

Words Forming Witnesses

Psalm 114 & Psalm 86:4-5
(Hymns – 248, 243, 260, 258)
March 31, 2013

Glad Souls

This is the day that made it possible for all souls to be glad.

That gladness,
and the good, forgiving, and steadfast love of God that produces it
breath after breath, moment by moment,
emerged with renewed power and expanded scope
that first Easter morning.

That's what I want to focus on for a few moments this morning –
the real impact of Easter on our lives today,
in this time and in this place.

The Easter story is pretty simple and straightforward.
It may not be as well-known as in the past,
but its simple power remains
for those who have the openness to hear.

Jesus of Nazareth had been executed by the Romans,
with the collusion of the Jewish religious authorities.
The reasons were a complex mix of blasphemy and treason,
all related to Jesus' claim
that he was the promised Messiah,
come to restore God's Reign of *Shalom* or Well-Being.
His disciples were allowed to bury him in a tomb in a garden
Immediately after the crucifixion.
The Romans placed a massive stone over the entrance to the grave
to ensure that no desecration or deceit happened.
Some of Jesus' grieving disciples,
mind you, only a few women,
came to the garden, found the stone moved away,
and the tomb empty.
When Jesus approached them,
they did not recognize him immediately.
When they did, they were astonished and overjoyed.
They rushed off to tell other disciples
who were huddled in fear in the room
where they had shared the last supper with Jesus.

More disciples encountered the risen Jesus
on the road to Emmaus.
They did not recognize him either until he broke bread with them,
just as he had at the last supper.
He met with others on the shore of the Lake of Galilee.
He put Thomas's doubts to rest.
Then he ascended, leaving his disciples with the commission
to go and witness to what he had said and done
throughout the world
so that the world would be filled with glad souls
living in intimacy with their Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer.

That's the purpose of this whole event.
People discovering that God has worked a miracle
that gives them glad souls
that enable them to flourish in a nourishing relationship
with God, with others, and with themselves.

I have no idea how God did that.
I think it is beyond human knowing.
All of the speculation about what could and couldn't have happened
seems a bit misguided to me.
As the early Christian leaders said repeatedly,
this makes little sense unless you see it in the light of faith.
Reason alone cannot make sense of it.
Understanding the power of Easter begins
by accepting God's love as the most powerful force in the world.
It continues by realizing that love embraces you
and that gladness of the soul arises from living in gratitude for that love.

Let me say a brief word about what I mean by 'soul.'
Human beings are made up of energy.
That energy has four dimensions –
physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual.
All of those dimensions work simultaneously,
actively inspiring and shaping our lives
breath after breath, moment by moment.
The soul is the force that aligns all these energies
into the attitudes and behaviours that constitute our lives.
The soul is the place of integration in our beings
where God waits to work with us to generate flourishing lives.
It is where the greatest potential for a life
lived in intimate positive relationship with God, others, and ourselves
can be realized by our choosing it.
But we do need to choose to live in and out of such a glad soul.
Our choice makes the potential a reality in this time and place.

With glad souls, understood in this way,
there are at least three kinds of gladness that I see possible.

First, there is the gladness that comes from knowing that God
has freed you from the fear of death.

Second, there is the gladness that comes from knowing that God
has freed you to flourish in honing all your talents.

Third, there is the gladness that comes from knowing that God
has freed you to contribute those honed talents
to the well-being of God's creation.

I think we live in a culture that is very confused by death.
Huge segments of our economy are driven by the denial of death –
health technology, products promising eternal youth,
More of our economy is driven by the glorification of death –
the arms industry, much of the video games industry, movies and television.
Everywhere you look these days, people are dying violent deaths.
We seemed both fascinated and numbed by it.

Death, from a Christian perspective, is a part of life,
a passage from one form of life to another.
It is the passage that Jesus went through that first Easter.
We go through it in his presence,
whether we recognize it or not.
This phase of our lives is to be cherished,
but its end is not a reason to fear.

In Paul's powerful image, we leave behind the worn and tattered tent
to go to a permanent mansion to be with the community of God,
on the coast of a Caribbean-like ocean with miles of sand beach
and golf courses that make Augusta look like a cow pasture.
A new phase of life awaits in even closer intimacy with God
because of what happened that first Easter.
And we can begin, through the choice of faith,
to live in more conscious intimacy with God right here and now.

The removal of the fear of death
makes the other forms of gladness possible.
Psalm 114 that we read this morning
praises the presence and power of God in the Exodus,
when God's people were freed from the death of slavery
and freed to be blessings to the creation.

That's the basic deal, the core covenant with God.
"I free you," God is saying, "to be blessings.
You all have unique gifts and talents.
Fear stunts the growth of those things I have given you.
Faith in my presence and power frees you to hone them and use them
in witness to my love, the value of others, and the value of yourself."

There is great gladness of soul in serving God, others, and yourself.
We have strangely divided these things in much of our thinking.
To serve God, we think we have to turn our backs on the world.
If we are going to serve others, we think we have to sacrifice ourselves.
If we take care of ourselves, we think we are being selfish.
Those distortions of the great commandment
weaken the gladness God is creating in our souls.
It is when we honour and integrate all three –
loving God, loving others, and loving ourselves -
that we find the flow of flourishing life in all its abundance,
in all its Easter glory.

This is the day that made it possible for all souls to be glad.

That gladness,
and the good, forgiving, and steadfast love of God that produces it
breath after breath, moment by moment,
emerged with renewed power and expanded scope
that first Easter morning.

May it be as powerful on this day for all of us gathered here.

Written and preached by the Rev. Dr. Brian Fraser
Minister with Brentwood Presbyterian Church
Burnaby, BC
www.brentwoodpc.ca