

Coming Home Different Three Times Over: Words of Joy and Acts of Love as Lodestars for the Future

First Scripture Lesson: Psalm 30

Second Scripture Lesson: Luke Chapter 24 (selected verses)

Focus: While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence.—Luke 24: 41-43

At the end of Luke's Gospel, the disciples return to the Temple in Jerusalem with great joy. This matches the promise of joy given to Zechariah in that Temple at the beginning of Luke's Gospel (1:14). The last Greek words in Luke tell us what the disciples do in the Temple: They bless God. No Gospel ends its account of the good news on a more beautiful note or on one that is more challenging for the Christians of all times as they come together in their own communities.—Raymond E. Brown, *Christ in the Gospels of the Liturgical Year*

We walk in joy towards a still greater joy to come.—St. Anselm, *Proslogion*

First Scripture Lesson: Psalm 30

Easter. Easter Sunday. Easter joy. He is - - -NO! Not yet.

Because to appreciate Easter's joy—to take it into our hearts and make it part of our lives—to know all the way down that Easter joy is our life and our hope—we have to remember Good Friday (a Friday that could only possibly be called "good" retrospectively, in the light of Easter Sunday's joy)—to appreciate Easter and Easter's joy we have to remember Good Friday and Good Friday's suffering.

"My God, my God why have you forsaken me?" Jesus cries from the cross.

Suffering isolates us, takes away our power of speech, and so threatens our very humanity.

In extreme physical pain, we feel alone; we have no words, only moans and cries. It feels like nothing exists but this pain—that I am nothing but this pain—that there is no 'I' at all.

And that's true of all kinds of suffering—physical psychological, emotional, or (what is really always the case) all three together: when we suffer, we feel alone, without words, undone.

That's why putting words to our suffering, finding words for our sorrow, music for our sadness—and even more, prayer for our grief—that's why it matters so much, why it moves us so much: it's a reassertion of not just of our power of speech but also of our humanity, and even more of our shared humanity.

Whatever words we say, whatever songs we sing, whatever prayers we pray, by the very act of saying them, singing them, praying them in the face of suffering we're saying to that suffering, "you don't own me, I am more than you, and I was made for more than you, and I am not alone."

"My God, my God why have you forsaken me," Jesus cries from the cross.

It's a prayer, the most human of all prayers, and it comes from the most human book of the Bible, the Book of Psalms, Psalm 22.

In the space of 31 lines, Psalm 22 moves from the depths of suffering to the heights of joy.

Joy moves in the opposite direction from suffering.

Think of the home crowd, when the home team wins—in dramatic, spectacular, unbelievable fashion on the final play of the game. First there is the moment—however brief—of stunned silence, then the shouts and cries, then the rush of words—"I can't believe what I just saw"—then the ongoing, everflowing gush of words, and then, soon enough, the singing starts. And that gush of words, that singing, can last a long, long time, in fact, it can last forever.

If you don't believe me, let's go down to Tank's on Wayne Avenue together some evening. We'll pull up a couple of bar stools and start talking about the Ohio State Buckeyes' double overtime win over Miami for the National championship in the 2003 Fiesta Bowl. I tell you, by closing time, you and I and twenty of our new best friends, will all be singing, "And when the ball goes over, our cheers will reach the sky, Ohio Field will hear again the Buckeye Battle Cry." (I tell you, it's enough to make you forget about last year's 42-27 . . . almost.)

Joy finds its fulfillment in words and even more so in music. It affirms our own humanity, and unites us in our shared humanity. Joy moves in the opposite direction from suffering.

Which is what our second Scripture lesson, Psalm 30, does. Like Psalm 22, Psalm 30 moves from Good Friday suffering to Easter joy. Listen now for God's Word to us:

O LORD my God, I cried to you for help,
and you have healed me.
O LORD, you brought up my soul from Sheol,
restored me to life from among those gone down to the Pit.

Sing praises to the LORD, O you his faithful ones,
and give thanks to his holy name.

For his anger is but for a moment;
his favor is for a lifetime.

Weeping may linger for the night,
but joy comes with the morning.

O LORD, my God,
You have turned my mourning into dancing;
you have taken off my sackcloth
and clothed me with joy,
so that my soul may praise you and not be silent.
O LORD my God, I will give thanks to you forever.

