

“Enjoy the Joy”

Rev. David Gregory

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Easter 3

Readings

Adapted from *Psalms 4:6-8* in the New Revised Standard Version

There are many who say, “O that we might see some good!

Let the light of your face shine on us, O Beloved!”

You have put gladness in my heart

more than when their grain and wine abound.

I will both lie down and sleep in peace;

for you alone, O Beloved, make me lie down in safety.

“A Kind Face” by Francis of Assisi, translated by Daniel Ladinsky

in *Love Poems from God: Twelve Sacred Voices from the East and West*

Joy is the greatest cleanser, and it is
the greatest testimony to our
faith.

“Toil with happiness,” my Lord once
said to me.

God sent a servant on an errand
through a dangerous part
of the world.

The servant, having received in hand
what God wanted
delivered,

turned to the Holy and said,

“My Beloved Master, do you have a final instruction?”

God replied,

“A kind face is a
precious
gift.”



God the Father
Popeo Batoni

With every passing week, the beauty of the resurrection season unfolds around us and within us. As the sun rises ever higher in the sky, we are surrounded with the brightness of new green leaves and blossoming wildflowers. The happy songs of birds accompany our thoughts as well as our conversations, reminding us that we are part of the larger cosmos. Simply put, it is a beautiful time to be alive. But not everything is beautiful.

We see hopeful signs in our battles with the global pandemic, even as we languish in an American epidemic of gun violence. There are glimmers of hope in our overall economic outlook, but the gains are only realized by a few. Housing markets have never been hotter, while our homeless populations mushroom. We've seen a massive effort to vaccinate anyone who wishes it, a public demonstration of government-provided health care, and yet millions of us exist without any regular health benefits at all.

In the last year we have seen massive voter turnout and unprecedented participation in our democracy, even as new laws are enacted to suppress voting within minority communities. Police reforms are happening in many places, but people of color are dying at the hands of police in far greater numbers than their white counterparts. Sometimes it feels like we're making good progress, and other times it seems there's no movement at all. As the song goes, "In this world there's a whole lotta trouble. . . ." So it comes as no surprise when the Psalmist says that there are many who say, "O that we might see some good!"

Why is it such a long wait to see justice and peace expressed in human government and human interaction? Why does resurrection not translate into human experience as easily as it does with animal and plant life? Can we change that, or are we doomed to a never-ending cycle of one step forward and one—sometimes two—steps back? Where is this sense of gladness the Hebrews sang about in the midst of their captivity? Not to be trite, but how can we find a glass that is half-empty to be half-full instead? It's not just a superficial feeling of positivity we're looking for, but a deep experience of joy that sets us truly free. Looking at a single set of circumstances, we are equally capable of suffering or joy. A rainy day can feel depressing, or we can find joy in precious water falling from the sky, watering our plants and filling our reservoirs. Our experience of it is simply a decision that we make.

If there is anything at all to the resurrection, it is found in our ability to decide in favor of joy instead of suffering. Nowhere is this tested more fully than in the losses we grieve. In every life there comes a time of pain that seems interminable, a grief that leaves us feeling inconsolable, or a circumstance devoid of any discernable benefit at all. I have mine and you have yours. This is a given. As Longfellow said in his poem, "The Rainy Day,"

*Be still, sad heart! and cease repining;
Behind the clouds is the sun still shining;
Thy fate is the common fate of all,
Into each life some rain must fall,
Some days must be dark and dreary.*



I can remember the very first time I flew on a jet airplane—you know, back in the days when people got all dressed up to travel and sat in wide seats outfitted with ashtrays. I flew alone as a teenager, and probably had some fears as we began our ascent into some big dark clouds that hovered over the city of Dayton, Ohio. The most memorable thing, though, about my first flight was that remarkable moment when the plane was suddenly above the clouds where a

beautiful bright sun shone in a huge blue sky as far as the eye could see. Behind the dreariness that blanketed that day, I could see with my own eyes the sun still shining. The only thing different was my own perspective. That's what joy is. It's not the absence of the clouds, but a decision to see what is behind them.

In his wonderful book, *Love Poems from God*, Daniel Ladinsky turns his artful craft of translation to twelve spiritual poets, six from the east and six from the west. One of them is Francis of Assisi who lived at the turn of the thirteenth century and became one the most well known and most beloved of saints in the western world. "Joy," he says, "is the greatest cleanser, and it is the greatest testimony to our faith."

With this as a backdrop, think of the disciples in their sad and fearful state, defeated, angry, and hopeless. Every beautiful thing was gone, including their hope for the future. The heavy hand of Rome had fallen on their leader, and the same could become true of them. This is when the women came running to them with something inexplicably wonderful on a bright and shiny sabbath morning. Could it be that "he is risen?" In that moment they could choose joy or suffering. They might see only their clouds of grief, or they could choose to see the sun that was shining behind them.

It's easy for any one of us to think that the so-called "blessings of God" are for others who are wiser, more faithful, more committed than we are. There is a pervasive sense of doom in the assumption of an angry Creator who withholds blessing in order to correct our errors. But what if this cloudy, toxic view of God is simply untrue? What if there is a bright sun of unconditional acceptance and love that's right behind it? What happens when we get past the idea of original sin and find only original blessing instead? When we make a decision to see that, then nothing is impossible any longer, nothing is even improbable in that case. In this awareness of new life, in this resurrection, the angry God disappears, and the deep abiding presence of Holy Spirit moves in and takes up residence where it has been all along—that beautiful energy that breathes us and beats our hearts, that oneness with all things that we call life.

I am deeply grateful for ancient people who made such an effort to communicate their metaphors of the sacred. I thank them for using their ideas to help us experience the great Unexplainable. Mostly, I am grateful for the presence of this deep joy that cleanses us from all the times we've chosen suffering instead. In this continuing celebration of new life, let's enjoy the joy!