

FIRST THE PAIN, THEN THE RISING

John 20:1-18

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One of the privileges of being a pastor is that parishioners invite us into their lives (you invite us into your lives) at some of the most sacred moments. I've been present with church members as they've taken their last breaths. I've visited babies when they were less than 24 hours old. Sitting with a family as they plan a memorial service, as they talk about the life of a loved one, is a profound privilege. It's a joy to be intimately involved in rites of passage, like baptisms, confirmation and weddings.

Here's something I've observed in those meaningful moments. Joy and sorrow are mingled together. A relative will stand at the pulpit sharing memories of one who has just died. She will choke back tears, and then a few minutes later, she will lead the congregation in laughter as she shares a funny anecdote.

One day I visited in the hospital after learning that one of our members had given birth to this couple's first child. I walked in and both parents were in the room. I saw the gorgeous baby. The parents were ecstatic that he was healthy. In the midst of their smiles, tears rolled down the mother's face. "My mom died a few months ago," she reminded me. "I just wish she were here to meet her grandson." At life's most significant times, joy and sorrow mingle together. We are very present in those moments, we are grateful, and we are aware, too, that life is fragile and precious.

The story of Holy Week is a story that perfectly mirrors human life. The joy of Easter doesn't arise out of thin air. It doesn't come from nothing. The joy of Easter

Sunday is born from the suffering of the cross on Friday, it comes from the quiet finality of the body laid in the tomb on Saturday. There is no rising without pain.

The priest and author Robert Wicks tells this true story.

A number of years ago, a young priest and I were driving together to a venue where I was to speak. After a brief quiet interlude in our conversation, I asked him a question I often ask physicians, nurses, teachers, clergy, and other helpers and healers: "Looking back, is there something that stands out as a 'teachable moment' to you?"

Almost immediately, he responded, "Yes. I was in a rural parish and was called to go to the hospital. However, the young man who took the call and left me a message didn't think to write down why or who wanted a priest. Since it was a small hospital I thought I would still go and see if I could find out when I got there."

"As I entered the hospital, I saw a couple sitting in the lobby looking sad. He was crying and she was stone-faced. I went over and asked, 'I don't mean to be intrusive, but did you contact the rectory looking for a priest?' The man couldn't reply but the woman said, 'Yes, Father, we were the ones. You see, last week I gave birth to twins. One was born quite healthy but the other has just died.'"

The priest continued the story: "Together the three of us went down to the morgue which was very dark. They pulled out the slab with the little figure on it covered with a shroud. We then stood around the body, prayed together...and cried."

"After that, in a resurrection-like experience, we went up the stairs to the neo-natal intensive care unit. When we entered, it was a totally different scene. It was bright and cheery! We stood around the incubator and prayed and cried again...but this time they were tears of joy."

“What was the lesson you learned from this?” Robert Wicks asked the young priest.

He paused and answered in a quiet but steady voice, “I don’t think it would have been possible for me to cry those tears of joy, if I hadn’t first cried those tears of sadness.”

We are Easter people because we have also been Maundy Thursday people and Good Friday people. We can celebrate today because we know that life can be hard, and we **will** be disappointed, and we will experience physical and emotional pain, and people we love dearly will die. And God has been and will be with us through all of it. God knows all of it. God lives it and feels it with us. We have been through the pain and now we rise, in joy and celebration.

But how can we celebrate, when we know that for many in the world, today is still Good Friday? For the people of Ukraine, and those who have recently fled? For the people of Shanghai, in lockdown because of Covid - many of them reportedly starving? We know the pain of many, at this very moment. Should we be celebrating? Is it right to sing songs of joy today?

This is Karen Walrond - she has written a book about how to be a joyful activist for social justice. How to do both of those things at the same time. She contends, in fact, that we **must** do both - if you lose your joy, then how can you be motivated to work to save this world and its people? And if you lose your passion for making change, then your life loses its meaning and joy. She convinces her readers that both must be held in tension, much in the same way that sorrow and joy are both a part of life. Here’s one of

her quotes: "I will never apologize for embracing joy and beauty - even when the world is falling apart - because joy and beauty are my fuel for activism."

