

The Rev. Josh Stephens  
St. John in the Wilderness (Flat Rock, NC)  
Year B - Easter 3  
April 18, 2021

## Easter Joy

The liturgically aware worshipper will notice that when the Alleluias come back, our Old Testament readings each Sunday get swapped out with readings from the Acts of the Apostles. The book of Acts is the continuation of Luke's Gospel. It's about how these disciples of Jesus -- who were not all that special when they had Jesus in the flesh to learn from -- begin to do amazing things in God's name as they live together as the Church after Easter. Here we find the resurrection community taking shape and you can bet this is the same community that we are sharing in today, so lean in and listen in to those Acts readings.

Here's how we'll get into Acts this morning: just an observation. I want you to remember a very common scene in many movies and TV shows. You might find this in a drama or romantic comedy. You would find this in a show about raising kids or finding oneself. Here is how it goes: A main character faces a challenging situation -- a trial of some kind -- when many things did not go well. This person especially was trying to live up to some standard set by a loved one (often a parent), by society, or even by themselves. There is that moment of despair when the main character just cannot succeed, can't do it, and so the protagonist thinks to himself or herself something like, "What's the point of this? I've tried

and I've tried, and I just can't do it." And then looking at their companion -- perhaps a romantic interest, a parent, or a friend -- they say, "I guess this is what you expected all along. You were right. I guess I'm no good after all."

Then do you know what this other person says in response? Here's what I've been getting at. I think every single time that person closest to the main character says to him or to her, "We never expected you to be perfect. All I've ever wanted is for you to be happy." *To be happy*. Well, isn't that just adorable. *To be happy*. It sounds so nice. *To be happy*. But what in the world does that mean? Is that the journey we are supposed to be on? I think this is truly some kind of post-modern, emotional consumeristic naivete that only people in the last few decades have ever articulated.

Of course, on one level we want everyone to be "happy." But isn't happiness an emotion? And isn't it rather foolish to think that we can sustain any kind of quality of life based on feeling one way or another? Are we supposed to be on some kind of life mission to find happiness? Is there a way we can live where all of our problems just go away? Is that the biblical view of life? Is that something God wants for us? *Could there be more for us than an endless search for moments when our fleeting emotions line up nicely and we feel good?*

We are on a quest. We are searching. It's God for whom we are looking. We are on a quest to live lives of faithfulness. We find ourselves hoping to know something of God's love for us and to share that love with the world. We can go deeper than happiness. This Easter, we might begin to live lives of joy -- lives of deep and abundant joy. Lives of Easter wonder filled with gratitude and peace -- that's what we are after. Contentment that is buzzing with life and love -- it's joy we are after and our Acts reading today has a lot to say about joy. But we are going to have to go deeper than just what we heard this morning in a small portion of Acts chapter 3. Remember this is the story of Jesus' disciples living into and living out that Easter message. The story of Acts 3 goes like this:

*One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, at three o'clock in the afternoon. 2 And a man lame from birth was being carried in. People would lay him daily at the gate of the temple called the Beautiful Gate so that he could ask for alms from those entering the temple. 3 When he saw Peter and John about to go into the temple, he asked them for alms. 4 Peter looked intently at him, as did John, and said, "Look at us." 5 And he fixed his attention on them, expecting to receive something from them. 6 But Peter said, "I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk." 7 And he took him by the right hand and raised him up; and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong. 8*

*Jumping up, he stood and began to walk, and he entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God. 9 All the people saw him walking and praising God, 10 and they recognized him as the one who used to sit and ask for alms at the Beautiful Gate of the temple; and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.*

*11 While he clung to Peter and John, all the people ran together to them in the portico called Solomon's Portico, utterly astonished. 12 When Peter saw it, he addressed the people, "You Israelites, why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we had made him walk? 13 The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our ancestors has glorified his servant Jesus, whom you handed over and rejected in the presence of Pilate, though he had decided to release him. 14 But you rejected the Holy and Righteous One and asked to have a murderer given to you, 15 and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses. 16 And by faith in his name, his name itself has made this man strong, whom you see and know; and the faith that is through Jesus has given him this perfect health in the presence of all of you.*

*17 "And now, friends, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers. 18 In this way God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, that his Messiah would suffer. 19 Repent therefore, and*

*turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out, 20 so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Messiah appointed for you, that is, Jesus, 21 who must remain in heaven until the time of universal restoration that God announced long ago through his holy prophets. 22 Moses said, 'The Lord your God will raise up for you from your own people a prophet like me. You must listen to whatever he tells you. 23 And it will be that everyone who does not listen to that prophet will be utterly rooted out of the people.' 24 And all the prophets, as many as have spoken, from Samuel and those after him, also predicted these days. 25 You are the descendants of the prophets and of the covenant that God gave to your ancestors, saying to Abraham, 'And in your descendants all the families of the earth shall be blessed.' 26 When God raised up his servant, he sent him first to you, to bless you by turning each of you from your wicked ways." (Acts 3)*

This is an Easter story we heard, and this is about sharing lives of joy. First we have the man who is healed. We are ones who find ourselves being made well by Jesus of Nazareth whom, as Peter said, "God raised from the dead." This man finds new life again in Christ. His feet and ankles are made strong. He stood up and began to walk. If your legs get healed, then you're going to have to stand up and walk, but our text says that he began to leap and praise God. He's actually jumping for joy and praising God. Now we know that it wasn't just his legs that were healed but when Peter and John looked at him, making eye contact with a

beggar, reaching out a hand to an untouchable, that Christ's Easter life began for that man that day and he began to jump for joy!

We can be so serious in our religiosity, but this is a joyous life we are living, not because of what we have or because things are easy all of the time, but because Christ is risen and we are sharing in his risen life that is making us well. Be joyful friends! That's why I'm so excited that we are having a parish breakfast again in May. We know how to fast these days, but do we remember how to feast? When I was interviewing here and getting to know this parish, you told me that you love to have these breakfasts. You told me that they aren't just breakfasts. They are a time when the men of the parish offer their gifts of service to us all. They are a time when we come together in fellowship to feast with one another. And you know what? I believed you! Now we are going to remember how to feast again. What if the feast is going to look a bit different than before? What if we have to eat outside, or wear a mask, or space out a bit more? Christ is risen. Feast we must!

That's kind of how it is with all our ministries these days. Things might look a little bit different now, but in the end, we have Easter work to do. Let's adapt. Let's celebrate. Let's joyfully be witnesses to the risen Christ.

And that's the other part of this Acts reading. Peter and John have encountered Christ alive just like you have encountered Christ alive and

now they are witnesses to his resurrection. They are saying to people in the temple that this is the continuation of God's story that you know well. God came to Abraham so his descendants might be a blessing to all the world and here we are. God raised up his servant Jesus, sending him to you to bless you, to fill you with joy, so you might share that joy with all the world. We can invite others to the Easter feast now!

Living lives of joy does not mean that everything is smooth sailing all of the time. Instead, it means that we are rooted deeply in God. As 1 John says this morning, we have been made children of God. God has claimed you most spectacularly in this resurrection story. We will face hardship. We will find ourselves unsure of the way, but our joy can remain. Even at the grave we make our song: Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!

When times are challenging, joy becomes an act of resistance that declares just how big and loving God really is. You'll never guess what happens next in our Acts story. It's jumping the gun to next week's reading but let's do it! When Peter and John are joyful witnesses to Christ's resurrection, people begin to get upset with them. The text says that the leaders are annoyed because they kept teaching and proclaiming that in Jesus there is resurrection, there is life, there is joy. So what did the leaders do, they arrested them and threw them in jail. That's Acts 4, verse 3. Do you know what the next verse says? Acts 4:4 says that because of their testimony many believed in Jesus of Nazareth and the

church grew to about 5000 strong. It's no wonder that Paul kept talking about joy in Christ in all those letters that he wrote with shackled hands from a Roman prison cell. Joy becomes our resistance against the powers of death that know nothing of Easter life.

You have probably figured out by now that happiness is fleeting. But we get to be Easter people, joyful people, with souls grounded in the living Christ who has given us that abundant Easter life. Seek out Christ in all you do and make time for him each day and each week. I hope you leap for joy and praise God upon meeting him. I hope we can all be witnesses to the resurrection. I hope God's joy abounds in your life and in our lives together.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> This sermon was inspired in part by a new podcast from the Diocese of Western North Carolina, called Mission: Joy. The first episode is featured here: <https://www.mission-joy.com/>.