

## Joy • Galatians 5:22–23

The year 1991 began with the threat of a protracted war. There were those who predicted the war might last years, much like the Vietnam War. And then came a stunning and quick victory that will go down in history as the land war that lasted only 100 hours.

Even some of the tragedies were turned into joy. Like the story of the mother who was grieving the death of her son, only to receive a phone call from Saudi Arabia which began with the words, “Hi, Mom!” At first she was skeptical, thinking it might be the cruelest of all practical jokes. She asked him questions that only her son could know the answers to until, eventually, grief turned into exuberant joy. Her son, whom she thought was dead, was alive.

What an incredible surprise!

Can you imagine the skepticism of Mary Magdalene and the other Mary on that first Easter Sunday morning? They had seen Jesus for themselves. While the rest of Jesus’ disciples, all but one of the men, were in hiding, the women had courageously turned out to be as close as they could to Jesus to witness the cruelty of the crucifixion. They would have been right up against the cross and touched him if the soldiers had allowed it. They watched as Jesus was nailed to the timbers. They listened to the few words he spoke. They agonized as he suffered excruciating pain and torture. They heard as he whispered out the words, “It is finished.” They saw as his head dropped in death. They took it all in.

An experienced executioner, who had seen this a thousand times over, officially pronounced that Jesus was dead. But to make certain, he took a spear and shoved it up under his ribs.

They watched as the cross was taken down. They followed as closely as they could as his limp body was transferred to a garden just out-

side of Jerusalem. They watched as his body was prepared and laid in a borrowed tomb. There was no doubt about it. There was no mistake this time that Jesus was dead. Really dead! And for the next three days, the women were drained with grief, as only those who have experienced grief can really understand.

Only on Easter Sunday morning their grief was turned into incredible joy because of the resurrection. For very early on Sunday morning there was an extraordinary display of divine power. The power of God came down to earth and brought him back to life again. It was a display of power so great that the earth shook. The miracle wasn’t the earthquake on the outside - it was the resurrection on the inside.

The rock that had covered the mouth of the cave had been moved, and Jesus stepped forth – ALIVE! It was the greatest miracle of all of history. It was God’s ultimate proof for everyone at any time to be absolutely sure God can do anything, because if he could do this - - - he could do anything else at all.

It was not only the miracle of miracles, but it was the surprise of surprises for Mary and for the other Mary. It shouldn’t have been. After all, Jesus had predicted it. Oh, not that he had given every single detail and specifics, but he had said that he would die. He had said that three days later he would rise back to life again.

They had heard the words - some had memorized the words - but it is quite a different story to hear a prediction and then to experience the reality.

In 1945 the United States communicated subtly, simply, but most clearly, that a very new high power weapon, a bomb, was to be dropped on Japan. We thought the message had been understood by the Japanese emperor and by the military leaders of that country.

***Jesus gave them joy that was greater than grief, stronger than fear.***

Some of the people on the streets, the civilians, could sense that there was a new threat in the air as there were more flights overhead. But no matter how much was predicted, no one could ever imagine an atomic explosion if they had never experienced one. That huge amount of power, released in an instant, was unlike anything else that ever occurred before. There is a difference between a prediction and an experience.

It is the same when the Bible gives its clear-cut warnings of the horrors of hell and the pleasures of heaven. There are going to be many people who are absolutely shocked and surprised to discover that the words that were predicted have become the reality of eternity.

Mary and Mary saw the empty tomb for themselves. They were shocked by what they witnessed when they looked into the tomb and saw an angel. He was like lightening, they said. Brilliant, supernatural - and he spoke!

He explained that Jesus, who was dead, was now back to life again. He said that they would see him for themselves. He told them to go and tell the other disciples. No wonder the two Marys were afraid, yet filled with joy.

That's an interesting combination, isn't it? Those are emotions we usually don't think of mixing together - fear and joy. Maybe we can compare it to a couple with the birth of their first child. Afraid of the fragility of the new child, worried about raising that child, caring for that child, and yet, at the same time, filled with the exuberant joy of a new life, their child, and all the possibilities and all the potential. That is certainly a mixture of fear and joy.

And then came the peak of their experience. Matthew says it like this: "Suddenly Jesus met them. 'Greetings,' he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him."

It sounds kind of weak, actually, the single word that Jesus said. "Greetings." Far better to translate the Greek word, *kara*, exactly as it should be translated: JOY. Jesus greeted them with that very word because that is exactly what he gave to them that day - Joy. Jesus gave them

joy that was greater than grief, stronger than fear. That was the ultimate miracle. Joy, not just in the resurrection, but joy in Jesus himself, until they fell on the ground, held him close, squeezed his ankles and his feet to them and worshiped him in awe and wonder.

But that was then.

What about now? Is that joy of long ago worn out? Far from it! For the Bible tells us that like a rich vein of gold running through history in human experience, the joy of the resurrection is as real and powerful today as it was back then.

St. Paul, writing to the Galatian Christians of the first century, described what a real Christian is really like. He said that a Christian is someone who evidences and grows the fruit of the Spirit. And then he listed the flavors of that fruit, saying, "The fruit of the Spirit is love, JOY, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." It's the same word - joy - that is to be the Christian experience then and now. And it is the word that Jesus spoke to the two Marys. That is what filled them up when grief disappeared.

