much to take in. You read a beautiful book, and you buy everything that author ever wrote. And you can't swallow it when it's a mountain of books. Joy is something you taste, you touch, you glimpse – and then you have this certainty it's going to keep coming your way and it'll never run out. It's something you never get the whole of. There's always more to come. The best is yet to come. That's the joy of Easter: tangible, forgiving, growing.

Easter is about discipline and joy. The Christian life is about balancing the two. It's about the discipline of joy.

My father and mother met in Switzerland in the summer of 1955. My father's family was used to taking vacations in the Alps, and on this occasion there wasn't much left of the family that wasn't married off and heavy with child, so my father, who by this time was 33 and had been ordained in the Church of England for five years, had resorted to taking a vacation with his widowed mother, who wasn't the most lively company and wasn't a particularly energetic walker. So he was eager to make conversation, and at the next door table found a brother and sister. My mother's brother had won a competition for which the prize was a week's vacation in the Swiss Alps. My mother and father quickly found plenty to say to one another and were quite happy just looking at each other when there wasn't much to say and were delighted to find that they both had London addresses back home.

Six weeks later my father went to visit my mother's parents for Sunday high tea. After an hour my grandparents rather implausibly found that they were called away to business elsewhere. My father took his chance. Undaunted by having known my

mother only six weeks, he got down on one knee in the time-honored fashion and said, “Ruth, my dear, will you marry me?” “Yes!” replied my mother, excitedly, “But...” and then, at this most cliffhanger of moments, the doorbell rang. It turned out that the neighbors were so intrigued by the appearance of the nice young man and the disappearance of the parents that they couldn’t help but visit to find out what was going on. It took a good half-hour to mollify their curiosity with platitudes.

Finally the front door closed behind them. My father, having spent the previous half-hour beside himself with anxious curiosity, turned to my mother and said, “Well?” My mother opened wide her big brown eyes and said, “Well what?” “You said ‘Yes, but...’” said my father. “What was the ‘but’?” My mother paused and said, “I can’t remember.”

They’d had a moment of joy. They then had what seemed like an unendurable time of discipline getting used to the joy. By the time of discipline was over, no one could remember the “But.” That’s Easter. That’s the fifty days of Easter. Living out the joy until you can’t remember the “But.” That’s the discipline of joy.