

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church
4th Sunday of Easter
May 3, 2009

Incomplete Joy

Isaiah 12:1-6; Luke 24:36-53

When was the last time you felt a really big letdown?

I still remember it more than 30 years later.

I was five, maybe six,

and I was counting on having the best Christmas ever.

I had seen the coolest thing on Saturday morning cartoons

and had asked for it for Christmas:

The Magic Hat.

The kid on TV, who looked a lot like me,

had performed all sorts of amazing feats of magic

with this hat.

And now it was Christmas morning,

and walking into the living room, there it was!

Sitting on the sofa beside the Christmas tree

where Santa always left my presents:

the Magic Hat!

I went straight to it, and picked it up,

ready to be inducted into the esteemed brotherhood of magicians.

Inside was a magic wand and all sorts of magical materials:

brightly colored scarves, marbles, and even a stuffed rabbit.

Emptying all the contents out of the hat,

I decided to start small.

So into the hat went the little green marble,

and with magic wand waving over the hat

I began to intone the magic words

that surely must be the right ones:

"Abracadabra, Magic Hat, make the marble disappear!"

Nothing. I got nothing. Only not the nothing I had expected.

There in the bottom of the plastic hat,

the little green marble still rolled and clinked around.

A second time, as my parents watch with growing realization and dismay:

"Abracadabra, Magic Hat *make the marble disappear!!!*"

Now, as a parent, I can imagine the sinking feeling in my parents hearts

as they realized my disappointment

right here under the lights of the Christmas tree

on Christmas morning.

They tried, of course,
 explaining that magic involves tricks, sleight of hand,
 knowing something the audience doesn't know.
We read the directions to the Magic Hat –
 but it was all a sham.
I didn't want secret compartments; I wanted magic!
 My Christmas joy was incomplete.

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Every year she feels it – the letdown.
The Easter letdown.

She loves the season of Lent,
 and embraces the practices of reflection, prayer, self-discipline.
There are no real expectations that she's going to feel any certain way
 during Lent.

It's a season about our humanity, our brokenness, or mortality.
If anything, the more mundane you feel, the less holy,
 the better the season.

But then comes Easter – the Day of all Days, the Morning of all Mornings!
 The Great Day of Resurrection!
The Day when the long deprivation of Lent
 is transformed by the power of God
 into the glorious brilliance of Jesus' risen life.

But this woman confessed to me
 that her Easter experience usually falls flat.
It's not the music, or the preaching, or the flowers, or the weather.
Those are all well-done, insightful, profound and beautiful.
But she never quite makes it to the realm of spiritual ecstasy
 that she hopes for on Easter.

Just ask any preacher
what is one of the most challenging sermons of the year to preach:
 Easter will be at or near the top of the list.
Rev. Allison got her first taste of that this year;
 and she found that there really is quite a lot of pressure
 to preach a sermon that rocks the house,
 and by its great rhetorical vigor
 lifts the congregation out of the pews
 and into joyous celebration!
And not only for the weekly faithful,

but for the Christmas & Easter crowd
who are there for one of their two times in worship per year.

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Now, four weeks into the Easter season,
some of the pressure is off for such spiritual ecstasy.
But our readings still speak of the joy that lives in the hearts of those
who know that Jesus Christ is risen.

The passage from Isaiah is not really an Easter reading in the lectionary.
Actually, it shows up in the Advent season,
for the Third Sunday of Advent
which is the Joy Sunday,
when we light the pink candle.

In the Advent season,
our joy is in the assurance,
that God's purposes will finally be carried out
when the Messiah comes.
The joy of the Easter season arises from our knowledge
that the Messiah has come,
and has accomplished the salvation of the world.
Because Jesus has conquered the grave,
we can say with Isaiah:
*Surely God is my salvation;
I will trust, and will not be afraid,
for the Lord God is my strength and my might;
he has become my salvation.*

And this is true. Christ *has* become our salvation.
Only, our joy is not complete...at least, not yet.
Now, after the resurrection,
we are living in a time between the times
after Jesus has been raised, has conquered sin and death,
but before his kingdom has been finally established.

We know we are on the way to complete joy,
but we have not yet arrived.
Our joy is always somewhat tenuous,
ever dimmed by the veil of tears
which is our present human condition.
Life has not become magical,
but requires long and careful learning and practice.

Still, we have reason to *shout aloud and sing for joy*
because we know that what God has begun on Easter morning,
God will bring to consummation one day,
when every tear is wiped away
and our joy *will* be made complete.

Even the disciples were of mixed emotions,
when Jesus appeared to them.
Luke says *they were startled and terrified*.
To reassure them, Jesus shows them his hands and his feet.
Even then, as they begin to understand,
the best Luke can say is that
in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering.
So whatever their Easter experience,
it is something shy of complete joy.

Easter joy.
It is not an easy pleasure or a naïve happiness.
It is not magic.
Living into the joy of Christ's resurrection
is a lifelong journey of learning and growing.

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C. S. Lewis entitled his autobiography *Surprised by Joy*.
He made three observations about joy.

