

St. Luke's Episcopal Church
Lindale, Texas
Ascension Day-(celebrated on the Sunday after Ascension Day)
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Luke 24:44-53
The Reverend John P. Carr

Real Joy

It is believed that the universe as we know it began about 14.3 billion years ago when all the matter in the universe was in a small ball more dense than the densest black hole. Then it explosively expanded to create our universe and about 4.3 billion years ago the earth began to form in our solar system. If put on a 24 hour time line, just about 1.5 seconds before midnight, mankind appeared. The life of Jesus is even more recent. In the three years of his earthly ministry He revealed that He is the Messiah and following his death and resurrection He took his disciples to a nearby hill top and after blessing them He ascended to rejoin His Father. That moment was the end of the beginning of the Kingdom of God and the beginning of the time before the second coming of Jesus and the rest of eternity.

His disciples stood amazed at what they had seen. But instead of being sad and downcast, they rejoiced and returned to Jerusalem to await the arrival of the Advocate, the power of the Holy Spirit that was being sent to them. They realized in the most profound way that day that Jesus is truly the Messiah, the Son of God and they of all people in the history of the world were the ones who were the ones who witnessed His life, death, resurrection and now his ascension. They jumped for joy.

The word 'joy' is defined by Merriam-Webster as, "the emotion evoked by well-being, success, or good fortune or by *the prospect of possessing what one desires*, the expression or exhibition of such emotion, a state of happiness." Let's look at that part about the prospect of "*possessing what one desires*" from a Biblical perspective on joy.

Joy is something that we may have never experienced or it may frequently be a part of our lives. It depends on our faith and our perspective. The joy of the world we are led to believe is found in wealth, fame, power, influence, and approval by the majority view. That is unfortunate because if there is joy in these things it is fleeting.

Joy comes as one of the fruits of the spirit that is sent from God. This means that joy comes from our relationship with and the following of God. Where there is love there is joy.

You may recall many stories in the Old Testament that involve joy and they all are associated with the love of God and the joy involved in worship. The one that springs to mind is when David was escorting the Ark of the Covenant. He was literally jumping for joy at the head of the procession because he knew that he was doing the right thing in the eyes of the Lord. He was full of joy at doing the will of God. (2 Sam 16)

The first fifty Psalms are attributed to David. Psalm 28:7 captures David's joy, "*The LORD is my strength and my shield; my heart trusts in him, and I am helped. My heart leaps for joy and I will give thanks to him in song.*"

It is the love of God and God's love of us that instills joy in our hearts.

This is a common theme in the Old Testament.

(I Chronicles 15:16; Ezra 3:12, 6:16; Psalm 16:11, 32:11, 51:12, II Chronicles 30:26)

I have seen the joy of God overwhelm a person in this church. The person was overcome with joy and it showed in the tears in their eyes and at the same time the radiance of their smile. Joy is a gift from God.

The fruits of the spirit are listed in Galatians 5:22; "*love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness and faithfulness.*" You will note that the list began with love and proceeded to joy and peace. This is the order of things. Love is above all things in the kingdom of God and the expression we have of that love is joy and peace. There is great joy when you see newborn love of God. When you see someone for the first time experience the love of God it is a cause for joy and celebration.

In Africa, at the Young Life Camps I was able to witness this very thing and it was a joy-filled and breath-taking moment. Some of the kids arrived as tough kids not very willing to even talk with their visitors from America. By the third day they had learned about the love of God and they understood that we had come to serve them and not to observe them. Many also had the sudden revelation that Jesus really loved them and that there was nothing that could separate them from His love. On the third day they are invited, as they in their hundreds are sitting, to stand up for Christ if they want Jesus to come into their lives.

It is awe inspiring when that great crowd comes to their feet in their profession of faith. God is at work in that moment and they and we were filled with joy. Many were moved to tears of joy. It is the real thing.

Paul expresses in many places not only the joy he experiences in his relationship with his fellow believers but also the joy they experience.
(II Corinthians 1:24, 2:3; Philippians 1:4, 2:2; I Thessalonians 2:19, 20, 3:9; II Timothy 1:4; Philemon 1:7).

Jesus the Christ, the Messiah experienced joy even though the Messiah had come to suffer. He set the example of not letting our current situation determine the state of our relationship with God or our sense of joy.

With God on our side why should we fear? Paul said in Romans 8:31,
“What shall we then say to these things? If God be for us, who can be against us?”
Paul was a pretty amazing man. He was the foremost persecutor of the people of the Way, the early Christians, and yet he became the foremost advocate for Jesus in the world of the Gentiles. He endured much because he had seen something that changed him and filled him with joy. He endured beatings, stonings, floggings, shipwrecks and near drowning and then he responded to his followers that *“he counted it all as joy”* in the service of Jesus. In Philippians 2:17 Paul said, *“Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all. Likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me.”*

With all of this laid before us why is it that we do not experience more joy? It is because we are separated from joy by sin. Satan wants to pull us away from the love of God and introduce us to the love of the world, his turf. We can combat this through our faith. When we turn to and follow Jesus, turning away from the ways of the world and instead following Him then we see life through the lens of joy. We can then experience joy even in the face of great challenges and hardship.

I met a young man the other day who mentioned that his son had died and that they were going to the cemetery to celebrate his birthday this week. I asked him what had happened. His little boy was born with a genetic defect that would limit his life to weeks or days. He and his wife were completely surprised that this had happened as there was no warning in the tests and observations leading up to the birth of their baby. While he seemed a little sad about the anniversary, at the same time he seemed filled with joy. He rejoiced. He said that they were able to give him life and to spend time with him even though he only lived a few weeks. He

said that the other children were able to hold and love him and eventually say good bye to him.

The ability to bear up under this loss was based on his faith. He saw what had happened not as something that God had done to his family but something that had happened and they responded in love, joy and sorrow at the loss of their son. His outlook reminded me of Paul and how he responded to his adversity. They both based their response to circumstances based on their faith and on the love of God.

When Jesus left the disciples and returned to His Father the disciples were not sad. They had just experienced the very definition of joy, "*the prospect of possessing what one desires.*" Jesus is the Messiah and now they understand this. He had fulfilled His mission for the Messiah described in "*the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms.*" He had come to save the world as the suffering Messiah. He lived, died and was resurrected and now He returned to His Father just as He had promised them. They had prayed for the Messiah to come and now they, these humble men, were the witnesses to his life, death and resurrection and now His Ascension. It is any wonder that they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. They were probably crazy with joy at what they had witnessed and what it meant. They were not filled with sorrow, they were filled with joy and they expressed this joy in worship in the Temple for all to see. Jesus had left but He was sending them new power soon. There was much to be thankful for and reason to be filled with joy.

This joy, this worship, this thanksgiving should be ours as well today. This is how God wants us to live.

It is like those kids in Africa experienced.

- They discovered that there was sin that robbed them of joy and separated them from living the Christian life.
- Then they discovered that there was hope for them in Jesus.
- Finally, they found that they could share this love that was given in grace for them by one who would always love them.
- This was indeed Good News and they too jumped for joy.

Amen