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Easter, April 9, 2023

“Jesus – Our Joy, Our Purpose”

Hebrews 12: 1 – 3, Hebrews 12: 2

One cold, rainy morning a teenager awakened on a farm and walked out to the back of the barn where she kept her favorite pet, her friend, the mule. The mule was standing outside in the rain, and as the drops of water rolled off the long nose of that ugly animal, the mule seemed discouraged and depressed. She looked at her favorite friend and said, “You know, Betsy, you would make a wonderful Christian because you look like so many Christians I know. You look like you’ve lost your best friend. You look like the world is coming to an end.”

That was a pretty apt description of the disciples on this first Easter morning. You may remember from the Gospel they were gathered in the upper room where they had celebrated the Passover with Jesus. Now, as John tells us, “With the doors locked for fear of the Jews.” As we hear from many others on that day, they are certainly feeling like they have lost their last friend.

Unfortunately, they were on the wrong mission for Jesus. They had been looking for Him to establish His new kingdom right there in Jerusalem. As we heard last week, some were looking for the prime positions, while others were angry because they got beaten to the ask.

All in all, this was a pretty sad lot. They had no joy. All they had was disappointment and sorrow. They were fully in mourning. In their grief they forgot what Jesus said that in three days, He would rise. It’s kind of amazing that they even got together, but then again grief does bring people together, sometimes.

They had nowhere to go and no one to go to. Jesus had died, all their hopes were dashed and they were just going to sit there and groan, waiting to be arrested. Unlike them, the ladies got up to do something. They headed out for that tomb to finish the preparations that had begun for Jesus’ burial on Friday.

Just like the disciples they were in mourning. On the journey they began to wonder how they would move that stone from the front of His grave. At least, they had a purpose and a mission. They were going to do the last loving thing they could do for Jesus.

Because of their faithfulness, they got rewarded. They got to see the empty tomb and hear an angelic witness that Jesus was not there because He had risen. They went to share their joy with the disciples.

Except for Peter and John, they didn't get much of a rise from the disciples, but that did not take their joy away. They knew that Jesus had risen. They knew now that the grave had not conquered Him. They trusted and believed.

The writer of Hebrews reminds us of one very important point in Hebrews 12: 1 - 2 he says, "We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, the champion who initiates and perfects our faith. Because of the joy awaiting him, he endured the cross, disregarding its shame. Now he is seated in the place of honor beside God's throne." The cross was not Jesus' joy. Like any human, He didn't look forward to suffering. Now He was returning to His Father, while saving us. Jesus knew the joy was in what He accomplished by the cross.

Jesus had come into the world to save us. The only way He could do that was to die on the cross. Someone had to pay for our sins. We people could not do that. God had to send someone. He chose the one He loved the most to die for us. That's how valuable we were to Him. Jesus was willing to endure anything, even death, to accomplish His purpose. It was the ultimate act of service. He gave Himself so that we could live with Him forever.

So often we think we are here to serve those who are in need. Sometimes, we forget that those we serve, also serve us. Max Lucado, one of the great Christian writers of today, talks about meeting a gentleman named Robert Reid.

He recounts, "Robert's hands are twisted and his feet are useless. He can't bathe himself; he can't feed himself. He can't brush his own teeth, comb his hair or put on his own underwear. His shirts are held together by strips of Velcro. His speech drags like a worn-out audio cassette. Robert has cerebral palsy." "Max shares, 'I heard Robert Reid declare, 'I have everything I need for joy!'" What an amazing statement of faith.

Although disease has kept him from many things, it didn't keep him from graduating from high school or attending a Christian University, from which he graduated with a degree in Latin. Having cerebral palsy didn't keep him from teaching at a St. Louis Junior College or from venturing overseas on five mission trips. Robert's disease didn't prevent him from becoming a missionary in Portugal.

Lucado goes on, "He moved to Lisbon, alone, in 1972. There he rented a hotel room and began studying Portuguese. He found a restaurant owner who would feed him after the rush hour and a tutor who would instruct him in the language. I heard Robert speak recently. I watched other men carry him in his wheelchair onto the platform. I watched them lay a Bible in his lap. I watched his stiff fingers force open the pages. I watched people in the audience wipe away tears of admiration from their faces.

Robert could have asked for sympathy or pity, but he did just the opposite. He held his bent hand up in the air and boasted, 'I have everything I need for joy.' His shirts are held together by Velcro but his life is held together by joy. That joy comes from the one common factor that brings joy to every Christian, that they are living for their purpose. That type of joy is based in faith, trusting that God will use you to accomplish His purposes.

I am sure that all of us can call to mind someone like Robert. The story may not be the same, but the reason for their life of faith is the same. They have found their purpose and joy in serving God by serving others. They made sacrifices to do it. We might wonder how they could possibly make that decision, yet because of their joy in Jesus, they were more than willing to do it. Just as Jesus went through a great sacrifice, Jesus' followers are willing to make great sacrifices for Him.

Here's one key element in life, until you learn to serve, you're not really living, you're just existing. You may be accomplishing things, but those accomplishments will fail in contrast to what God wants you to accomplish. So often what we do, we do to get for ourselves. You make a living by what you get, but you make a life by what you give away.

Do you suspect that Robert has a lot of people who care about him? They don't care about him because of what they can get from him. They care about him because of what he's given away. He's given them Jesus. Robert's witness of joy, despite his circumstances, comes from the love he has found in Jesus.

This Easter season we want to emphasize joy. We've been on a long difficult journey. We're still missing people who we care about very much, who have not returned to in-person worship. How do we serve them? How do we help them to know that gathering together is really vital for the Body of Christ? How can we care for them and help them fulfill the purpose God has for them?

On the night of Jesus' birth, the angels came to the shepherds, do you remember their announcement after they said, "Don't be afraid." "We bring you tidings of great joy to all people for to you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." The joy of that night was Jesus' birth. The joy of this day is Jesus' resurrection.

Jesus endured the cross in order to bring us the joy of salvation. But His cross also reminds us that we also will face difficult times. We want to remember that joy that Jesus had as He looked beyond the cross and the grave. When the storms of life are raging, joy is far more valuable than a full bank account. Joy is only discovered in the richness of faith that Jesus deposits in all who are filled with the Holy Spirit.

Perhaps St. Francis of Assisi said it best, "Let us leave sadness to the devil and his angels. As for us Christians, what can we be but rejoicing and glad." Jesus wanted our joy to be complete. John the Baptist reminds us that we must decrease and Jesus must increase in us. One of the ways He increases is as we serve Him and give our life away. Like Paul, we can then declare, "For me to live is Christ and to die is gain."

Will you make this the passion and principle of your life? Will you make your decisions based on this radical approach to life? Will you allow your life to be filled with God and His purposes? Here is one thing that is certain: if you do, you will discover the secrets of joy that are complete and unending.

When you find your joy in Jesus, you can commit your life more deeply to God's unfailing grace. Do that and you will find this to be true: "I've got the joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart, down in my heart, down in my heart. I've got the joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart, down in my heart to stay. And I'm so happy, so very happy, I've got the love of Jesus in my heart. And I'm so happy, so very happy, I've got the love of Jesus in my heart."

Count me in: Do something that brings joy to someone else, helping to fulfill your purpose.