

Mark 16:1-7

God is Before You

Easter Sunday April 8, 2012

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Every month in our church we have worship themes. This month our worship theme is joy. Joy is one of the most basic human emotions. Joy is this most delicious feeling of pure happiness.

In 1947 Alan Funt started a radio show that audiences grew to love, because it brought us so much joy. Candid Camera set up situations where people in ordinary situations were asked to help someone, or hold something, or reacts to a stranger on the sidewalk. If the person agreed, the stranger would ask more and more of the people, until this normal situation became very funny. Broadcast on every channel and now an online success, Alan Funt's concept with Candid Camera turned silly moments into hilarious dilemmas. It successfully hit America's funny bone because Funt was able to make us see the everyday joy in life. He was able to help us see the funny side of the confusing moments in everyday dilemmas.

We all crave joy, and search for it. But most days we go about our business, quite unsuspecting, and even oblivious to the joy around us. If we are lucky, sometimes new situation startle us, or helps us see ourselves differently. Often joy takes us by surprise. That was true for the followers of Jesus. They had followed him to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover, but I bet they never expected him to get arrested after the Seder. They were thrilled when the crowds of peasants gave him a hero's welcome on Palm Sunday, but I bet they were dismayed when people came to arrest him in the garden. They were happy to go with him while he prayer; he often prayed alone at night. Usually, no one needed to stay awake, but that night after they dozed off, suddenly he was arrested, and I bet they were stunned and

horrified to realize that he was on his way to a cross. Mass confusion reigned. Some disciples left town; others remained frightened for their own lives.

Then, after they buried him, the surprises continued. Women went to the tomb the next morning at dawn, only to find his body missing. To this day, no one really knows what happened. Was it a trick, or hoax? Did a clever doctor resuscitate him? Did God rescue him? Did his body die, but his spirit emerge victorious? The resurrection of Jesus Christ is a mystery people have been pondering for 2000 years.

Yet the most surprising thing of all is that the people who knew Jesus and loved him found him to be alive. Their awful confusion gave way to joy. They felt his presence when they sat to talk. They saw him in the distance walking across the water, when they went fishing. They recognized him in the face of a stranger when they walked on the road to Emmaus. Suddenly instead of losing him in Jerusalem, they found he was everywhere, darting around like someone who had been set free from his body.

Before long the followers of Jesus were not in despair, but they were full of joy. Joy took them by surprise. Let's take a closer look at this story and see if we can find the surprising joy at the heart of it.

In the first place, the story says, there is a new day dawning. When the women arrived at the tomb, they came bearing spices. They were talking about Jesus' death- how sudden, how disturbing, and how sad it was. Jesus died on a Friday afternoon, but Jews were not allowed to bury the dead once the sun set because it was the Sabbath. So they took his body quickly down off the cross and laid it in a tomb, next to his grave. Sadly, there was no time to complete his burial. Tombs were hollowed sections of soft limestone. Bodies had to be bathed in embalming spices before they went into the permanent grave. That took more time than they had on Friday so the women returned on Sunday at dawn to finish what

they started before the Sabbath. As they walked to the graveyard they may have worried about the body, or how to move the stone covering the tomb, but they never expected to find him gone.

Then an angel met them. What he said stunned those women disciples. “Don’t spend a lot of time here. He is not here. Jesus is gone. Go home. Not to the places where you are staying in Jerusalem, but home to Galilee. He has gone before you to Galilee.

Suddenly those women had a big decision to make. Should they keep searching for the crucified rabbi, or start looking for their Risen Lord? Should they keep analyzing their options, or start building new expectations? Should they go back to Jerusalem or on to Galilee? Should they dwell on the past or start building a new future?

The disciples never really figured out what happened to Jesus. But they discovered he was alive, and that was what mattered, most. Easter reminds us that there are times when you come to a moment of decision. You can re-think the past or you can decide to move on. Even if your life has been difficult or heart-breaking, at some point you need to decide whether to keep analyzing it or using its framework, or start down a new path. Each day we all decide whether to remain stuck in a graveyard, or to take a journey to find new life. Now I understand that sometimes you have to go back to look at what has happened before you can move on. But the point of therapy and even 12 step programs is to move on.

The angel said – don’t stay here; there is nothing here. Easter reminds us that each morning is a new gift from God. Each day we rise to greet the dawn, we have a chance to hear this angel telling us, “God has something planned for you today which is brand new. God has gone before you.” Yesterday is over; today, you can search for new life. Each day God gives you a new day.

