

**Participating in Joy**  
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**Easter 2020**

Will you pray with me? *O God, while it was still dark, the women came to the tomb, hesitant and hopeful, and so we come to you today. Surprise us here with your mercies. Awaken us from despair. Resurrect in us a joy gone cold, that we might once again know the power of your love made new. Amen.*

We need poets in times like these. Their turn of phrase, economy of words, the way they wrestle gold from ruin. A poet can sear your heart with truth, make you laugh out loud, then shock you with a close that sticks like a stubborn burr. I need the poets right now. They understand, like the prophets of old, the already-not-yet-ness of our current situation. Already we live and love, already God has arrived, in Jesus, to share our common lot. And yet, we live with fear. We act out our pain on others. We suffer. We die. The poet embraces it all and in some genius stroke of alchemy transfigures our suffering into beauty.

To quench my longing for poetry, I sometimes begin the morning with [Poetry Unbound](#), a potent podcast narrated by Irish poet Padraig O Tuama. This week included the first poem speaking to our pandemic reality. As O Tuama dissected a poem, he told the story of a friend who works in an Irish hospital. There they wash their hands, she said, with industrial floor cleaner, because there's no more hand sanitizer. Her hands are pink and chapped. Yet just as my anger kindled over the conditions in which medics must work all over the world, he added a detail to the story. At the end of every shift, the shift manager now tells all the workers, "I love you." Imagine it—the nurses and chaplains, the custodians and doctors—those gathered now around sickness and beating back death without proper protection, the shift manager looks at them and simply says, "I love you." He says it because he does not know who will fall ill or even die. He says it because together they are the very instruments of compassion, the beating heart of courage, and it's important that they know. He loves them.

This Holy Week journey is like nothing we've lived through in our lifetimes. More than 1.7 million sick and over 100,000 lost have upended all our plans of lilies and pancakes, bowties and brass. This year we cannot pretend there's any other way to Easter than through the anguished hours in Gethsemane, the torture of the cross. This year Lent came for us and laid bare our fragile mortality. And yet, joy does not begin on the other side, it does not lie down and wait for resurrection. Joy, poet [Ross Gay](#) insists, "has everything to do with the fact that we are going to die."

I'm glad he said so, because there's a question tumbling around in our minds right now, a question pressing on the lungs of people all around the world—how can we know joy in a moment like this? Gay flips the question on its head—how can we not know joy in a moment like this? To understand that we are all suffering, some disproportionately, to understand that not one is immune calls forth a raw tenderness, if we allow it. A tenderness to call off the feud, to forgive some old breach, to embrace your lover, to really see your child, your grocer, your neighbor, and know we are in this thing together. "Joy, for me," Ross Gay says, "is those moments when my alienation from people shrinks and everything becomes luminous."

One of his students put it this way: "What if we joined our wildernesses together?" Ross Gay instructs, "Sit with that for a minute. That the body, the life, might contain an unexplored territory, and yours and mine might somehow meet, even join. And what if the wilderness," he asks, "is our sorrow. What if we joined sorrows, I'm saying. What if that is joy?"

What if this is joy? Our hearts stitched together like some giant patchwork quilt, joined precisely in those places of proud flesh, dark cords that once were wounds? And that place, that place where we are all stitched together, where every river of sorrow flows is the sacred heart of

Jesus, where human and divine love meet, where together we proclaim a love stronger than death. Last week I spoke of participating in one another's sufferings. Today we cross over to participating in one another's joys. Not frivolity or vapid happiness, but enduring joy. The kind of joy that cannot be parsed from mortality. The living, breathing, irresistible joy that faces death full on but refuses its finality.

This week I wondered about Jesus' joy. When I imagine Jesus through the stories we hear in the Bible, I envision an intense gaze, colorful stories, sometimes accompanied by scathing, prophetic words. I imagine eyes that seek out those on life's margins, hands gentled by healing, the dusty feet of a sojourner unafraid to walk in the wilderness. I believe he was a master debater, witty and charismatic, enjoying his banter with religious leaders. But joy? I wish we had more of that reflected in the gospel stories. My experience is that those living on life's margins have cultivated a sense of humor and unshakeable joy that perplexes those with more privilege.

