

“Joy and Fear”

Reading: Matthew 28:1-10, 11-20

Written and preached by [Luke Richards](#)

Maybe my biggest mistake in my life as a Christian has been misunderstanding the meaning of joy. I've always thought I'm the last person that should be a pastor; I'm naturally as melancholy and surly as my wife will let me get away with being. Joy is not something that comes easily to me. And I don't know about you, but when you're as naturally melancholy as I am, all of the Bible verses and Christian songs that sing of joy and happiness seem a little forced, fake, syrupy. Joy is something that shows up in a lot of places in the Bible, and we sing all kinds of songs about how happy and joyful Jesus makes us. “Joyful, joyful we adore thee,” “I've got the joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart,” “it was there by faith I received my sight and now I am happy all the day,” and we could go on and on and on with songs and hymns and choruses that sing about how happy and joyful we're supposed to be as Christians. And those songs aren't totally wrong, since joy is all over the Bible, as well. When the angels announce the birth of Jesus, they call it “good news of great joy for all the people.” When Paul describes the fruit of a life filled with the Spirit of God, He speaks of “love, joy, peace, patience,” and so on. And again, there are many other examples in the Bible.

And so I, grouchy that I am, spent a large part of my life as a Christian frustrated with this whole business with joy. I thought joy meant being happy all the time for no reason, and I thought people who were happy for no reason must not be paying attention to anything around them, so they must not be very smart. So maybe, I thought, Christians were meant to *pretend* to be happy, but that's not very honest. So I spent many years singing these songs about joy and just getting grumpier and grumpier, because I thought I was supposed to be feeling some sort of emotional high off of Jesus all the time and I wasn't, so either something was wrong with Jesus or something was wrong with me. Like I said, I'm the last person who should be a pastor.

It turns out that the problem certainly wasn't with Jesus and the problem wasn't necessarily with me, either, but I had a wrong understanding of what this joy is all about. Today is Easter, the highest Christian holiday, when we are gushing with joy, but this joy is not just a feeling of euphoria or happiness or giddiness, though it certainly can include a feeling. Sometimes people try to make sense of joy by making it a decision: it's not a feeling, it's a determination to soldier on through the hard times. But that's not really it, either. Joy is an answer we give. It's a response we make.

The reason I'm focusing so much attention on defining joy is, again, because this is Easter, and it's a celebration. We don't get all dressed up and sing happy songs just because spring is coming and the flowers are starting to bloom. We get all excited because we claim that a man who is God in the flesh was raised from the dead after being crucified as a criminal. And all of this happened nearly two thousand years ago on another continent, and we're supposed to be joyful. Why? Well, because we also claim that this man is still alive today, and we claim that death can't touch Him ever again, and because of what He did, we can have hope of transformation and healing and, well, a joy that will last even beyond death. Joy is our response to what God has done. Joy is our answer to fear.

Our passage of Scripture for today makes mention of joy. Everything has gone topsy-turvy in the lives of Jesus' followers by now. Jesus had been preaching a message of love and forgiveness and had announced the good news that God's kingdom was at hand, and He had shown His power by

doing many amazing things. But the people who should have embraced Him as their king had instead, by and large, rejected Him and seen Him as a threat to their power. So they plotted against Him, found a traitor in His company to take advantage of, arrested Him, shamed Him, and executed Him. At this point in the story Jesus has been dead for a couple of days. All of the expectations of His followers have been brutally dashed to the ground. The big, brash men whom He has been teaching and preparing for years have scattered and are in hiding, so our story focuses instead on a handful of women whose names we barely know. Women weren't considered reliable witnesses in that day; they didn't generally hold property or take the lead in what was stereotypically the men's world. But here they are: in Jesus' kingdom, *all* people are invited to find Him at this empty tomb, because He created all people, He loves all people, and He calls all people — especially those who are fearful or marginalized — to take up the mission of His kingdom as His ambassadors.

And so these women are the first to the empty tomb, and the first to hear the message: Jesus is risen, He has conquered death and hell, He's alive, don't be afraid. Again, everything is topsy-turvy: the guards of the tomb, the soldiers with the weapons who are trained in how to threaten and put more people in tombs, are instead so afraid that they shake and become like the dead themselves. And the women become the first apostles, the first ones to hear and respond to the sight of Jesus alive. Matthew's gospel tells us that their response to the news is that they are afraid yet filled with joy. There it is, that mention of joy that can be so elusive and confusing. They have just witnessed something so profound, so powerful, so earth-shaking, that they can't help but be afraid at the implications, but they also can't help but be motivated by a joy that they can't keep to themselves.

Their joy is much more than just a painted smile. They're not just pretending to be happy, nor are they joyful in the sense that they just feel good right now. Their joy is not a combination of chemicals and electrical impulses in their brains that give them a nice feeling. Their joy is not a mood. And what's interesting is that their joy in this moment does not exclude fear; they are both joyful and afraid right now. Sometimes we make the mistake of thinking that if I'm joyful, I can't ever have what we might call a negative feeling or thought; if I'm afraid or doubtful or have questions, I'm ruining my joy. But here they are, afraid yet joyful.

