



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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The Room of Rejoicing

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Easter Sunday was a weird day for me. I don't know about you, but in my opinion, two weeks ago was one of the most beautiful Easters in recent memory. The weather was so gorgeous that when I took my dog outside, she didn't want to come back inside. She just wanted to soak up the sunshine and the 70-degrees. Then, I got to church, and it was packed. We had an awesome service at Westminster. There was a palpable optimism in the service. We sang songs about life, hope, the defeat of death, peace on earth, etc. Suffice it to say, I was riding high as I left the church.

But then I got to my car. I turned on the radio, and my euphoria just vanished. News was streaming in from Pakistan, where 69 people were killed in a suicide bombing while enjoying a nice day at the park. Making matters worse was the fact that the attack intentionally targeted Pakistani Christians who were celebrating the holiday. This heavy dose of apparent reality had a lasting effect on me throughout the day. My excitement turned into despair. My cheer into cynicism. My joy into misery. As the sun set and the temperature dropped, I found a perfect image for my soul in my dog, who ran outside expecting another opportunity to enjoy the nice weather, but was met instead by 30-degrees and darkness. As she looked at me, shivering and confused by the sudden change in the atmosphere, I thought, "Yep. I know how you feel."

We Christians go all out in celebrating Easter Sunday. And rightly so. After all, we believe that the resurrection brought new hope to our world. But when we go outside and look around, we can't help but feel like the world hasn't changed at all. The world is *still* a scary place. People get still sick and die every day. The powers that be still seem to be in charge. And we are very much aware that being a Christian does not make us immune to trials and tribulations.

While American Christians have largely been sheltered from religious persecution, it is the norm for some of our brothers and sisters in other parts of the world. But even though we may not exactly share that experience, we too can feel the tension between the good news of Easter and the bad news we get in life. We know what its like to have our passions ignited on Easter, only to be snuffed out when tragedy strikes. We know what its like to share stories of God's grace, only to be snubbed by people who don't take our message seriously. We know what its like to trust that God is in control, only to doubt God's providence when our lives are flooded with chaos. We know what its like when "life happens" and robs us of our joy. For many of us, Easter *does* warm our hearts. But our hearts are cooled when we see stuff in the world that suggests that the resurrection didn't make a difference. In our experience, the rejoicing of Easter is only a brief reprieve from the darkness that looms over our world.

The apostles of the early church were very familiar with the anti-Easter appearance of the world. In our text today from Acts 5, the apostles stand trial before the high council of Jerusalem. They're being accused of stirring up trouble by preaching in Jesus' name. The religious authorities have had enough of the apostles' message. Far from being convinced by the stories of the empty tomb, the world was still operating as though nothing happened. The priests say, "Stop!" The apostles say, "We can't stop!" So the council has them flogged – an absolutely brutal punishment in the ancient world. In the face of such overwhelming hatred and persecution, no one would blame the apostles for feeling discouraged.

But then something weird happens. After the beating, the apostles are leaving the court room, and they're... rejoicing! They are overwhelmed with gladness! And this isn't some sort of "put on a happy face" kind of thing. This is sincere joy! How can they do this? Don't they know that they should be feeling

sorry for themselves? Well, no, they don't feel this way at all. In fact, the text says, they were honored to be dishonored for Jesus' name. They were thanking God that he counted them worthy to undergo persecution. This is weird stuff. How did the apostles get to this point?

I'm convinced that the apostles' ability to rejoice is rooted in the fact that they saw something that totally reoriented their vision. They saw something that peeled away the scales from their eyes, so that they were able to look at the world through a radically different lens.

It's what they saw in the locked room on Easter Sunday.
It's what they saw on the shores of Galilee.
It's what they saw on the Road to Emmaus.
It's what Paul saw on the Road to Damascus.
It's what Stephen saw as he was being stoned.
It's what millions and millions of Christians throughout the centuries have seen time and time again.

Peter tells us what they saw when he says, "God raised up Jesus – whom you had killed – and exalted Him as Ruler and Savior of all!" The resurrection of Jesus invited the apostles to see the world in a brand new way – one that enabled them to rejoice in the midst of suffering. They didn't ignore their suffering. But the resurrection compelled them to look through their suffering to a reality that existed beyond their suffering.

I think the perfect description of what they saw in Jesus' resurrection can be found in the Revelation 5. That passage depicts the majestic throne room of heaven. God, sitting on his throne, is surrounded by angels, humans, and creatures – all of whom are praising him in one accord. All of a sudden, God pulls out this sealed scroll, which represents his Almighty power and will. An angel looks around for someone to open the scroll, but no one is found worthy enough to do so.