Jesus enjoyed hanging out with street workers and lepers, women of ill repute, commoners, and kids, so I suspect he laughed a lot more than was recorded in our sacred text. Maybe he winked as his words cut down to size some authority on his high horse. Maybe he traded jokes with lepers and paralytics. Maybe he enjoyed the raised eyebrows around the fancy dinner table when the women who followed him spoke out of turn. Maybe when he called the children to come to him, they wrestled like puppies and when he came up out of the Jordan River gasping for air, the joy written on his face was unmistakable, a joy recognized in his dancing eyes when he appeared, resurrected, to the disciples.

His final week, with death breathing down his neck, was too precious not to know joy. We behold such tender moments in this week. The woman who anointed him with expensive perfume in an act of scandalous devotion. The intimacy of washing the feet of the disciples. The hope he poured out on the criminal dying next to him, the way he created family, even as he agonized on the cross, giving his mother and the disciple he loved to one another. A tenderness borne out of the brief passage of life and proximity to death. A living, breathing joy.

But the tenderness didn't end there. The Pharisee known as Joseph of Arimathea wrapped Jesus' body in linen, after tenderly removing it from the cross. The women, armed with ointment and nothing but hope to push past the heaviest of stones. Crucifixion was an act of terror, a tool of oppression. It invited bystanders to participate in cruelty and humiliation. But the acts of tenderness, oh how they shine this year. The joining of sorrows, the banishment of alienation, the sense that though we can't quite see the path ahead, though we sometimes disappoint each other, we are in this thing with Christ and we cannot rinse divine love from our hearts.

We selected the gospel according to Mark to tell our story this year, because—like the times in which we live—he refuses to sugarcoat it. He revels in irony and lands squarely in ambiguity. He protests a tidy close. The short ending of Mark's gospel which Priscilla read this morning was disbelieved by early Christians. So uncomfortable were they with its betrayal that they opted to add a longer ending that provided, well, some closure, for the Markan ending goes utterly wrong. The women, upon glimpsing the miracle of the resurrection, are terrified. Charged by an angel with being the first to share the good news, instead they seal their mouths like tombs, because, Mark tells us, they are afraid. Even in the longer ending, it goes all wrong. The women tell, but no one believes. Jesus appears to two disciples on the road, but they refuse to see. Finally, Jesus upbraids them, that's literally the word we find in the NRSV translation, for their lack of faith and stubbornness. This whole thing is a mess and one can't help but pity the God whose plan it was to entrust good news to humanity.

But this, you see, is where the joy enters in. Because those of us receiving the story already know. The good news pursued those who loved Jesus with an unbreakable joy. It found them out, spread like wildfire, and somehow reached the shores of our lives today. In the irony and ambiguity

of Mark's ending dangles an invitation: how will we live the story in these times, in our own lives? Will we seal our hearts like tombs out of fear? Mark's unfinished business is ours to complete.

And for Mark, it wasn't about the great commission and traveling out to the ends of the earth to share this news. Mark's abbreviated ending does not toss the disciples into ships or set them upon highways, rather it says, to the women: return to Galilee, back where it all began. Jesus will meet you there. This Lenten journey tells us this as well. Go back to your home, to your family, to meals around a table, circle back to the start as if you are seeing it for the first time with resurrection eyes. With tenderness, with abiding delight, even as death breathes down our necks, let there be joy. For nothing can stop God's rising. Nothing can separate us from the love of God made known in Jesus Christ. Not illness or distancing, not things present or things to come, not powers or principalities, not injustice or oppression, not anything else in all of creation can alienate us from the love of God made known in Jesus Christ, a love stronger than death. A full-bodied love dusted with resurrection power. And so together, let us proclaim this truth. I invite you to unmute now as we speak together Easter's good news greeting:

Christ is risen!  
Christ is risen indeed.  
Christ is risen!  
Christ is risen indeed.  
Amen.