

## SEE INSIDE FOR MORE

Texts on Sunday, April 6, 2008

*Isaiah 6: 6-13; Luke 24: 13-35*

**T**hose first disciples are pretty happy about Jesus' resurrection. The early church is pretty happy about resurrection. Maybe your church is resurrection happy. Maybe you too. It sounds like a good thing—but we'd better be happy for the right reason. How embarrassing it would be if a letter came to your house and you read it wrong and you started getting happy about what you'd read wrong. What a reckoning is waiting for people who read wrong. Now I wonder, is the church happy about Jesus' resurrection for the right reason? This word—have we read it right? If the Bible is to be our guide, then our resurrection joy needs to be rooted in the same reason for joy in Jesus' resurrection they moved in the early church.

Why were they so happy? It's not because his murder was so gruesome, and they're glad that he got over it so quickly. It's not because they missed him so badly and couldn't imagine their future without him, like a church forlorn after the beloved pastor is gone. And it's not because they expect him now to take an army against the hated Roman oppressor "to redeem Israel," as the two put it when they were walking on the road, sad-looking. No, none of that. I would say, they're not really happy for him—not in the way you might be happy for a friend who got promoted. "Oh Jesus, I hear you'll be sitting at the right hand of the Father for the next thousand years or so. I'm so happy for you." No, they're happy for themselves. And that's the way it should be. Something within themselves has changed, almost beyond comprehension, and they are happy. Today, the church goes around shouting "Jesus is risen! He is risen indeed!" and it sounds good, and maybe it is good—but only if we are happy for ourselves because something within us has changed almost beyond comprehension.

What changes for those two who are walking on the road to Emmaus? It's pretty simple: the deaf hear and the blind see. Almost the first thing we learn about them is that "their eyes were kept from recognizing him." Blind! And later, when Jesus calls them fools—the word in the original is "mindless men"—who never understood what the Bible is saying, he doesn't mean they never even heard it. He means that hearing and hearing, they never really listened, never understood. They were deaf! Their happiness is, I was blind but now I see; our ears were shut up, but now we hear.

Hear what? See what? You see, we're still not done searching for the church's real reason for happiness. To be sure if you were literally blind, you'd be happy to see. But Luke isn't into telling literal stories. What do they see and hear clearly? Let the Bible be our guide. Let's go back, let's go way back to the terrible oracle of judgment pronounced by the prophet Isaiah in the sixth chapter. We did not read the best known verses of that glorious passage, so beloved of church-goers, in which we hear that the prophet "saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and lifted up" and six-winged seraphs were chanting "Holy, holy, holy." We skipped that—because, like happy talk, glory talk in the church is often chocolate to children; taste a little and they don't come down for their medicine. We read the medicine.

The prophet's lips have been cauterized with a coal of righteousness. He is ready and eager to bring glad tidings to the people. But the Lord hires him to say what! "Say to the people, 'Hear and hear, but do not understand; see and see, but do not perceive.'" Well, that's our sad friends on the road to Emmaus. The Lord tells Isaiah to prophesy to "stop their ears, and shut their eyes, so that they may not look with their eyes or listen with their ears, or turn or be healed." How long must I do this? How long, O Lord? "Until cities lie waste and the land is utterly desolate." Deafness and blindness are to be sent upon the people until the whole nation is ruined. If a doom like that came to pass, what happiness when the doom began to pass away! Well, a doom like that did come to pass on Jerusalem, not once

but twice.

When Luke's church first heard his gospel stories, the year was about 80 A.D. Just a few years before that, in 70 A.D, the Roman general Titus had attacked the city, intending once and for all to be rid of the Jewish people and their constant resistance to imperial domination. The whole city was burned to the ground. All that was left of the grand temple built by Herod the Great and his descendants over six decades was its huge foundation wall. The city lay in ruins, the land was utterly desolate and everyone was sent far away. Isaiah's oracle of doom had come to pass. Early Christians pored over the Old Testament, looking for prophecies that seemed to anticipate the coming of the Messiah. Without a doubt, Luke and his church believed that the destruction of Jerusalem was divine judgment. So when Luke tells this story, and men whose ears have been shut up finally hear, from whose eyes scales have fallen and they see, it means the fierce judgment of the Lord is done and the days of doom are over. The church's preaching is for new ears; communion in the breaking of the bread is for new eyes.