Second Scripture Lesson: Luke Chapter 24

Easter. Easter Sunday.

In his account of the first Easter Sunday, the Gospel writer Luke charts this same movement from suffering to joy, and does it no less than three times. And these three interlocking episodes build on each other, reaching their crescendo in the closing scene, and the closing words, of the Gospel: “And the disciples returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.”

And in all three episodes, those involved come home different—they come home in joy.

The first episode begins, early in the morning, with the three women going to Jesus ’tomb, and finding it empty.

The second begins with two disciples setting out on a day’s walk to the village of Emmaus, and on the way, they meet a mysterious stranger who begins to talk with them and to teach them.

The third begins with the disciples gathered together, wondering what to make of everything they’ve heard when—suddenly—Jesus is right there with them.

I’ll read selections from each episode. Listen now for God ’Word to us, Luke Chapter 24:

Episode I: The Women Going to the Tomb

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, the women came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be

handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.” Then they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest.

Episode II: The Walk to Emmaus

Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, “What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?” They stood still, looking sad.

Then Jesus said to them, “Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?” Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

As they came near the village they urged him strongly, saying, “Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.” So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.

They said to each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?” That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem, where they found the eleven disciples and their companions gathered together. Then they told what had happened on the road, and how Jesus had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

Episode III: Jesus Appears to His Disciples

While the disciples were talking about all this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.” They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. He said to them, “Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.” And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet.

While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, “Have you anything here to eat?” They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence.

Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.

The Culmination of the Three Episodes

Then Jesus led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

Sermon: Coming Home Different Three Times Over: Words of Joy and Acts of Love as Lodestars for the Future

I hope you saw it. In all three episodes, they were still struggling to understand, still trying to find words, still doing their best to hold it together—and to stay together—in the midst of their suffering.

And then, in one way or another, they are given words.

For the women who come to the tomb, the words come from the angels:

“Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, that the Son of Man must suffer, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.” Then they remembered his words . . .

For the two disciples walking to Emmaus, the words come from Jesus whom they don’t recognize as Jesus:

Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

And for the disciples gathered together in that upper room, the words come from the risen—and now recognized—Jesus:

Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations . . .

And these words move them from suffering to joy—so that they can’t help but share the words and the joy they bring; in fact in the third episode, Jesus tells them that they are to share these words and this joy with all nations.

And with these words they are also given acts of love.

The angels teaching the women at the tomb, Jesus teaching the two on the way to Emmaus, Jesus teaching the disciples in the upper room—those are not just words but acts, acts of love. But so also is Jesus’ breaking of the bread, his showing the disciples his hands and feet, his eating their broiled fish, his blessing them at Bethany—all of these are acts of love.

And so they come home different—in joy: ready to share, in fact, called to share, those words and the joy they bring with others. They are continually in the temple blessing God

Suffering isolates us, takes away our power of speech, and so threatens our very humanity.

But joy moves in the opposite direction. Joy finds its fulfillment in words and even more so in music. It affirms our own humanity, and unites us in our shared humanity.

*Weeping may linger for the night,
but joy comes with the morning.*

So there I was—a few years back. I had officiated the funeral, and then the graveside service, and now just the two of us were left.

It was one of those cold gray February afternoons.

The ground was torn up, muddy with the tracks from the backhoe. The cemetery had laid down those plywood planks so we could walk from our cars to the grave. But already puddles had begun to form in them.

I could hear the rain on the canopy above us and I could see the cemetery workers, about a hundred yards away, huddled together by their pickup trucks, talking quietly, a couple of them smoking, waiting for us to leave.

Her mother had lived a good, long life—loving much and much loved.

And in the service, I had said the right words—the words I'm supposed to say: "In my father's house there are many mansions, I go to prepare a room for you if it were not so, would I have told you so? And so too at the graveside, "And Jesus said: 'I am the resurrection and the life.'"

But at that moment, with the two of us standing alone next to the coffin and the sound of the traffic on the nearby highway—the sound of traffic on a busy highway on a rainy day? It's like the sound of waves on the beach: the relentless monotony produces its own kind of silence—at that moment, with her standing there with one hand on her mother's coffin, I didn't say anything, I didn't have anything to say, I just put my hand on her shoulder.

