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Saint Thomas Evangelical Lutheran Church, Bloomington, Indiana

If Grace Dances

John 20:19-31

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors were locked where the disciples were, for fear of the Judeans, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples that are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

I took ballet in pre-school, and that was about the sum-total of my dance lessons. I lacked the coordination to advance beyond that. But on Saturday nights, my parents would turn on the Lawrence Welk show, and my dad would try to teach us to jitterbug to the big band music. He said—my dad—the key to the jitterbug was to keep track of his hand, to always come back to it. Eventually, the twirling from hand to hand would dissolve into my sister and I running in circles around him as we moved from right hand to left hand, around the back, and around again. I remember vividly turning from the news—whatever it was, news of wars, conflicts, tragedies—to this little moment of joy for our family. Whatever peace we argued for, whatever change we wanted to see in the world, it was in some part to preserve this. For the record, now we line dance in the kitchen and belt out our favorite tunes on the drive to anywhere. But this joy, I believe, is resurrection joy, is

Easter joy—it is joy that is both a foretaste of a future feast, and a true reality worth savoring now.

I read this week, in a commentary on the Torah edited by W.G. Plaut, that there are eleven different words for dance in the Hebrew Bible. Plaut says, “There were dances to express communal joy, and various biblical passages picture dancing as the opposite of mourning...There were victory dances, petitional dances, dances to celebrate the harvest with gratitude, and, of course, dances were indigenous to wooing and wedding.” As best I can tell, the first mention of dancing in the Bible is in today’s first reading, when the prophet Miriam, Aaron’s sister, takes up her hand drum, and leads the women in singing and dancing. Some scholars think the longer song, the one that Moses sings, is actually an edit—someone thought the great prophet needed more lines. In contrast, I imagine after all the discouragement, fear, and—finally—miracles of that day, he may have needed a nap more than a rousing speech, but the editors didn’t ask me.

But I think what really got me this week was Miriam’s expression of unabashed joy. The pure relief of the crossing of sea, of never again having Pharaoh and the Egyptian army at their back. The amazement at what God had done for them—them, who just days before were slaves. Slaves who worked and ate and slept and bared their backs at the order of their overseers. They now had a freedom without limits, because there had been a sea, but they had walked across on dry ground.

Admittedly, when the dancing and singing wind down, we know the people are going to have to learn—and often learn the hard way—*how* to be free. Within three verses, they’ll be complaining to Moses. Eventually, in their whining, they actually ask Moses, “Why did you bring us out of Egypt?” Eventually, they tell him it was better when they were slaves. Eventually, the people struggle to hold on to the joy of their freedom. The Israelites get a bad rep for their whining, the doubts, these things that have them looking at their feet, rather than following God’s lead.

They get a bad rep, but they’re far from alone. Today’s gospel story begins on the same day as the discovery of the empty tomb. Yet, a mere verse after the joy of Mary Magdalene’s confession: “I have seen the Lord!” the doors are locked, the disciples wait in fear. Do we sit with them? Eventually, do we, too, struggle to hold on to the Easter joy?

When I was preparing to preach, I struggled, perhaps I should set a more somber tone. After all, swirling around us are all these questions: will the fragile cease-fire hold? Will there be hope and safety for those who have sought refuge in our country? Will those who sleep on the streets of cities find dignity and home? How will our community treat those who are in prison? I wonder: is there room in these questions for joy; is there room for something like dancing, and singing?

One great temptation is to treat Easter only as past event. That once upon a time, long, long ago, Jesus was raised from the dead. What a cool story. But Easter is so much more

than an old story. Our confession is that Easter is joy; Easter is a dance, and we're already on the floor. Death, sin, and evil will not have the last say in our lives, in the world. That bright morning was a glimpse of what will be ours, what is to come. Easter is an invitation to let the music get into our bones, to learn the steps of a dance both ancient and new.

And, here I probably sound like some kind of "As Seen on TV" salesperson—"but wait, there's more!" But there *is* more! Because if one temptation is to treat Easter as something that happened 2000 years ago, and is finished, over, done with, the other temptation is to assume that resurrection joy is only ours in the future. That we'll dance when we reach that eternal disco, or something like that. And in the meantime, we put our happiness on the shelf, and add guilt and shame to any premature expression of it. How can we be joyful when there is so much to sad about, mad about, concerned about?

But we believe that this Easter joy is how we make sense of the world. We're not waiting for the eternal disco to start dancing. We dance in the streets, in the kitchen, on the way to anywhere. We see the joy around us, we bear witness to it, we bring it with us, in this and every present moment. We do not blind ourselves to concerning realities, but we recognize them as concerning *because of* all the ways they prevent Easter joy from reaching those who need it most.

We see that in the way Easter ripples into the past, drawing in all the stories and places of God's saving work. Reaching the unlikely but righteous Mr. and Mrs. Noah, Deborah and Jael who hand Israel a victory even when the men have them wait on the sidelines, Jonah who preaches the gospel to the Ninevites even while reeking of fish guts, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, Daniel, and Esther who lead and save their people even when they are marginalized, exiled, and threatened. The news was bad, but the saving joy was theirs, again and again.

Do you see what I'm saying, Beloved? Easter joy isn't just a future thing we'll get to eventually, by and by. It is how we live. We are part of this dance, following God's lead, always clearing the floor so there's room for everyone, more room, and more room. Even here, even now, even with all the unanswered questions that swirl around us. W. H. Auden has a poem about his Anglican self worshiping in an Austrian Catholic church in the shadow of the Iron Curtain. The poem itself is a tangled mess of references to the bleak news of the day, the slow rebuilding of Europe after WWII. But the end is everything, he writes:

about
catastrophe or how to behave in one
what do I know, except what everyone knows -
if there when Grace dances, I should dance.

Amen.