

Sunday, April 5, 2026
Easter Sunday
The Rev. Jack Alvey

Surprised by Joy

Over this Holy Week, I've been exploring with you the theme of joy. On Maundy Thursday, we saw how joy begins in love, how obedience becomes joyful when it flows from the love Christ has already given us.

And on Good Friday, we asked how a day like that could ever be called good. Where is the joy when everything seems lost? And we said that joy was still there—but hidden. Like a seed buried in the ground.

And now it is Easter. And while we have just sung *Jesus Christ is Risen Today* joyfully and triumphantly, while you coming wearing your Easter best, while the flowers are so beautiful they are practically singing, the first Easter morning does not begin so dramatically. The first witnesses come to the empty tomb in the quiet predawn hours. The only songs of praise came from birds quietly chirping in the distance.

That first Easter morning begins with Mary weeping. It begins with confusion, fear, and sorrow. The stone is rolled away. But the bells are not ringing. Alleluias are not being sung. Mimosas are not being poured. The shadows of Good Friday still linger. Joy remains hidden.

As much as we might wish otherwise, God is not Mary Poppins. God does not simply snap her fingers and make everything instantly right again. Because the joy of Easter is not that kind of joy.

Even when Mary sees Joy staring her in the face, she does not recognize it. She does not recognize the one she has followed for three years. The one whose feet she anointed. The one she watched die on the cross.

She thinks he is the gardener. But then again, maybe he is a gardener of sorts. Jesus does, after all, plant God's Word in our hearts and into the world. Jesus is Word made Flesh, the one who was crucified and buried just a few days ago.

The One who brought joy to the world is now buried and thought to be lost. Mary's vision is still clouded by the tears of Good Friday.

And then Jesus speaks to her. "Mary," he says.

And slowly, everything begins to change. New life begins to emerge in Mary. Her eyes widen just a bit. And then something dawns on her – the Son of God who is risen from the dead is right there!

And I imagine she weeps again. But this time, these tears are different. They are tears of joy. Doesn't joy sometimes begin like that? With tears? Joy emerges from the deepest, darkest depths of our soul. True joy grows through the layers of our pain and disappointment and failure.

The kind of joy resurrection brings is not found in a sudden burst that changes everything instantly. But it is a joy that grows in us and in the world around us slowly and surely. Joy's goal is not speed but strength.

Resurrection joy grows in us until we feel it strengthen every fiber of our being, until our tears work their way into quiet laughter, and finally into shouts of praise and thanksgiving.

The joy of Easter is something that reveals itself over time. After all, Easter is not just a day. It is a season. Fifty days long.

Joy grows on us. You might say joy dawns on us. That said, I hope this is not the last Sunday before your summer sabbatical from church, but just the beginning of your experience with the surprising joy of resurrection life.

During our *Living Well Through Lent* series, I came across a line from Alice Walker that has stayed with me. She said, "Expect nothing. Live frugally on surprise." And I wonder if that is what Holy Week and Easter are teaching us—not to live by expectation, but to remain open to surprise.

I've noticed how often our expectations can make way for our disappointments. We expect things to go a certain way. We expect life to be fair. We expect God to act according to our timeline.

And when those expectations are not met, we feel let down, unheard, unseen. It can feel as if joy is buried. And those feelings are certainly real and understandable.

But I wonder how resurrection joy might change our perspective. How does resurrection joy shift us from expectation to surprise? How might living this way move us from focusing on what is missing to focusing on what is given? How might we go from expecting a wish-dream to receiving the God-given reality? From what is not to what is?

I'm not saying we should pretend things are fine when they're not or simply accept the world as it is and say, oh well. It's about learning to trust that God is already at work, even here, even now in the darkest of places.

Many of us know what it's like to live a little braced for disappointment, and how hard it can be to stay open to surprise.

Resurrection makes possible this shift from disappointment to surprise, from bracing to openness, from sorrow to joy.

My childhood preacher, John Claypool, spoke of this shift in his book *Tracks of a Fellow Struggler*. The book features a series of sermons given during and after his daughter's illness and death.

In the midst of all that grief, he found himself asking the same question many of us ask when everything falls apart. How can life possibly go on? And what he came to believe, what he held onto, was this.

Life is Gift.

Not a gift. Not one gift among many. But Life itself is Gift. And that realization changed how he saw everything.

I wonder if what he discovered is the same thing we are discovering this week. Joy is not something we chase or manufacture. It is something that grows in the life we are given.

If life is Gift then life is not something we control. It is not something we earn. It is not something we are entitled to. It is not something we deserve. Rather, life can only be received. Life is something that comes to us. Not because everything in life is good, but because our God who is good is always at work even when we can't see God at work.

And so the deeper question is not whether life is a gift, but whether we notice life as Gift, all of it, the Maundy Thursdays, the Good Fridays, the Holy Saturdays, the Easter Sundays.

Speaking from experience, it is easy to miss the life that is right in front of us. It is easy to stay braced. To stay closed. To expect disappointment.

But the good news of the empty tomb tells us that we can begin, slowly, to receive life as Gift. And learning to receive Gift is where joy begins to grow.

While noticeably hidden these last few days, the joy we thought was lost has been growing all along.

Joy was planted on Thursday night and buried on Friday, covered over by suffering and grief, by our guilt and shame, by our disappointments and failures, by our fear of not having enough, hidden from sight.

It felt as though everything was lost.

But now, on Easter morning, that joy begins to rise. Not all at once. Not in a way that erases what came before. But in a way that both uses and transforms what came before. In God's hands, nothing is lost. That is what resurrection does.

Resurrection does not take away Good Friday. It does not take away suffering and death. Resurrection changes how we see and carry suffering, pain, loss, disappointment.

As we witness in the first Easter morning, the world has not suddenly become safe again. Death is still real. The Romans are still a threat. Mary's tears are still there.

But something else is real too. Something stronger than sin and death. Stronger even than the mighty Roman Empire.

Resurrection.

Jesus is raised from the dead. The tomb is empty. Joy to the world begins to sing again. But life does not begin to change for Mary until she hears Jesus call her by name.

The tomb is empty. Resurrection is real. But she is still weeping. Still confused. Still standing in the dark.

Until she hears her name. And everything begins to change.

Because the truth is, even on Easter morning, joy does not always come easily.

The question for us this morning is not whether we feel joyful. Because God knows, even on this Easter Sunday, we are all still carrying the pains and disappointments of this life.

The better question is this. Are we open? Open to what God is doing even if we do not yet see it? Open to the possibility that something is growing beneath the surface? Open to a joy that has not yet fully revealed itself?

And being open to that gift begins in a very simple way. By listening for the voice of the one who calls us each by name.

And that is my prayer for you this morning and this Easter season. That the resurrection of Jesus speaks to you and opens your eyes. That you might begin to see what you could not see before. That even in the places that feel empty... that you will be surprised with tears of joy.

Alleluia. Christ is risen! Amen.