

“JOY IN JESUS!”

1 Peter 1:3-9 April 19, 2020

As the snow storm continues to rage outside my study window this morning, I am still thinking spring and counting on spring like weather to make its presence known in the next few days! I have spring flowers and a lamb on my study door and I have faith that sunnier days are coming! Yes, I realize we live in Wyoming where we could get spring snow storms until June but I'm really looking forward to the warmer temperatures and not trudging through snow forever.

In my Country Extra magazine it has a photo article titled: Baby Animals are the Best Buddies showing some youngsters with a cute little calf, a baby goat (kid) named Humphrey and a sweet new puppy. In this same issue is a joke called Following Directions. It is from Leroy Schroeder in Albion, Nebraska. This is how he tells it: A young man was planting some flower seeds on a sweltering day, sweating from the hot sun. His neighbor said, “You need to wait until the sun goes down, or plant in the morning when it is coolest.” The man said, “I can't do that. It says on the package, ‘Plant in full sun!’”

Now that I got that out of my system let's move on, shall we? On this second Sunday of Easter we are now in the period called “Eastertide.” This is a season of celebration, a season of embracing the proclamation of Easter. It is an embrace of life itself. We are focusing on holding on to the exuberance of Easter and holding on to the Joy.

Just that? Joy? Nothing more profound? Just...joy? Well, yeah. But no. No, in fact, there is no such thing as “just joy.” Nothing “just” about it, nothing insignificant, nothing easy, nothing “no big deal” about joy. It is central to the faith.

Really? Central? I thought that was love. Yes, it is. Two centers? No, one center, or central expression. You're right, it is love. But Paul's letter to the Galatians says that this central expression, this fruit of the Spirit, love, is characterized first by joy. It is the chief property of love—a joyous love. That's what we ought to have, ought to display, ought to live each and every day. And why not? We've got everything we could ever ask or imagine. “Our cup runneth over. The Lord is our Shepherd; we shall not want.” Do you hear how many voices point us toward joy? Read through the Bible again and find every word telling us that we can be joyful; we ought to be joyful; we are given permission and encouragement to be joyful. And don't forget this text from 1 Peter, our epistle for the week.”

First Peter is not a letter we read all that often. It's just tucked away toward the end of the New Testament, as though it were embarrassed to be included. “I'll just sit back here, out of the way, so as not to bother anyone,” it seems to say. “Call me if you need me. But I hope you won't. Really.” And why so shy? Besides the fact that Peter had been through the wringer and was probably a little skittish.

Well, this letter isn't really for us. Well, it is, of course, all of scripture is God-breathed and useful for building up. But it isn't. This letter was written when the church was under constant threat—when the benediction was spoken in a whisper because everyone knew when they gathered again that someone likely would be missing, caught up in the cleansing, in deportations and imprisonment. They were afraid that their neighbors might discover that they practiced a minority religion, a suspect faith, and that they might be turned in to the increasingly vigilant authorities who were out to make the nation safe. They were looked at with suspicion as they passed their neighbors on the street. They didn't feel safe in their own hometowns, their own places of work. They were, in fact, model

citizens. They did jobs no one else would do. Christians were often the only ones who cared for the dead, who would treat the body as though it were something precious and give it a decent burial because they believed that life was bigger than what we could see with our eyes. But others thought they were just odd. And icky. And scary.

Questions began to be raised in communities of faith. Should we go underground? Should we hide? Should we blend in, act like them? Would it be safer to pretend we aren't saved by grace through faith? Should we act as though we weren't asked to pray for our enemies and pray for those who persecute us, because it's risky and darned hard? The question was, "Should our faith move inside: inside our heads, inside our hearts? Should it be a personal faith that keeps us safe and warm where it really matters in the imaginations of our inner life?"

This was the question Peter set out to answer in this letter. Let's be aware that there are some who don't think this letter was written by Peter. The timing is wrong, they say; the vocabulary doesn't sound like a Galilean fisherman.

Besides, his name was Simon, not Peter. All that is true. And they're probably right. But, doesn't this sound like something Peter would do? If he didn't write it, then maybe he said it and later someone wrote it down and put his name on it. If he did write it, he probably did it without a sense of irony.

If the question "Should we hide?" is being addressed, who better than Peter to answer it? Peter professed his loyalty to his Lord with moral conviction and then ran like a scared bunny when things got heated. He claimed his steadfastness with loud protests, and then claimed to not know whom they were talking about when someone asked him about this Jesus. Of course, Peter would answer this question.

He has been there. He understands the pull to save one's own skin. He has a grasp on reality; he knows what will work and what won't. He's as practical as they come. So, who better? What do you say, Peter? Stay safe? By no means! We'd need to study the whole letter to get the full answer, but we can catch a glimpse of Peter's spirit, even in these opening verses. A new birth is our gift.

This new life is not based on our merits, not earned by the sweat of our brows, but by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. That gift is ours, and nothing can diminish it.

Nothing can snatch it out of our grasp. It is ours—as sure as the air we breathe, as sure as the light we see, as sure as the hope in our hearts. It is ours, this gift of life.

This way of seeing ourselves and all creation around us: It is ours!

There is only one response to that. Only one. Rejoice. Yes, of course, rejoice.

And there are times when it is easy to rejoice. There are times when things are going well, and we can contemplate the fullness of the promise of eternity. Then, yes, we can look inward and rejoice and feel good about what has been given. We are content, satisfied. "Uh, no," says Peter, grinning in his beard, "You rejoice, even if now for a little while you suffer." Wait, what? Rejoice while suffering?

That doesn't compute. "I know, right?" says Peter. "But yeah, it really does.

Here's the thing; you're alive." "I know", you respond, "and I'd like to stay that way."

"No," Peter responds, "alive. Not just living. You're ALIVE, which means that anything that happens is just a moment in eternity—a blip on the screen. So, all those things that terrify you don't mean anything. They can't diminish you; they can't break you. You're alive. I didn't get that then. I get it now. All there is is love."

Peter laughs at his own thoughts. "Sounds like a pop song, doesn't it? But it's the truth, the deep truth. Love that starts with him, the one I turned my back on, but who never turned his back on me. Love of him who loves so deeply it shakes you to the core. Love so profound we are remade—made alive. Call it salvation; that's the only word that fits. We are being saved by his love, saved to love like him, saved to live like him. Does that sound like a party or what?"

His teeth gleam through that tangle of a beard, his weathered face wrinkling around his eyes as he reaches out with those big fisherman hands to slap you on the back. "Welcome to the party," he shouts a little too loudly. "Rejoice with an

indescribable and glorious joy.” Amen, Peter, Amen.

In closing I would like to share a short meditation by Anne Graham Lotz. She quotes the scripture Romans 15:13: *May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.*

Joy is supremely different than happiness. Happiness, which is an American’s inalienable right to pursue, seems to depend more on circumstances or things or people or feeling. Joy is independent of everything except our relationship with God. Someone has defined joy as peace dancing! And Jesus, with eyes that must have sparkled in anticipation of the blessing that His beloved friends were going to receive, explained, “I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete” (John 15:11).

One of the hall marks of those who are immersed in a love relationship with Jesus and His Father, which they express through abiding obedience, is joy! Joy in Jesus! Joy in living our lives for Him. Joy in abiding...and obeying! Joy that is complete, with nothing that needs to be added to make it more so.

May you travel this next week with that abiding and complete joy of Jesus in your heart and mind, surrendering to God’s will and guidance for your life, and finding hope in His promises. May you find peace in the midst of trial and joy in the midst of uncertainty and suffering. Amen.