*This* is something to get happy about—almost, but not yet. Looking at a destroyed city, and believing that worse has come to worst, is not yet the occasion for joy. If some in Luke's church were happy that Jerusalem's Jews had suffered disaster, woe to them who had no compassion. Some no doubt were immature like that, and today many Christians are still immature like that, happy to think they are right about Jesus and everybody else is wrong and doomed. I tell you I would not want to be caught dead in front of Jesus with that thought on my mind. If we want to understand the joy of Jesus risen, really, we have to take one more step back into the Old Testament story.

Recall why Isaiah spoke that oracle of doom on the people of Judah. What was it that the Lord had sought from them and failed to find? It's in Isaiah, Chapter 1: "Ah, sinful nation . . . your whole head is sick, and your whole heart faint . . . Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow." Which they would not do, and so down came the doom. Therefore, on the day that eyes open new, even though they open on a wasted city; and on the day that ears hear at last, even though they hear terrible cries from suffering children in the desolated land, they are happy, resurrection happy, for the only good reason that the church ever has to be happy about the risen Lord. We are happy for ourselves, that we have changed. Not only do we see our ruined city, but in the Lord at last we see its people with eyes of love and wills that can act. Not only do we hear the cries of the ages to which we have been deaf, but we hear a commandment to love as we have been loved, and deep inside we know we can do it. We see inside for more than we ever knew we were ready to give. This is the change we have been waiting for.

But is this real? Does this happen? If the doom is done, the sign must be just as Isaiah said, just as Jesus said, that the oppressed are freed, the orphan and widow defended, and the people pursue goodness and hunger for justice. That is the only good reason to shout *Jesus is risen!* But in fact, God's children are still falling into poverty and disease and war, and people who can help mostly won't. I had the opportunity a few months back to work with a team from this Presbytery on rebuilding the wasted city of New Orleans. I had an eerie feeling as I walked around New Orleans' lower ninth ward where the houses had stood week after week under twelve feet of water. It seemed I'd seen a city like this, lying waste without inhabitant, its houses without people and the land utterly desolate. Then it hit me: Buffalo, east side. And as I studied the causes of New Orleans' disaster, I saw that in both cities, as in countless other cities of our rich land, shut eyes and plugged ears have brought ruin to the streets. The price of two weeks of today's war waged on Iraq would have been enough to fix the levees in New Orleans. You may love that war, you may hate it—but only liars claim there isn't enough resource in the land to fortify the levees, to pave the cities' streets, to build the schools, to welcome the prisoners home to families and jobs, to pay the teachers and bind up the wounds of the sick and uninsured. It's

not money that's lacking. It's open eyes, open ears, open hearts. This nation is like a car in a skid heading for the cliff of injustice' doom.

There's only one reason to be shouting joy for Jesus' resurrection, and mostly, it seems to me, the churches have not read their letter right. The reason the Bible gives me for joy is when my eyes are open and my ears hear. If in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, "the first fruits of those who have died," as the apostle puts it, (1 Cor 15) then we who see that have been given "birth by the word of truth, so that we may become a kind of first fruits of God's creatures." (James 1:18) You see what they're saying! If he's not dead, you're not dying. If you have been given birth by the word, then you see that there is something in you that is not facing death, but life only. I'm not talking about the hereafter. I'm talking about what it would be like to live right now as if you had "been to the mountaintop and seen the promised land—and you're not fearing any man." Not afraid of your finances, not afraid for your job or lack of it, not afraid for your family, not afraid of the heedless governments that tower over the cities and make war upon the nations, simply not afraid of death. "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?"

I'm not saying that the test of a Christian is that she feels confidence like this every hour or even every day. But I am saying that there is no great meaning to joy in Jesus' resurrection except when in the courage of God, your heart is burning within you as you hear, like you'd never heard it before, that you can live into your worst fear like one who will never die. I am saying that being happy about Jesus' resurrection is like chocolate to the church unless your eyes are open and you read your life like one who is free, free at last, never to die, able to say with the great American visionary Eugene V. Debs (1855-1926) "while there is a lower class I am in it, while there is a criminal element I am of it; while there is a soul in prison, I am not free." Are you happy? See inside for more.

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