First, as we see in his title: Joy surprises.
We cannot coerce joy to enter our hearts,
anymore than we can control the movement of the Holy Spirit
who, like the wind, blows where it will.
We cannot muster up joy, or prolong it once we sense it.

Joy comes only and always as a gift of the Spirit.
It is never something we earn by our merit,
nor something we deserve by right as a Christian.

The sudden and surprising nature of joy
is captured in the poem of William Butler Yeats
describing his experience one day,
sitting in a London coffee shop:

*My fiftieth year had come and gone
I sat, a solitary man, in a crowded London shop,
An open book and empty cup
On the marble table top.
While on the shop and street I gazed,
My body of a sudden blazed;
And twenty minutes more or less
It seemed, so great my happiness,
That I was blessed and could bless.*

Joy came to Yeats with a sudden realization that
he was blessed and that he had the power to bless.
Surely, this is an Easter moment,
a sudden, joyous realization of the power of resurrection.
All Yeats was able to do, really,
was be open to the moment of blessing,
to appreciate it for what it was, no more than 20 minutes,
and to *remember* it.

Secondly, Lewis taught,
joy is different from pleasure, happiness, fun, or excitement
It is not really like these,
except that once we taste any one of them,
we want more!
This is perhaps the most striking descriptor in Lewis's account of joy:
joy is also experienced in the longing for more joy.
The desire for more joy itself is an aspect of joy!

The memory of joy keeps alive our *desire* for more joy.
Consider the memories of poet William Blake
in *Songs of Innocence*, from a poem called
"The Echoing Green":

*The Sun does arise,
And make happy the skies.
The merry bells ring,
To welcome the Spring.
...Such, such were the joys,
When we all girls and boys,
In our youth time were seen,
On the Echoing Green.*

This longing for childlike joy, innocent exulting in life,
stays with us and burns in our hearts.

But the truth that the Christian must finally come to know
sometimes through long and hard searching
and painful experience,
it that the only thing that can possibly satisfy
our longing for joy,
the only *One* who will fill this yearning,
is the One who made us to be joyful creatures.

From the pen of St. Augustine:

"Our hearts are restless until we rest in God."

The third things Lewis taught,
and this is essential for the Christian experience of joy:
Joy coexists with pain.

Because our vision of God's kingdom is that of a time and place
where crying and dying are no more,
where there are no more tears, no more pain,
we may wrongly think that in this life
prosperity and pleasure and painless life
are necessary prerequisites for joy.

But pain and hardship are very often the context of true joy.
This is why Peter exhorts us

*"Rejoice insofar as you are sharing in Christ's sufferings,
so that you may also be glad and shout for joy
when his glory is revealed."*

If we learn anything from Christ, it is this:

We must die with him, in order to rise with him.

The joy that blossoms in the hearts of the disciples on Easter morning
is rooted in the fertile soil Christ's passion,
in the suffering of their Lord and the agony of the crucifixion.

It is this dynamic of hardship and hope,
pain and perseverance
trial and transformation
that yield the joy of Easter morning.

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In the end, the truth of the gospel
is that Joy is a gift.

And our hardship, our discouragement, our confusion, or spiritual dryness
are the experiences that remind us of this.
Joy is a gift of God, never earned, deserved or forced
into our experience.
It cannot even be coerced by the observance of liturgical seasons.
We do not experience our lives in the neat sequence of the liturgical year.

Just this Easter I confessed to my own spiritual director
that only a few days after Easter I had been cranky with people.
I hadn't been feeling very joyful,
as I thought I should be
in the week after the most brilliant day of the Christian year.
His counsel to me was that I needed to discover where Christ was for me.
At any given time,
it may be the Easter Christ who meets us,
or it may be Christ on the Cross,
or Christ in the Passion, or Christ the healer,
or Christ calling for justice, or Christ exhorting us to prayer,
or Christ the child of Bethlehem
the Christ who turns over our tables,
or the Christ who calls us friend.
At once all of these, but revealing himself in a particular way
with the grace needed for just that moment.

And it is in meeting Christ that our joy will come,
not on command, but always at the right time
and in the appropriate way.

To rest in that assurance is to be ready to receive joy when it comes.
Then to enjoy it while it lasts, and let it go.

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As the risen Lord was carried back up into heaven,
the disciples *worshipped him*
then they returned to Jerusalem with great joy;
and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

Here we have the picture of our Easter joy.
Here now... for a moment... giving us a vision of heaven,
here, but passing
as the vision of Christ disappears into the clouds,

and we reenter the reality of our own Jerusalem.

Living in this reality we come to the Lord's table,
this table of paradox
where we share in Christ's suffering
yet call it the joyful feast of the people of God.

For now, our experience of joy is like a series of open circles,
circles of relationships, pleasures, goals, desires;
broken wholes, like the broken loaf.

Every now and then for the briefest moment
one of the circles will close and become complete,
and we will know true joy;
but it will not last – the moment is always fleeting.

Then the circles of life are broken again,
reopened and in flux,
and we find ourselves with ever greater longing
for fullness of joy,
for consummation,

for the Day of Resurrection,

when faith becomes sight,

and we see our Lord face to face,

and our joy at last

is made complete.