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St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, OH  
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Text: John 20:19-31

Thomas’ Foreboding Joy

Last Sunday was so full of joy here at St. Paul’s.  
It was the kind of joy that sweeps you up into it,  
And you find yourself needing to respond with song or tears or shouts of praise or all of the above.  
I felt the joy welling up when I sat in the parish office finishing up a few things before church began.  
As I sat there, I watched you all enter into the building,  
Many of you clutching your Lenten outreach offering boxes.  
If I’m honest with you, I couldn’t believe so many of you remembered them (I definitely didn’t remember mine),  
And I was overwhelmed to see how many of you did the discipline.  
It was joyful to watch.  

Then, when Jeanne finished her sermon saying with all the confidence of her faith,  
saying, “Love wins!” I felt that joy well up in me again.  

And it just kept coming as I watched all the crowds of children come forward to the altar rail at the 9am service -- the rails so full they couldn’t all fit. That was joy.  

This was just through my eyes.  
But I’m sure you saw those glimpses of joy too last Sunday, even if you weren’t here.  
Because it was everywhere.  

Easter is full of unrestrained, unapologetic joy...  
The kind of joy that breaks free from the tomb and refuses to be silent.  

The joy continues into this second Sunday of Easter.  
Today, as we do every year on this day,  
We hear the story of our brother Thomas,  
The one we often refer to as “doubting”  
Thomas missed those glimpses of resurrection joy that his fellow disciples got that Easter week.  
He just heard about the joy – about Jesus’ visit to the disciples,  
About his wounds and his words.  
But he wanted to see it for himself – feel it for himself.  
There was something within him that just couldn’t quite accept it.  

For centuries, we’ve looked at Thomas and assumed his problem must’ve been doubt.  
But what if we left doubt alone for today?  
And returned to that central experience of Easter – joy.
Brene Brown, psychologist and author, writes compellingly about joy:
“Joy is the most vulnerable emotion we experience,” Brown says.

But, as with all vulnerability, sometimes we can’t tolerate it. Sometimes we just can’t tolerate joy.

So, what we do next, Brown says, is we start “dress rehearsing tragedy.” We imagine “something bad is going to happen when in reality, nothing is wrong.” She calls this phenomenon “foreboding joy.” When the vulnerability of joy overwhelms us, we shield ourselves with foreboding thoughts of all that could go wrong.

“How many of you have ever stood over your children while they’re sleeping and thought, ‘Oh my God, I love you’ — and then pictured something horrific happening?” Brown asks.

“Or woke up in the morning and thought, ‘Oh my gosh, job’s going great. Parents are good. This can’t last.”

There’s so much evidence to the contrary when we start to feel joyful. So many reasons to fear. So many reasons to “dress rehearse” the tragedy.

Going back to our Gospel for today...
What if Thomas then wasn’t doubting his fellow disciples and their stories of Jesus’ visit? What if instead, Thomas was having an experience of “foreboding joy”? Maybe it wasn’t a matter of belief for him. Maybe he was simply afraid that the joy of Easter would be too much? ‘What if this doesn’t last?’ He must have wondered. ‘What if Jesus doesn’t stay with them forever?’ ‘What if it’s too good to be true?’ ‘You all saw just happened last week with the crucifixion – what if something like that happens again?’ ‘How can we bear it?’

Perhaps Thomas felt a sense of foreboding joy, and it scared him.

Brene Brown points us to another path of response to joy other than the foreboding one. She says, there are people who have a profound capacity for joy. “The difference,” she says, “is that when something really blissful happened to them, they felt grateful. Instead of using it as a warning to start practicing disaster, they used it as a reminder to practice gratitude.”

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1 https://www.huffpost.com/entry/brene-brown-joy-numbing-oprah_n_4116520 - and all following Brene Brown quotes
Perhaps this was the next path that Thomas chose that day long ago?
When Jesus returned a week later, coming back for another resurrection appearance,
Thomas saw the wounds of the crucifixion on his body.
He heard his words.
He saw Jesus’ face.
And after their encounter he exclaimed with all the gratitude and joy you can imagine:
"My Lord and my God!"

He chose gratitude over fear,
Letting the joy sink in.

It’s the choice we’re all given every year at Easter:
Will we choose joy over doubt,
Joy over fear,
Joy over all the darkness that surrounds us?
Will we, as poet Wendell Berry writes, “be joyful though we’ve considered all the facts”?\(^2\)
That’s the invitation of Easter – joy, after all other options have been considered.

Maybe you can relate to Thomas in that first resurrection appearance?
Maybe you’re feeling some foreboding joy yourself these days?
Maybe joy hasn’t felt like something you can experience?

The good news is that this season of Easter lasts for fifty whole days – all the way until Pentecost.
That’s 50 days to let the joy sink in.
50 days to begin to believe that love *ultimately* does win,
even if we see evidence to the contrary in the moment.
50 days to greet the Risen One,
And to let this Easter joy break our hearts open again.

Amen.

\(^2\) https://bookpeopleblog.com/2011/04/05/poem-of-the-day-manifesto-the-mad-farmer-liberation-front/