In the 2nd place – God is in the future – not the past. There was an article in yesterday’s Boston Globe about a popular author of the book “Extremely Loud, Incredibly Close”, Jonathan Safran Foer. He has

collaborated to re-write the Seder. Our Jewish friends and family celebrate this ancient ritual around dinner tables, and until this year they have been celebrating the Passover using the liturgy from 1932. Jonathan Foer believed it was time to update the story for modern Jewish families. He was playful and named it the New American Haggadah-Hunger Games VIII. Through his writing he brings the story of the Exodus – the oldest story in scripture into the 21st century.

It is time for the Easter story to come into the 21st century too. We have been using some old theology for this Easter story. It is time to move on. How many of you think that Easter is really all about sin? That is what we learned growing up. You know the theory. Adam and Eve ate the apple in the garden, and things went downhill from there. Their craving for fruit sent all humanity down a slippery slope. Their disobedience made us all prone to sin. Generation after generation, the theory goes; we turned away from God, because we could not help ourselves. We were cursed by a pre-disposition toward doing evil. Finally after thousands of years, God was helpless to reach us, so God made a bargain with the devil. The deal was that Jesus had to die for all the sins of the world, to finally wipe the slate clean.

I think it is time to re-examine this theory of atonement, as the backdrop for Easter. I don't see the joy in this interpretation at all. Furthermore, it makes very little sense to modern believers. For one thing, the punishment never fit the crime. This theory of atonement makes God into a vengeful and exacting parent. Plus, it puts God at the devil's mercy, and makes Jesus a pawn.

Now I know that people make mistakes. Some of us are capable of horrible things. But I don't believe we are all bad people – flawed at our core by the inherited mantle of sinfulness. This whole notion that Easter is a story of atonement was born in the Middle Ages – 100 years after Jesus lived. Peter and James and John never thought God forced Jesus to atone for their sins. The early churches never imagined Jesus was paying a debt, or substituting his agony to redeem them. They never imagined

that dying was Jesus' reason to live. His exuberant way of living may have irritated the powerful Roman governor, to be sure. But Jesus came to show us how to live, not to die for us.

After 1000 years of living in the shadow of a Middle Ages theory of substitutionary atonement, , I think it is time at the start of the 21st century to rediscover the joy of those early disciples, and let go of these feudal ideas about personal salvation. God does not dwell in the past, settling some old score. God is not worrying about Adam and Eve long ago. The angel said God is ahead of you, not behind you.

Finally, Easter is a decision, not a test of your beliefs. Faith is much more than what you believe. It is what you decide to do with your life. The resurrection is so much more than a story about what happened to Jesus. It is really about what happens to you because of the empty tomb.

Christ's disciples left the tomb and went back to Galilee, and started communities of faith. Those communities were not debating Christ's death, but living as though he were with them every day. They became places that fed the hungry. They were known for the way that they greeted the outcast. They gained a reputation for setting up assistance programs to clothe the widows, and the destitute. Those early Christians changed the world by living as though Jesus Christ were alive in them. They were tireless, because those communities of faith brought them joy- a greater joy than they had ever known.

Faith is much more than what you believe. It is what you decide to do with your life.

In his novel Great Expectations, Charles Dickens asks the question – what will you do with your life? When he depicts a woman in a dusty room, nursing her old resentments, making her life a living death, he asks us to consider what we are doing with our lives. Will we be like Miss Havasham –subtle name, or like young Pip, who has known disappointment too, but refuses to dwell on it? Will we live in the past or set our sights on great expectations? Sometimes life is terribly unfair. Sometimes we face disappointments we don't deserve at all. Yet, we still have choices each day. In the end it always comes

to the same decision that Mary Oliver poses in her poem “The. “What will you do with your one wild and precious life?”

Every Sunday I say the same benediction at the end of our service.” May the living Christ go with you, beside you to befriend you, above you to watch over you, behind you to encourage you and before you to show you the way?” I know many of you assume that I am reminding you that God will be with you everywhere you go. But there is more to it than that; God is more than surround sound. I send you off each week saying – I hope you find the Living Christ. I pray you meet Him in the face of a stranger beside you. I hope you see the Living Christ in the hand of a beggar behind you. I send you out each week with the prayer that you do what those women did so long ago at the tomb – you will go back to Galilee, back home, determined to find the Risen and Living Christ is going before you. **Easter is a moment of decision. If you want to find him, you will have to decide to look.**