

Joy in the Morning

Luke 24:1-12

April 9, 2023

You remember what happened.

Just last week, Jesus was welcomed into Jerusalem as a king and a prophet, but by Friday everything had changed. Betrayal. Arrest. Sham Trial. Denial. Death Sentence. Crucifixion. Burial.

More than the heart could bear.
More than the mind could take in.

And so, before dawn, finding strength in numbers, a group of women gather at the tomb of their friend. They lean into the comfort of ritual. Anointing the bodies of the dead was tradition, and it might take their hearts and minds off the horror of the last three days.

The tomb was the most predictable place. After all, dead bodies remain dead. Amid cascading grief, the graveyard is a place of quiet security. The finality of death symbolizes stability. No more surprises after a week of thrilling ups and devastating downs.

But...
But the silence will not last.
But the darkness gives way to light.
But this tomb is no predictable place.

The sun begins to rise. The boulder is rolled away.
There is no lifeless body to anoint.

But...
Two men in dazzling clothes confront them with a message so astonishing it transforms their lives. The message is this: *He is not here* (seems obvious enough) *but has risen*.

Without those three words, it's just another sad story of a young visionary crushed by the violence of human evil and the insecurity of the powerful. Without those three words, it barely merits a headline. Without those

three words, nothing else matters. Had those words not been spoken, I would have nothing to offer you this morning...or any Sunday morning.

But they were spoken. But they were heard. They changed everything.

He is not here...but has risen.

One of the joys of this particular stage of parenting (at least for me) is the almost daily opportunity to reconnect with the humor of nine- and six-year-old boys. What qualifies as funny in our household is rapidly changing, and we have entered the era of what child development experts call "potty humor." That is a technical term. I'll spare you all the details, but my guess is you don't need them. A resource provided by the pediatrician offers nine things parents need to know, and the list begins with this: You probably started it.

The truth is, I probably did. But the school bus certainly helped. I remember the day our dear son came home with this classic gem: Guess what? *Chicken butt*. Uncontrollable laughter for ten minutes. And that was just me.

Maybe this emerging lens explains why I saw something new, something I had never seen before, this year in Luke's Easter story. There are so many "buts" in this story. In fact, Luke begins this astounding account of the resurrection morning with a conjunction.

But on the first day of the week.

It is a powerful tool in the hands of a gifted storyteller. The previous chapter ends in a tomb, ends in shock and grief, ends in silence and darkness, the finality of death. The story Luke has told absorbs every ounce of

violence, hatred, and despair that the world can dish out. And then the story seems to end in a whimper, a quiet burial in a borrowed tomb. Time for the credits to roll, the sad music to play.

Not so fast. Luke opens a whole new chapter with a stunning shift:

But...on the first day of the week...

But...the story is not over.

But...death will not have the last word here.

Oh, it may seem otherwise. It certainly did to the women who came to the tomb in the fog of grief and the pre-dawn darkness. They have no answer to give those shining strangers who meet them at the tomb. *Why do you look for the living among the dead?*

But the truth is, these women weren't looking for the living at all. They had come in utter silence to anoint a dead body, not to hear a resurrection message.

But something changes in that moment. Something that changes everything. Luke says this: They remembered his words. And so, they run to tell the others. They remembered his words, and so these women become the first preachers of the resurrection message.

He is not here but has risen.

They remembered. How about you?

This morning, on the first day of the week, you have gathered in this holy place. And like the women, you come with a mixed bundle of emotion.

There is sadness. I know there is sadness in this sanctuary. Some of you are missing a loved one who sat next to you last Easter. There is the rawness of grief in this space. There are unreleased grudges. There is even raging anger. I know that there is desperation at the state of the world and uncertainty about its future. I know that there is more than a little cynicism about the place of faith in our lives. For some of us, hope sounds like a foreign language and joy as elusive as a castle in the clouds. I think it's fair to say that many of us approach Easter morning with more apathy than anticipation. We expect no dramatic change, just the comfort of predictability. Another year, same old thing.

But.

What if today could be different?

What if this is the moment when everything changes?

He is not here but has risen.

This stubborn, defiant, relentless conjunction bears witness to another possibility on Easter Day. Oh, I know that fears are legion. I know that the darkness is thick. I know that the divisions run deep and that things rarely change.

But the women went to the tomb.

But you are here.

The first miracle of Easter, the one that makes everything else possible, is showing up. The women went to the tomb. Some glowing ember of faith, nearly extinguished but not quite, drove them back to that place.

Remember how he told you... And some part of them does remember, remembers his words.

Even if you have come this morning out of a commitment to routine, out of family obligation, or annual tradition, you are here.

In the morning.

On the first day of the week.

You are in the right place.

Then they remembered his words.

Perhaps they remembered the words that begin Luke's Gospel, when an angel named Gabriel speaks them. *Nothing will be impossible with God.*

Perhaps they remembered the words of Jesus spoken on the plain. *Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.*

Or perhaps they remembered the words of the Psalmist. *Weeping may last for the night, but joy comes in the morning.*

They had forgotten. But now they remember. They had given up. But now they have hope. They had come to share grief. But they go to share good news.

He is not here but has risen.

And so, this morning, I wonder which message you have forgotten or stopped believing. I wonder which words of life you most need to hear today.

Here are the ones I need most. I need to hear what I cannot conjure up on my own. I need to hear that joy is the default setting of our humanity. I need to hear that hope persists beyond diminished expectations, that life is more than breathing, that existence itself is alive with purpose and meaning.

That's why I showed up this morning. And you showed up too—quite a crowd. Could something be different because you did? It's a good bet. Showing up changes things. Showing up changes us.

Two weeks ago tomorrow, as the city of Nashville and the community of Covenant Presbyterian Church and Academy were reeling from another unthinkable tragedy of gun violence and the latest example of human depravity in action, a crowd gathered in another sanctuary in Nashville. That Monday evening, they packed the pews. The walls were lined with people of all ages, faces streaked with tears. I spoke with a friend who was there that evening. He explained to me why he went: "I couldn't think of anything else to do, anywhere else to go. I needed to be with people who, like me, were angry, who were grieving, who were crying, who were praying. I needed to be reminded that even now, God is with us."

Unspeakable grief. Tragic loss. Soul-wrenching anguish.

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they went to the tomb. They needed to be together. They needed to be reminded. God is with us.

Then they remembered his words. Perhaps these: Do not be afraid. I am the resurrection and the life.

This Easter Morning, we do not claim this truth in simplistic or reductive optimism.

We stare into the abyss of evil and malicious violence. We face the reality of voices silenced and lights snuffed out.

We condemn the cowardice of those who refuse to act. We lament the horror of nightmares that are not dreams.

We name our fear and acknowledge the depth of pain we experience and cause.

Every ounce of violence, hatred, and despair. We stack it all up. And then we dare to speak that relentless defiant conjunction. We dare to believe, as Karl Barth wrote, that the gospel is not a natural therefore but a miraculous nevertheless. Nevertheless.

Nevertheless, we speak it again and again and again. Nevertheless, we speak the word until the word speaks us.

He is not here but has risen.

Friends, your capacity for joy is not solely contingent on the conditions of your life. It depends which story you tell, which virtues you cultivate, which community you join, which voices you believe.

The forces of evil are so powerful.
Death feels so final.
There is little reason left to hope.

But church, listen to this:

Joy.
Joy.
Joy comes in the morning.

And guess what? It's morning.