

One of my professors in seminary used to tell a story about a friend of his completing his first round of clinical rotations in medical school. His friend expected that the first time he attended a woman’s labor and delivery would be a gut-wrenching experience. He was surprised though to hear the mom-to-be yelling “Joy! Joy! Joy!” Not long after the delivery, the medical student returned to the new mother and told her he was astounded by her ability to scream for joy in the midst of so much pain. The mother looked at him: “You do have a lot to learn. I was shouting for Joy because I was in agony. Joy’s the name of the midwife.”¹

Joy was the last thing Mary Magdalene and Mary expected to feel on their way to the tomb. They thought they would go to Jesus’ grave, offer prayers, anoint Jesus’ body, and of course, try to hold each other up as the venom of grief coursed through their veins. Meanwhile, members of the royal army would keep doing what they had been doing for two days, which was guarding Jesus’ tomb from anyone who tried to steal his body and watching the shadow on the sundial lengthen as they counted down the moments until their shift was over and their feet and back could finally get a break.

If all these things had gone as expected, we’d all be none the wiser. Instead, we’d be at home reading the Sunday paper, drinking a smoothie or coffee—take your pick—and getting ready to put on our gardening gloves or packing up the kiddos for sports practice. Jesus wasn’t the first person to have died by crucifixion. It was the standard issue punishment for the worst criminals, especially those who threatened the fragile egos of the government officials. There’s certainly no reason for anyone to have expected today to be different—even if it meant monotony for the guards and harrowing darkness for the Marys. Today was gonna be just another day in first-century Jerusalem, business as usual after a grueling Friday of a chaos, trials, and death.

...Which is what I expect many for many of us tomorrow after we take off our Easter finest and refrigerate the leftover ham and asparagus. Some will return to work and brace for an exhausting commute and that annoying bottleneck on Route 5 in Brandywine near the CarMax. Others will return to school. Target will restock its clearance bins—thankfully with Easter chocolate instead of cans of green hair-dye for St. Patrick’s Day. Some will pop open the box of Allegra or Claritin and hope the pollen isn’t too bad.

¹ Sam Wells, “The Discipline of Joy,” (text of sermon, Duke Chapel, Durham, NC, April 4, 2010, accessed April 10, 2017, <http://chapel-archives.oit.duke.edu/documents/sermons/April4TheDisciplineofJoy.pdf>).

We'll return to worrying about whether our parents have another doctor's appointment they aren't telling us about. Young siblings will fight and be forced to apologize and give each other a hug even if they don't mean it because they know that unless they do they'll lose TV privileges for the rest of the week. We'll pay the SMECO bill and do everything else it is that we do on Monday and Tuesday and Wednesday when there are no trumpet fanfare and Alleluias to declare. Business as usual. Except there was nothing usual about that day. There's nothing typical that of all the thousands of executions by crucifixion, only one merited a movement that changed the world. The reason we shell a few more dollars for flowers, buy new ties, eat succulent racks of lamb with mint jelly, and shout Alleluia is because God had had enough with the status-quo, business-as-usual life, a life that began and ended with our failure, a life held captive by the power of sin to convince us that we must be and do something we're not. The resurrection is God's declaration that there is nothing usual, nothing routine, nothing ordinary about your life, my life, the trajectory of our lives, or the fate of the entire cosmos. Had God not raised Jesus from the dead death, evil, failure, and sin remained in control and had the last word, which is what they had so confidently thought *visa vie* the imperial army and scapegoat-hungry crowd on Friday morning. If that was the case then what what we see would always be what we'd get.

That's why tomorrow will not be just another business-as-usual day. It's why Easter is not merely a celebration of what God did in the past, a holy form of Independence Day. To celebrate what God did in the first century is to celebrate what "God is *still* doing."² "When the angel says, 'Do not be afraid,' or when Jesus says, 'Fear not,' it wasn't because they were trying to say nothing can go wrong, because often things do go wrong. It is not assurance that everything turns out for the best, because, if we are honest about it, it seldom does. Rather, it is assurance that, whatever may happen to us, whatever a day may hold, God has the power to strengthen us and uphold us; that whatever we must face, we do not face it alone; that nothing we encounter is stronger than God's love; that ultimately God gets the last word; that in the end—and sometimes even before the end—God's love is triumphant."³ When life puts a period, God steps in and puts a comma.

The sad truth though is we don't always trust in it. We want to, but we're scared of being disappointed or wasting our intelligent minds and time. Trust me, I get it. At least once a week the phone rings in the office and the caller ID says, "Publisher's Clearing House."

² David Lose, "Easter A: Proclaiming an On-Going Easter," *In the Meantime* (blog), April 11, 2017, accessed April 12, 2017, <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/04/easter-a-proclaiming-an-on-going-easter/>.

³ Martin B. Copenhaver, "Pastoral Commentary," *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide*, Barbara Brown Taylor and David Bartlett, eds. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox 2010), 348, 350.

I don't answer the phone because I don't really believe I've won anything, and if I have, I know there are strings attached.

I suspect that's how we treat our lives of faith. And, [as my favorite preacher-theologian says], "when [you] don't believe something can happen [you] stop dwelling on it because [you] don't anticipate it."⁴ So, we rush through conversations not expecting to encounter the love of God or being that Love. It's why we listen to Scripture expecting to hear history instead of considering that God might speak to us anew. And far too often we try to make sense of the resurrection when it's the "resurrection that explains us," as Duke's former Dean of the Chapel, Will Willimon, says.⁵

And you know who we are?

We are pressed but not crushed,
perplexed but don't despair.
We are persecuted but not abandoned
We are no longer slaves
we are daughters and sons,
and when we are weak
we are very strong

And neither death nor life
nor present nor future
nor depth nor height
can keep us from the love of Christ.⁶

Isn't it about time to claim it? Not because it's tradition, not because it makes for a good story, but because life in Jesus Christ tells who we are: not your past, not your present, not even your failure, grief, your sin, or anyone else's for that matter. I know business-as-usual mode is easy to fall into because it's safe, but there's nothing safe about what happened that morning. Nor is your life. God is not going to abandon you though. Ever. At the very moment you are ready to give in and give up, pay attention.

⁴ Brian Blount eloquently express the paradox of our attitudes toward the resurrection and worship. Brian Blount, "Clueless," (audio of sermon, First Presbyterian Church, Richmond, VA, March 26, 2016), accessed June 1, 2016, <https://fpcrichmond.org/sermons>.

⁵ Willam H. Willimon, *The Collected Sermons of William H. Willimon* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 196-7.

⁶ Arrangement of 2 Corinthians 4:8, Galatians 4:7, and Romans 8:39, by Sara Groves in "The Word," *Conversations*, 2001, CD.

A different kind of joy might be calling your name—one you can't imagine amidst the agony...the same agony of the crowds shouting crucify, the same agony of feeling the earth shake, and watching the nails pierce and the breathing ending.

It was over.

But early one Sunday morning...early one Sunday morning, y'all...
two women went looking for death and found life.

Your life.

The world finally bid its farewell to the same 'ole, same 'ole.

Why don't you, too?

Y'all,

Alleluia. Christ. Is. Risen.

[The Lord is risen indeed.]

You're gonna live like you mean it, right?

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April 16, 2017