

Easter Sunday Morning
April 12, 2020
Acts 10:36-40; 42-43
Psalm 118:1-2; 14-24
Colossians 3:1-4
John 20:1-8

Joy Delayed?

By the Rev. Tom Garrison

The Lord is Risen. The Lord is Risen, indeed.

Good Easter morning to you.

Those words are sung in our hearts today from the haven of our homes, as we remain separate from one another in this unusual time of sheltering in place. Yet those words should not have any less power.

He is Risen. But it feels like our joy has somehow been delayed. No grand procession. No Easter bonnets. No *Hail Thee Festival Day* together.ⁱ

And yet we are together online and in spirit and in determination to observe this day of triumph. As the hymn says: Death's mightiest powers have done their worst. Let shouts of praise and joy outburst. *Alleluia*.ⁱⁱ

Maybe your joy seems delayed, the shout stuck in your throat because of the deaths around us. Perhaps you won't feel free to celebrate until there is "no more crying, no more dying there" in the words of the negro spiritual.ⁱⁱⁱ

But "hope deferred makes the heart sick," Proverbs tells us, and we are part of the Christian contradiction. A great theologian once said we Christians need to put the words "in spite of" in front of all our beliefs.^{iv}

We discover strength through humbleness; life *in spite* of death, joy *in spite* of sadness.

There are more than 100 hymns about joy. Do you have a favorite Easter anthem? Perhaps it is Beethoven's *Hallelujah Chorus* or *Ode to Joy*? Is it *Jesus Christ is Risen Today*? Or *Welcome Happy Morning*?

Henry Van Dyke's *Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee* is not always thought of as an Easter hymn, because resurrection is not mentioned in the original lyrics, but it's a favorite of mine because it's—well it's just joyful. [Video version has an excerpt from this hymn]

And that is what we need, we must find this day. Joy, despite the devastation wrought by Covid-19. Having a hard time *believing* that things will get better? Wondering how to find the

“Giver of Immortal Gladness” again in times such as these? Well first, a little perspective. We’ve overcome hard times before.^v

The disciples thought everything was lost. They feared for their lives following the crucifixion and had to wait three days to discover otherwise. And even then, Jesus chose to reveal the good news first—not to them, but to Mary Magdalene and the women gathered by the tomb. Women who had no standing in the existing courts of law. They weren’t believed initially on that first Easter morning so long ago.

And how many times does the Bible talk about having to wait 40 days and 40 nights—or even longer—for answers? For good things to happen? The Jews were exiled 70 years in Babylon. Our time of sheltering in place seems paltry in comparison.^{vi}

And we Americans? We survived the Great Depression and the so-called Dirty 30s—high winds and choking dust affecting farming for nearly a decade. There were black blizzards that even blocked out the Statue of Liberty for a time.^{vii}

Scientists, however, tell us we are hard-wired for JOY. Joy triumphs not because there aren’t bad times and sad times, but because these trying times make us appreciate what we have. In the same way we know smiling is contagious, finding joy in life helps us remain positive; and neuroscience tells us we have a separate circuit for generosity that has been clinically shown to increase our own happiness when we are generous to others.^{viii}

May these trying times make us appreciate that Christ died for us and is with us still. Make us appreciate those who risk death for us today: the doctors and nurses, caregivers, & first responders, the truck drivers, shelf-stockers, check-out clerks and educators & elected officials who do so much for us, that we might live.

So, we must be joy-givers this day in the knowledge that joy delayed is worth the wait.^{ix} Our Easter basket has not just the gift of joy in, but We’re given but hope. Archbishop Desmond Tutu says hope is not the same thing as optimism. Hope is unshakeable and it is nurtured by community, by a kind word and a caring deed.^x

We see the sunrise and know that morning has broken into a new day. In the resurrection of Christ we buckle down—says Edwin Lewis—push through the day, and strive for *future joy*.^{xi}

Like Mary Magdalene, may we have the strength and the joy that comes from *knowing*, He is Risen. He is Risen indeed.^{xii}

Amen

ⁱ The famous Ralph Vaughan Williams tune dates to the English Hymnal of 1906, but the words are even older for Venantius H. Fortunatus's famous text which date to the 6th Century in Gaul. "Hail Thee, Festival Day."

ⁱⁱ From the Latin hymn *The strife is o'er, the battle done* (Translated by Francis Pott, 1860). The full verse is: "The pow'rs of death have done their worst, but Christ their legions has dispersed: let shouts of holy joy outburst. Alleluia!"

ⁱⁱⁱ *Soon and Very Soon*, by Andraé Edward Crouch, American gospel singer. It's incorrect to call this a Negro Spiritual. I learned after writing this sermon that Crouch wrote this gospel hymn in 1978 (based on Revelation 21:4. "There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."). However, it is thought that the words "soon and very soon" are an excerpt of the speech "How Long, Not Long" given by civil rights leader, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. at the Alabama Capitol on March 25, 1965.

^{iv} Proverbs 13:12 and German-American philosopher and theologian Paul Johannes Tillich, respectively.

^v From the last two lines of the first verse of *Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee*: Giver of immortal gladness, fill us with the light of day."

^{vi} The number 40 is mentioned 146 times in Scripture, and generally symbolizes a period of testing, trial or probation. The phrase "40 days and 40 nights" meant a "really long time" even as we, today, think sheltering in place orders seem a really long time. The number is revered in Jewish, Christian and Muslim tradition.

^{vii} The black blizzards of the Dust Bowl were said to have been two miles high, travelling 2,000 miles or more and sometimes lasting for five hours. In addition to travelling from farm states to New York City, on May 11, 1934 it travelled to Washington, D.C., covering the U.S. Capitol, ironically when lawmakers were debating a soil conservation bill.

^{viii} See the work of Dr. Richard Davidson, and others, discussed in *The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World*, by His Holiness, the Dalai Lama, and Archbishop Desmond Tutu, 2016, Avery Press, pages 55-57.

^{ix} 1 Peter 1:6 says, "So be truly glad. There is wonderful joy ahead, even though you must endure many trials for a little while." Christian blogger Bailey Roberts writes: You and I are likely in the wait, in that time of being on hold, looking ahead, hoping for what might be. But while we wait, let's be active waiters. . . waiting well [by] choosing joy in the moment and trusting God with what we cannot see. "Delayed joy is worth the wait" comes from Boyd Bailey of Wisdom Hunters.

^x *The Book of Joy*, Tutu, p. 121. He makes clear hope involves risk and vulnerability. But don't be too hard on yourself in the current circumstances. Earlier, Tutu notes, "You are made for perfection, but you are not yet perfect." And on page 211 the best advice: "God uses each of us in our own way, and even if you are not the best one, you may be the who is needed or the one who is there." Good to remember.

^{xi} Various attributed to Edwin Lewis (1881–1959), a Methodist theologian and Professor of Systematic Theology, Drew Theological Seminary or to an unsigned post from the Overseas Missionary Fellowship in 2015 in a November 2015 article, "Giving Thanks When Joy Feels Delayed."

^{xii} For those of you old enough to remember the 1977 classic movie *Oh, God!* starring George Burns, you might recall God visits an unsuspecting grocery store manager named Jerry, played by John Denver. Jerry is asked to carry God's word into the world, and he questions, "How?" He protests that no one will believe him. In the movie, God states, "You have the strength that comes from knowing." So did Mary Magdalene.