

A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

Easter's Great Joy

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Matthew 28.8

Let us lie still with our eyes closed a moment before dawn breaks on the day of the Resurrection. Easter begins in the darkness of a Jerusalem night where no one sleeps peacefully, in the darkness of the empire's oppressive and murderous occupation, in the darkness of uncertainty and fear and death, even death on a cross. In the darkness, women meet and silently set off down the path toward a tomb outside the city walls, toward a stone they cannot move, to complete a sacred task interrupted by darkness. They strain their eyes for the slightest light of dawn, not knowing they would be, that very morning, the first witnesses to the first light of New Creation.

He is not here; he is risen.

When they quickly departed the tomb to go tell the others, they left, according to Matthew's Gospel, with fear and great joy. Great joy!

Today, Easter Sunday, is a day of great joy. And we need joy these days. So much has been lost. We need as much gladness as we can find, everywhere we can find it. When we find it, we need to carry it with us as long as we can, or let it carry us as long as it will.

A few people have discovered the new chalkboard outside the sanctuary at church. Written on it this week was a somewhat audacious question, "What is the best part of quarantine?" The answers were many: time, time to read, to garden, to pray; 'life at a walking pace' someone wrote; someone else wrote family. Someone else wrote: Nintendo and lots of tv time. We have to find happiness wherever it will be found.

Most of you know we have three children at ages in school when they are each very active and busy with various interests. Earlier this year, my wife was almost in tears one night: when was the last time we had a family dinner? She cried. Someone is always doing something. I'm so tired of the busyness all the time. I just pray that we can slow down to have a dinner when everyone is at home with nowhere to go. Well, Honey, you got your wish; everyone's at home now every night. Even though we've all enjoyed it as well, we've asked her for everyone's sake to please stop praying for that.

Lots of people are eager to share any kinds of good news these days. Few are doing it better than the actor John Krasinski. With the help of his children and contributions from around the world, he created a homemade broadcast called Some Good News. In case it's hard to remember that the world is filled with light, he's become the Walter Cronkite of humanity's bright spots. People are making homemade masks for hospital workers. A couple's April

wedding goes on with pews filled with cardboard cut outs of their friends. Choirs harmonize to create virtual concerts for anyone to enjoy.

A young girl was unable to see the Broadway show she'd been dreaming of seeing when the tour was cancelled. So, Some Good News brought the whole cast of Hamilton together on a video call with the girl to sing for her. If you can watch her face on that video and not get a choked up, well, you're tougher than most. We need some good news; we need some unexpected joy. Some Good News caught fire immediately and inspired people all over the world in different languages and different cultures, people are producing these celebrations of good things. Humanity is united in its suffering and battle in the darkness of pandemic, everywhere you look, light breaks in the darkness.

Matthew McConaughey is calling out bingo numbers for nursing home residents in Round Rock. Families are walking neighborhood streets after dinner while children hunt for teddy bears in windows. We can't visit art museums, but you should see some of the sidewalk chalk creations under your feet all over town. People are planting vegetable gardens, some out of fear, but even those who plant out of fear experience the therapeutic healing from digging your hands in the soil, and the pleasure of watching a seed emerge from its tomb to life. I've heard stories of some of you making meals for one another or leaving a box of DVDS on the doorstep of self-quarantined seniors. I've heard of ice cream deliveries, too. We've had so much to lose, but we've gained more than a little, too.

There's delight and joy all around. People I know and love have been tested, and then received the welcome, wonderful news: negative for Covid. Others are recovering like my friend Tommy who came close to losing his life and now is celebrating every day, every breath that fills his lungs in a new way. He was so close to death and now has new life. The singer Josh Grobin recorded himself in a video from his shower. In a series of shoutouts to people struggling and surviving, he mentioned Tommy and sang Somewhere Over the Rainbow from his shower. Who knew we needed Josh Grobin singing Over the Rainbow from his shower? But we did. Unexpected, simple joy is all around. New born chicks so fluffy, so sleepy, falling over beak-first right into their food, new garden shoots beginning to push up through the soil, teddy bears in windows, chalk on sidewalks, palm branches on front doors, the friendly girl at the grocery who brought the cart to my car for pickup and seemed happy to be alive, clear canals in Venice, smog clearing in Wuhan, a sharp decrease in car accidents everywhere, teachers video chatting with their students because they actually miss them. Did they know they would miss their students? There's joy all around.

The women quickly departed from the tomb with fear and great joy. You know that word fear is all over the Gospels. Men and women are justifiably afraid of a lot of dangers that threaten them and mysteries that overwhelm them. Think of the disciples on their little boat on the big sea as a storm rises up and threatens to swamp them. There was a lot to fear then, and a lot to fear now. Joy is also all over the Gospels. Think of the man who found a treasure hidden in a field. For joy, he sold everything he had to buy the field. We'll give everything for joy.

Joy is all over the Gospels, but Great Joy . . . now that's special. The women departed the tomb with great joy. The only times in all the gospels when someone has great joy, *Mega Chara*, there are only a few.

When the wise men saw the star in the sky, they rejoiced with great joy.

When the angels sang to the shepherds in the fields of good news from Bethlehem, they sang with great joy.

When the disciples were in the presence of the risen Christ before his ascent to heaven, they worshipped him with great joy.

When the women departed the tomb early that Easter morning, they left with great joy.

Joy is found in many places all around. Great joy comes in the Gospels in Christmas stories and Easter stories. Great joy is found among those who celebrate Christ's birth and Christ's resurrection as we do today, every one of them also in hard, dark, fearful times. There's nothing in all of life that equals the pure delight we take in the Incarnation and the Resurrection of our Lord into a world that desperately needs his redemption. It is the great joy that makes possible all other joy. He is the divine Light that illuminates all other light; He is the true life that gives meaning to all life; in Him is our true hope for life. He is true Love who shows us what love is. Love is what saves us.

I have a friend who immigrated to the United States as a refugee from Vietnam after the war. After American forces withdrew, he, his family, and his whole community, in grave danger, fled into the jungle in the darkness of night. They lived for years like that. During the day they would hide high up in the trees. At night, in the darkness, they would come down to look for food and to visit with one another in whispers. Every Sunday, they met for a quiet worship service--very quiet.

Eventually they made their way through the jungle, across the border to safety. Years later, telling me about his experience, he opened a small box. In that box were the tattered remains of the Bible he carried with him from his home when he fled, as he survived in the jungle, and through all the miles of his harrowing journey to freedom. I was in awe, "You saved your Bible through all of that?" He was quick to reply, "This Bible saved me."

Everywhere there's fear all around, and darkness and grief and so much loss is close at hand, the Easter's Great Joy of is always, even closer, saving us through dark nights and dark days, lifting our eyes to the inbreaking light. On this day, in whatever comes our way, may the Lord restore to us the full joy, the surpassing joy, the great joy of our salvation in Christ. Amen.