There is a difference between joy and ordinary happiness as we typically use the word. We think of happiness as everything going great; life is good. If we have a good day, we're happy; if we have a bad day, we're unhappy. Our days can become yo-yos of emotional ups and downs. And just when we're really high, something takes us crashing back down again.

Joy is not like that. Joy is something that goes beyond circumstance. Joy is rooted in God himself who does not fluctuate, does not change. Joy is the assurance of absolute good even when it seems that absolute evil constantly reigns around us. Joy is the far bigger picture, so that when everything seems dimly dark we know that the joy we have is rooted in God himself who is infinitely bright.

When I was a boy, our family often vacationed along the Atlantic coast. As a young child I walked through the beaches from northern Maine all the way to the southeastern coast

of Florida. I was fascinated by the waves of the sea and the dangers that came with it. While I was allowed to play in the shallow water, I was only allowed to go out into the deeper water with my father. Although it was many years ago, I can still remember what it was like to go out over my head. My father, who was a strong swimmer, would take me out into the deeper water. I'd put my arms around his neck - I can still remember the feeling and the skill with which he swam. Sometimes I would fearfully say, "We're out over my head, Daddy!" And sometimes then he would just stand up and it seemed to me, as a little boy, as if he had all power and as if he were a giant. And I knew I was as safe as could be.

Now I'm a man, taller and stronger than my father. But I still must cope with the waves - not so much in the ocean as in life. And I find there are a lot of days in my life when I am out way over my head. When there is an undertow that wants to pull me away. When it seems as if the waves crash one after the other, so fast that I can hardly catch my breath, and I know that I'm not strong enough, tall enough or big enough to make it in what seems like an angry sea of life's circumstances.

It is then that I put my arms around my Father, my Father who raised Jesus from the dead. He is stronger than any current and taller than the depth of any circumstance. And I discover as I hold tight to him joy, stability, strength, assurance - everything that I need in an otherwise uncertain sea. Joy beyond circumstances!

But understand that this is a joy only available to those who are Christians. Only to those, in the words of the New Testament, who are in the Lord.

St. Paul, who found himself in some awful circumstances, was up against the greatest threat of all when he was on death row. He did not

know when his execution date would come, but he knew that it was imminent, it could be at any moment. It was from his cell that he wrote a letter that we call Philippians, one of the smaller books in the New Testament. Interestingly, the recurring theme of this book is joy, even though the man writing it was on death row. And as he described the joy he experienced in impossible circumstances, he wrote an interesting line in Philippians 3:1 with the hope that his readers might also experience the joy he had. He wrote, "Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord!" He knew that in the sea of life's circumstances those who swim alone, who depend upon their own ability, are going to drown because they don't have what it takes. But those who are in the Lord, those who have committed their lives to Jesus Christ as Savior, those who have acknowledged him as Lord of life, those who throw their arms around the neck of God, can find joy no matter how fierce the storm.

Let me tell you, that life that is flavored with this kind of joy is very different from life without it. It is what you might call, "Yes, but . . ." living. Yes, Christians have tough times and difficult experiences; yes, Christians go through unemployment and broken relationships; yes, Christians have their diseases and difficulties like everyone else; yes, Christians know grief and discouragement, depression and even death.

But, Christians who are in the Lord can look at any one of these troubled experiences of life and say, "Yes, but I have Jesus the risen Christ." "Yes, but I understand that God is in control and he is the one who gives me stability and strength for life, so that, as a Christian, I

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***I understand that God is in control and he is the one who gives me stability and strength for life, so that, as a Christian, I can even look death, the most frightening threat of all, right in the face and be afraid and yet filled with joy.***

filled with joy.” “Yes, but I have eternal life through Jesus Christ, and God proved it. I know that if he did it for Jesus, he’ll do it for me.” “Life may be a stormy sea, yes, but I have the joy of the risen Christ.”

C. S. Lewis was one of the literary greats of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He was the author of marvelous fiction such as the SCREWTAPE LETTERS and the CHRONICLES OF NARNIA. He was a brilliant scholar who is renowned to this day, although he died in 1963.

C. S. Lewis’ autobiography is called SURPRISED BY JOY. It describes how this brilliant man was a skeptic, a non-Christian. He rejected the Christian claims of truth and the presentation of Jesus Christ. But, to be intellectually honest, he knew that he had to read the Bible and consider what it had to say for himself. When his brilliant mind came humbly to the truth of Jesus Christ, his death and the reality of his resurrection, C. S. Lewis answered, “Yes!” He accepted Jesus Christ as his Savior and Lord. He became a Christian. He thought it through well, as an intellectual might,

but by his own admission and by the title to his autobiography, he was surprised at what happened. He was surprised at the change that occurred when a person became one with the risen Christ. He was surprised by joy. That is what being a Christian is.

And now I have a question for you. Have you been surprised by joy? If not, joy awaits you in the person of Jesus, the risen Christ. Come to him. Come to him like the two Mary’s. Fall at his feet in humility as a sinner. Put your arms around him and worship him as Savior and as Lord. And you, too, will be surprised by joy!

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