

“Looking for the Living”

Luke 24:1-12

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Happy Easter to all of you! I say this sincerely to you, Happy Easter. In the midst of all else that is going on in your lives, on this day I hope that you can feel and receive, even if it is just for a moment, a complete sense of utter joy. Whether it is here amidst this scruffy and beautiful crowd of God’s people, or if it is in a quiet moment when you are alone with your thoughts, I hope you experience the unfathomable outpouring of love and life that we celebrate this day.

Easter joy is unique, but it is also found in other celebrations and moments of grace. Easter joy disarms and fills that part of us we call our soul or our spirit. Easter happiness reaches deep into the essential part of our self that is both unique and universal. The gift of Easter life is the experience of having all fear loved out of us; the gift of all brokenness mended; the gift of all sorrow comforted; the gift of all lies dispelled; of all hatred reconciled and the gift of life conquering death.

Our Easter story, that took us through betrayals, condemnations and the crucifixion of Christ, proclaims that what continues eternally within us and beyond us is unmerited love. The Easter story is not about practicing something so we can be the best at it; it isn’t about our IQ or how much money we accumulate, or how popular we are or whether we are leaving an important mark or legacy to the world. The Easter story and gift sets all these things aside and simply proclaims that we are God’s beloved people.

William Sloan Coffin wrote: “Of God’s love we can say two things: it is poured out universally for everyone from the Pope to the loneliest addict on the planet; and secondly, God’s love doesn’t seek value, it creates it. It is not because we have value that we are loved, but because we are loved that we have value. Our value is a gift, not an achievement.”

For those of us who do so much to achieve value, Easter and the gospel can be a real conundrum. For those of us who work so hard to discover what sets us personally apart or who feel like we are always rewriting our life’s resume so we

can stick out as something special, Easter proclaims how special we are without effort, but it also proclaims everyone else is special too.

One of the most meaningful verses for me, in Luke's account of the resurrection is this: "But the disciples did not believe what the women said about their visit to the tomb where Jesus' body had been placed – they didn't believe because their words seemed like nonsense."

There is so much truth in this verse. The women's story about the stone being rolled away, Jesus' body being gone, two glowing men asking the women why they look for the living among dead, all these things do sound like nonsense. But when we speak in faith terms, it often sounds like nonsense "...Faith takes us beyond familiar ground..." Faith engages us in a different way than most of life engages us. Easter faith engages that deep, deep place within us where we acknowledge what we will trust most in life. Do we trust that we are loved without merit by the source of life, or don't we? Do we trust that God's desire for all people and creation is healing, forgiveness, abundance and compassion, or don't we?

Perhaps it is the people who have every right or justification to curse God, but do just the opposite, that illustrates the nonsense of the Easter message best.

Soon after the terrible earthquake in Haiti an onslaught of reporters and international aid workers made their way to the island. Within days of the earthquake we were seeing horrifying images of collapsed buildings, people living in the streets, bodies being pulled from the rubble, makeshift hospitals filled with children and adults.

As the days went on, more after-shocks occurred, people became more desperate and people like the members of the Idaho church started taking drastic and ill-conceived measures to respond to the hardship.

Camps were set up where people stayed in tent-like structures made of sticks and plastic. Aid agencies tried to distribute food and water, but found that groups of able-bodied young men were taking all the resources from the women, young children and the elderly. With hundreds of thousands dead and equal numbers of people severely injured, the survivors were and are suffering in that tiny nation.

But there was a most surprising news broadcast about a week after the first earthquake. A large group of Haitian church members were gathering regularly outside their destroyed building. Along with their pastor this group of survivors sang songs of joy and hope together. The congregation offered prayers of thanks for their lives and hope for the future.

The news reporter didn't know what to say about the group other than they had become a helpful presence in the recovery. The congregation had energy, even in their hunger, to organize efforts to help the desperate. How they could be singing joyfully didn't seem to make any sense to the reporter, but sing, pray and lift their hands skyward was what the congregation did.

While Christian leaders and radio talk show hosts in the US were saying that Haiti was suffering God's wrath for worshipping the devil, people in Haiti were thanking God for all the love that was being shown to them.

At some time, some moment, members of the Haitian church let the Easter message take hold in them. Somewhere deep in their soul they really began to trust that God loved them and wanted good for them. Over some amount of time, study, prayer and worship they stopped believing what others said about being rejected by God, and they started believing that the source and substance of the universe was a force of healing, peace, forgiveness, compassion and justice.

It is precisely in the worlds places of brokenness and pain that the Easter story is most powerful. For those who have embraced the words spoken to the women who went to Jesus' tomb on Easter morning, "Do not look for the living among the dead," the response to life's difficulties isn't "how can I sing with so much pain," but rather "how can I keep from singing."

The father of a good friend died about a month ago. She and her family are people of deep faith, and even though her heart was broken by her father's death she sang at her father's funeral. The hymn she sang is most commonly known as "How Can I keep From Singing." The lyrics to the first verse go: "My life flows on in endless song: above earth's lamentation, I catch the sweet, tho' far-off hymn that hails a new creation. Through all the tumult and strife I hear the music ringing; it finds an echo in my soul—how can I keep from singing?"

It is in the midst of life's joys and sorrows that the promise of unmerited love lifts us. It is like music that finds an echo in our souls and we cannot keep from singing.

So I hope for you a happy Easter. In the midst of all that is going on in your days and weeks I hope for you the experience of life emerging in the most unexpected times and places. And I celebrate with people around the world who have come to embrace in the depths of their souls, that love is poured out on them in abundance by our incarnate and eternal God.