What does their joy do to them? Does being joyful mean they just sit around and laugh because they're tickled inside? Does joy make them throw a party? No, joy moves them. Joy is their movement in response to something God has done, and that's something we often see in the Bible: joy is not just a feeling of gladness, it's a response, an answer to the fact that God has done something worthy of provoking gladness. Because I'm glad, I move. Joy gives me something to say and do in the face of fear and death. They may be afraid, but there are two kinds of fear: there's fear that stops us in our tracks, and there's fear that keeps us going. There's a selfish fear about what I might lose, and a healthy fear that leaves us in awe and intensifies our joy.

On the night Jesus was betrayed and arrested, His most ardent supporter Peter gave in to fear and denied that He had ever met Jesus. His fear was the sort that stopped him, a fear that doubted whether the faithful love of Jesus was enough to overcome the brutal power of the world. The other men who followed Jesus did pretty much the same thing: they were too afraid to follow Him to the cross, so they barely get a mention in the story. The guards at Jesus' tomb were confronted by a dead man walking out of His grave, and they saw something far more powerful than the death and the power they had relied on, and their fear knocked them off their feet. Afterwards, when they pulled

themselves together enough to go and report what had happened, the response is to lie and bribe and cover up. That's the response of fear: to rely on whatever unsavory methods we think are necessary to protect ourselves.

But the response of joy is to proclaim the truth, to shout it from the rooftops. If it's joy, it's hard to keep quiet. These women might be afraid because they've brushed up against someone bigger and greater than they realized, but they're filled with awe, not dread. They're filled with awe and joy because they've just seen that the power of God can break death itself, and they've seen that God is good, and God is faithful to His promises, and God uses His mighty power to save.

There aren't that many moments of such joy in our lives, and God is offering us the chance to have lives permeated by that joy because we live transformed by the empty tomb of Jesus. How often do you have a moment or a day of such joy that it changes your life and you can't help but tell people about it? A graduation, or a wedding, or the birth of a child, or healing from a disease, or a beloved relationship being renewed, or some unexpected good fortune. We have those days, but they're relatively rare. But here at Easter is a day that changes our entire understanding of how the world works — a day that shows God's power is greater than death or sin or failure or hate — and, like those women, we can live in a joy that moves us because we have an answer to the darkness.

And when the women take the message of Jesus' resurrection to the other disciples, the joy is infectious. The fear that had stopped them and made them hide is replaced by a joy that moves them to go and meet Jesus, and their joy keeps moving them for the rest of their lives. This small band of people who encounter the risen Jesus begin to preach their message of joy, and more lives are changed, and more and more, and when they encounter hungry people they feed them, and when they find people lost and ignored in the dark corners of society they include them and love them, and when they meet arguments and hate they simply respond with even greater love. The followers of Jesus haven't stopped moving in the nearly two thousand years since Jesus walked out of that tomb, and we're not about to stop today.

So the joy of the empty tomb gives us something to say in times of fear. When the world tells us we need to be afraid of our neighbors because they might hurt us or kill us or take our jobs or do things differently than we do, we look at the empty tomb of Jesus and say, "He is risen indeed." And because He is risen, threats don't frighten me. When those who have power try to tighten their grip by pitting us versus "them," by dehumanizing those who are different so that we can feel better about ourselves, we say, "He is risen indeed." Jesus died and lives today for *all* people, not just those who look like me or think like me or live where I live. When our enemies remind us of what we've done, dredging up all the shadows in our past, insisting that we cannot possibly change and God can't really love someone like me, and when they point out all the reasons we should be afraid of someone finding out the truth about who we are, we look instead at the empty tomb of Christ and say, "He is risen indeed." He died for me and He lives today so that I can live for Him.

When advertisers tell us to be afraid that we aren't as cool or as beautiful or as wealthy as our neighbors, and we need to be afraid of how they might look down on us, we look at the empty tomb of Jesus and say, "He is risen indeed." He is Lord, and His judgment that I am His child will last far longer than any fashion trend or bank account. When the world tells us the lie that life is all about being happy and content, and failing that, life is about avoiding pain and being numb, we look at the

empty tomb and say, “He is risen indeed.” There is a joy that is stronger than pain and lasts longer than happiness. When that nagging voice begins whispering in our ears about “what if,” and all the worst-case scenarios bubble up through our thoughts to the point that joy seems like a joke when there are so many things that could go wrong, we look at the empty tomb of Jesus and say, “He is risen indeed.” He has conquered death and hell, and there is no “what if” that is out of His hands.

Today is our joyful celebration of an event so good that fear itself runs in terror. Today is our day to proclaim with voices hoarse from singing that death itself has been given a fatal wound. Today is the day to move, to get up and go to the margins to find those who are lost and hurting, to go and embrace our enemies, because Christ is risen from the dead and invites all people to have hope together in His kingdom: the lost can be found, the hurting can be healed, the grieving can find joy, and the enemy can become beloved. God has given us an answer to fear in the joy of the empty tomb of Jesus.



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