

Sermon: Glorious joy!
1 Peter 1:3-9, Ps. 16
2 Easter, Year A

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Emmanuel Church, Staunton
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Rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy!

Yale Divinity School recently launched a campaign and sermon series competition called “50 States of Joy.” They are inviting pastors from every state to preach on the topic of joy. This effort to unite pastors around the country is part of the school’s “Theology of Joy and the Good Life” project. The creators felt that the topic of joy is often neglected in discussions of the Christian life of faith. Allen Hilton, who originated the idea, says that “Joy is not a good feeling prompted by pleasant circumstances, which is what I think makes people say they’re happy. (For the Apostle) Paul, joy is an un-dentable sense of well-being that comes from having a God-given purpose and a God-given community to join that purpose with him.”

Today’s sermon is the first in a series where we will be exploring the topic of joy. I signed up as a participant on Yale’s web site before even looking at today’s lectionary reading. Interestingly our readings for today are rich in “joy” related words! In our first reading from Acts, Peter says, “my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced.” Our reading from Psalms also says, “My heart therefore is glad and my spirit rejoices.” I guess Peter knew his psalms! Then in our Epistle from first Peter, the word “rejoice” appears twice and the passage ends with “an indescribable and glorious joy”.

How would you define joy? Is it a synonym with happiness or is it something different? Happiness, which is something most of us enjoy experiencing, often seems to be based on outer circumstances. “I am happy the sun is shining today” or “I am happy to be eating this mint chocolate brownie.” *Happy* seems very fluid, seems capricious, blown about like the waves upon the ocean. If we were happy about the sun shining, will that happiness disappear when the clouds and rain come? Or if we were happy about eating that chocolate brownie, will we be unhappy when we look at the scales in the morning? *Happy* seems to come and go, appear and disappear depending on circumstances.

For Peter joy is something different, something deeper, maybe something below the waves, maybe more like the ocean itself. For Peter joy is woven into the fabric of our life in God, and faith in Jesus and his resurrection. Joy is a bi-product of our faith that goes beyond the immediate situation in front of us. For the Christian, faith evokes joy at the foundational level.

In describing faith, Peter writes, “Although you have not seen him, (Jesus), you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith...” Indescribable and glorious joy!

Today we celebrate Lucy Dennison’s 25th anniversary of her work here at Emmanuel as our church secretary. Hi, Lucy! The lectionary has offered us all a great gift in how this particular occasion connects with the scriptures, for Lucy’s life of faith and joy are intimately connected. I

want to share with you a little bit about Lucy and her time with us. What many of you don't know is that Lucy didn't even want this job! One of Emmanuel's strong leaders Archer Hanson, who may have been senior warden at the time, asked Lucy to apply when the position came open. Lucy delayed because she didn't think she wanted to be a church secretary. But fortunately Archer, sometimes referred to as the "Sergeant," persisted and talked Lucy into it. That first day on the job Lucy remembers Sue Buerkel, who had preceded her in the position as church secretary, took her to lunch and member Frances McAllister sent her flowers, and thus was the beginning of a beautiful stretch of life here at Emmanuel.

This Baptist turned Lutheran who puts up with the sometimes strange Episcopal practices and traditions, enriches our lives with a beautiful faith. On the days we are both in the office, we start our day with a prayer. Lucy is always ready to pray. And unlike many Episcopalians, she doesn't mind praying out loud spontaneously! She could teach us a thing or two! And does, unknowingly. Her prayer often begins with thanking God for who God is. Think about that! What a beautiful expression of praise to God which is undergirded by a deep humility. Her faith exudes a wonderful joy that permeates her being and sets a positive tone in the church office, not just on the good days, but every day.

One of Lucy's duties, which falls to the Rector in most Episcopal churches, is administering the Discretionary Fund. This is a special fund that is used to address the immediate needs of folks in our community. We get calls from people who have received a final notice on their electric or water bill, or need a gas voucher to make it to a doctor's appointment. Administering the Discretionary Fund is one of the most challenging activities in the office. It requires a good mind; it requires prayerful discernment as to who gets what and how much; it requires a love, respect and empathy for our fellow human beings and a wise and discerning heart; it requires at times taking a bold risk and possibly getting it wrong; it requires kindness and humility, and Lucy has all of these gifts. She sees this as her ministry. And when challenges come her way with this or any one of the endless possible tasks in the life of the church, her faith keeps her upright. Her joy stems from a deep and abiding faith in Jesus' life and resurrection that will not be taken from her. She seems clear of her God given purpose in her community.

Our collect for today says, "Grant that all who have been reborn into the fellowship of Christ's body may show forth in their lives what they profess by their faith..." Having faith doesn't mean we won't struggle; having faith doesn't mean we won't suffer or experience pain in this life; having faith doesn't mean we have all the answers. But as Peter reminds us in his letter to his struggling community, having faith in our Lord Jesus offers us a great gift of an "indescribable and glorious joy." Might joy be one the greatest signs of our faith in the resurrected Christ? You might find you are *happy* if the circumstances are just right. And you may find that your happiness is tossed to and fro like the waves of the ocean. But what about your joy? Like our example in Lucy, can you think of your joy as something deeper, more like the ocean of God's being, that springs forth as a result of your faith in the resurrected Christ?

Amen.