So yes, we celebrate today. And we will keep on celebrating, because Christ is risen, and life is worth living, and all of God's people are worth saving, and all of God's creation is worth saving. And we'll suffer again, and God will be with us, and joy and sorrow will mingle together. This is human life as God intends it. God intends us to feel both the sadness and the exhilaration of life, and live it all fully. As Jesus did. Because when we know that God is with us, we no longer shrink in fear. "Do not be afraid," the Bible tells us over and over again. The Easter story tells us we need not be afraid of death - God has conquered the grave and promised us eternal life. The Easter story also tells us to not be afraid of life. Even though we know that life will sometimes be painful, we live in courage because God is with us.

The writer Anne Lamott is about to turn 68 and she wrote a short essay about how she feels at this point in her life. First, she said, "I'm going to celebrate. I'm going to appreciate spring. And you might ask how that is going to help the people in Ukraine. But if you believe in chaos theory, and the belief that if one butterfly flapping its wings can affect the weather halfway across the globe, then believe this. Noticing beauty changes things in ways we cannot begin to imagine. Everything is connected."

She goes on to say, "I will celebrate that I have shelter and friends and warm socks and feet to put in them, and that God found a way to turn the madness and shame of my addiction into grace. I'll shake my head with wonder, which I do more and more as I age, at all the beauty that is left and all that still works after so much has been taken away. So celebrate with me. Step outside and let your mouth drop open when you

behold the world's beauty. Feed the poor with me, or make a donation to UNICEF in my name.”

I cannot tell you, on this Easter Day 2022, that the worst is over, for us as a planet or for the pandemic. I cannot tell you that we've reached the tipping point for racism or homophobia or sexism, or that our political divisions are starting to heal. But I can tell you this. God is on the side of healing and unity and justice. God brings new life where it looked impossible.

*The sun hasn't peeked over the horizon yet. The greenish haze of the moon offers barely enough light to move about. Mary Magdalene is already awake. Grief does that to you.

Days before, Mary's beloved friend and teacher was murdered. The Sabbath meant burial preparation had to be left unfinished, but now Mary is headed back to the tomb. First, she presumes that his body has been stolen, but it doesn't make sense. She peers inside the tomb again. Then, turning to leave, she nearly bumps into a man with dirt under his fingernails. He speaks first. "Why are you weeping?" She thinks he's the gardener and begs him to tell her where Jesus' body is.

What a strange detail: the resurrected Christ is mistaken for a gardener.

Maybe because the place where Jesus was crucified was a garden. A tiny, beautiful detail that reminds us that death is never too far from new life.

A gardener knows the kind of hope it takes to sow a seed in the ground, to cover it with manure, to bury it in the cold winter dirt. To leave it be for months, **trusting** that with the right amount of water, air and time **something new will be born** out of a single seed.

The first step to creating life from a seed is to bury it. A seed reaches its potential only when it is buried. When things look most lost, most bleak, most hopeless...that's when the seed is undergoing its most important change. Seeds must be buried before they can create new life.

Maybe this is what it means to be an Easter person - to see Christ and think, "Gardener," not as a mistaken identity, but as the truest one. The seed in the ground, the body in the tomb - first the pain, then the rising, and through it all, God is with us.

Our "Alleluias" are stronger than ever, because we have known the suffering of God's beloved world in a very real way these last two years. We have experienced losses, including the loss of this very celebration. Yet here we are. We are stronger, we are more resilient, and we are more committed than ever to joining the gardener in the sacred work of bringing joy where once there was pain, transforming this world into an abundant garden, where all are fed, where everyone and everything can grow. Let us celebrate the good news that Christ is risen indeed. And let the passion of that conviction propel us into action, for the sake of the world God loves.

*This section of the sermon borrows heavily from Good Enough, by Kate Bowler.