She turned towards me. "You know Richard, I was just remembering something, something I've remembered my whole life: When I was a little girl, five or six years old, I had gone to bed, and I must have kicked the covers off, because I was cold, curled up in a little ball. I suppose I was half-asleep, and didn't want to wake up to pull them up. And then I remember my mother coming in. I lay still and kept my eyes shut—I didn't want her to know I was even half-awake. And as she tucked the covers under my chin, she leaned down and kissed me—I can still remember the smell of her perfume and the warmth of her breath, 'Good night, my precious one, sleep tight.'"

For that woman, as she stood there with her hand on her mother's coffin, that moment and the memory of that moment were sacramental. As sacramental as the angels in white teaching the women by the empty tomb, as sacramental as Jesus breaking bread at Emmaus, as sacramental as his eating fish with his disciples in that upper room. Perhaps not as dramatic but every bit as sacramental: because in that moment, God was present. God was with her.

And God was with us on that cold, gray afternoon. Because she gave me her words that day. Words of joy and acts of love—which we can't help but share with others. Joy moves in the opposite direction from suffering: It affirms our own humanity unites us in our shared humanity.

It was still cold; still raining, and the traffic still roared as I hopped over the puddles on the plywood, but I went home different that day.

Easter. Easter Sunday. That means the bulletin's a little thicker. And that's because of the lilies and all the Easter flowers—behind me and out there in the narthex. (And many thanks to all you who were here on Friday afternoon arranging them.) In the Easter bulletin, we have pages 9, 10, 11, 12 and 13—five pages of Easter flowers “in memory of” and “in honor of.”

I wonder how many of those persons on those lists have been sacramental to you—their words of joy and acts of love, their very lives. I've been here long enough now to say that some of them on the left-hand side, and many of them right have been for me.

And we need that. We need that because this life isn't all joy, just as it wasn't—and it wouldn't be—for the disciples.

Before his death, before their last supper together, while he was still with them in Jerusalem, Jesus warned them:

“Then they will hand you over to be tortured and will put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of my name. Then many will fall away, and they will betray one another and hate one another. And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray.”

And yet, in the years ahead, amidst all that trial and tribulation, the words of joy and the acts of love of that first Easter serve as a guide for the disciples. In the Book of Acts, which is Luke's sequel to his Gospel, the disciples again and again open up the Scriptures for others just as those two angels and Jesus opened up the Scriptures for them. A guide for their teaching, yes, but also for their lives—a source of strength, a lodestar.

Lodestar—it's a navigational, a nautical term. It's a star, usually the north star, but really, metaphorically, anything, that serves as guide, that helps you chart your course and make your way in life, even—especially—in the midst of trial and tribulation, when we are suffering, feeling alone, without words, undone.

A lodestar—that's what the words of joy and acts of love of that first Easter Sunday became for the disciples. And that's what her mother's words and love were for the woman standing next to me at the graveside—a lodestar.

So this Easter Sunday take a moment and remember, remember those people (whether their names are in the bulletin or not) who have been sacramental for you, whose words of joy and acts of love have been a lodestar for you. Take a moment and remember them.

And as you do, take the music with you. Because Joy finds its fulfillment in words but even more so in music. Joy and the music of joy affirms our humanity and unites us in our shared humanity.

So this Easter Sunday, come home different: take the music with you as a sacrament, as a lodestar: Jesus Christ is Risen Today, Thine is the Glory. The Buckeye Battle Cry.

([Look back to choir]: I know, I know, and I'm sorry: but I knew some people would be thinking it, so I thought I better just come out and say it.)

But especially take the music you're about to hear with you: Handel's *Messiah*, Widor's *Tocatta*. Take that with you, because joy finds its fulfillment in music.

*O LORD, my God,
You have turned my mourning into dancing;
you have taken off my sackcloth
and clothed me with joy,
so that my soul may praise you and not be silent.
O LORD my God, I will give thanks to you forever.*

We walk in joy towards a still greater joy to come.

Easter. Easter Sunday. Easter joy.

He is risen. He is risen indeed.

Amen.