That is until a figure approaches: the Lion of Judah! He emerges triumphant, approaching the throne with a confidence reserved for God alone. But as he approaches the throne, the lion turns out to be a slaughtered Lamb – His body broken and his wool stained with his own blood. Anywhere else, it would have seemed as though the Lamb had been defeated, but in this heavenly throne room, it is the slaughtered Lamb that emerges triumphant. He takes the scroll, breaks it open (thus confirming his victory), and everyone in the room breaks out in joyous celebration:

Worthy is the Lamb that was slain
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might
and honor and glory and blessing!”

This is what apostles saw, and this is why they were so honored to undergo persecution. They were counted worthy enough to follow the path slain Lamb. That’s not a realization that they gleaned from their terrible situation. Rather it was this vision of the throne room that led them to reinterpret their situation in the light of God’s reality. The apostles acted the way they did in the court room of Acts 5, because they had experienced the throne room of Revelation 5.

It’s kind of hard to wrap our heads around this, but I think of it like this: A few months ago, Kelly and I went with some friends to the “Escape Room” on the Southside. If you’re not familiar, the “Escape Room” is an amusement attraction that specializes in “escape games.” Basically, they lock you and your friends in a room for an hour, and to win you have to solve puzzles to find the code to unlock the door before the hour is up. And there are clues scattered about the room, so have to get creative and rummage around. We actually did manage to win the game with less than two minutes left on the clock. It was clutch. And the adrenaline was running so high that when we won, my friend – this big, construction worker –

kicked open the door and roared in triumph. You'd think the rest of us would be like, "Calm down, man, it's just a game." But trust me we were just as excited as he was.

We were so hopped up from playing the game, that when we got outside, we were still very much in game mode. This was late on a Saturday night in the Southside, so there were tons of people around looking to drink and party it up. Meanwhile, we're over here like, "We want to do more puzzles!" We went to a restaurant afterwards, and we're looking for clues behind the TV, under table, in the bathroom. We didn't exactly blend in with everyone else. And the reason we look so weird was because our time in the "Escape Room" taught us to see the world in a fresh way. It's a silly illustration, but the point is that we emerged from the "Escape Room" with a passion, energy, and vision that we didn't have before we went in.

I think something similar happened to the apostles when they saw the resurrection. The risen Jesus showed them what life looks like in the heavenly throne room. When they figuratively entered the throne room, they could see that it was the slain Lamb, not the butchers, who ruled the universe. When they entered the throne room, they could see that God's victory is not won with violence, but comes when he dies on a cross. When they entered the throne room, they could see that God's final word to them was not one of condemnation, but of salvation. When they entered the throne room, they could see that their final destination was not the grave, but the loving embrace of God. When they entered the throne room, they could see that at the core of the universe was not cynicism or fear, but thousands and thousands of voices rejoicing. The world as God sees it looks like this throne room, and one day, the whole world will be conformed to this vision.

In the resurrection, we have been given access to this throne room. In the power of the Holy Spirit, God has made this

joy is available to us. We have all been invited to come and join the celebration. That was my problem on Easter Sunday. I so quickly forgot the truth of the gospel that I had just experienced in church. How foolish of me! If I had interpreted the news in the light of the throne room, my joy wouldn't have been taken away. Instead, while I still would have mourned the loss of life, I would have remembered that the Lamb who was slain sits on the throne. And those 69 martyrs are not forgotten in their graves, but are now around the throne, rejoicing that God counted them worthy to suffer for the sake of Jesus' name. That is what is real, that is what is true, this is why it is possible to rejoice even when it doesn't make sense to the eyes of the world.

So I urge you to keep your eyes fixed on the throne room. Watch as Jesus, the Lamb of God, bears your sin and shame, your pain and your suffering, upon himself. Watch as the darkness of the world breaks Him, and brings him down into the grave. But also watch as, even after all of that, he stands in victory, and "turns your mourning into dancing, takes off your sackcloth, and clothes you with joy." Come and join in the chorus of heaven. Let yourself be swept up in the praise of the Lamb. Let your vision of the world be wholly shaped by your witness to the throne room. Let your actions be guided by the desire to see all of creation reflect the truth of Easter. For when you do so, you will emerge with a Spirit-given passion, the boldness of a martyr, and an unsurpassable joy.



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