

Singing Hymns of Easter Joy in the Face of Death

January 12, the day over 200,000 people died in the earthquake in Haiti, amidst horrifying scenes of chaos, rubble, broken bodies, anguished cries, frantic efforts to rescue those trapped in collapsed buildings, the most surprising thing that people witnessed was thousands of survivors gathered together in public squares long after nightfall singing Christian hymns. A few days later a CNN film crew was searching for an orphanage rumored to have been repeatedly assaulted by looters, who stole what little the poor children had. The crew was having trouble finding the place until they heard the beautiful sound of the children singing hymns. The broadcast of those children who'd lost everything, lost their parents, had their home destroyed and their meager means of sustenance looted, and yet still singing, was heart wrenching.

What could prompt people facing such devastation to sing hymns of joy and faith? Why hadn't they gathered instead to shake their fists and curse at a God who could allow an earthquake to bring unspeakable suffering to a people already pitifully poor? What could give them such hope in the midst of despair? We celebrate that hope today.

The Christian story begins not with Jesus' birth, not with his ministry, not with his death on a cross, but with his resurrection. The Christian story was first thought by its own primary leaders to be nothing but *an idle tale*. It begins with those women who tragically went to embalm the body of their teacher only to find his tomb empty. Surprised even further by two angels who asked them why they were looking for the living among the dead, they ran to tell the Apostles the amazing news that Jesus had risen from the dead. That very night the disciples met their risen living Lord. What first was supposed by Jesus' disciples to be an *idle tale* became the starting point of Christian proclamation. Michael Ramsey, the 100th Archbishop of Canterbury, wrote,

The Resurrection is the true starting place for the study of the making and the meaning of the NT... for the first disciples the Gospel without the Resurrection was not merely a Gospel without its final chapter, it was no Gospel at all... It is both historically and theologically necessary to begin with the Resurrection. For from it in direct order of historical fact came Christian preaching, Christian worship and Christian belief. (From the 1996 Easter Sermon in Canterbury Cathedral, quoted in 'Anglican Digest', Easter, 1997, p. 60)

Without Jesus' resurrection there would be no Christian story. The power of God overturning death in Jesus is the only thing that made sense of his otherwise tragic story. This was God bringing about a new creation. This was the beginning of a new covenant for God's people. Although we receive the account of Jesus' resurrection as the culminating conclusion of the Gospel story, for those early believers it was the basis of faith from which they could understand and write about the rest.

It was because they met and knew their risen Lord that these same followers who denied even knowing Jesus and ran away when he was arrested, who hid in a locked room, were suddenly emboldened to proclaim him. They faced up to rulers and authorities, they

proclaimed the good news to the whole world, they encountered persecution, hardship and death all because of their faith and trust in the new life they experienced in Jesus. Death could not hold Jesus so those early Christian followers were unafraid.

Is it possible for us today start with the same premise? Death could not hold our Lord Jesus. God didn't simply raise him from the dead as one might miraculously come out of a coma to continue in life. Through Jesus' resurrection God overturned death itself. Jesus is the new Adam. As the Apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians,

Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ. (1 Corinthians 15:20-22)

If we take as the beginning point of our faith that God raised Jesus from the dead, of what should we be afraid? Death is not the final answer. Pain, suffering and sickness, brokenness and despair are not the final answer. Human sin, cruelty, inhumanity, oppression and injustice will not win out over God.

Those faithful Christians singing through their tears gathered in the ruined public squares of Port au Prince knew that despite the worst tragedy imaginable that the power of Jesus' resurrection was the hope they could hang on to. They sang with joy because Christ had risen from the grave. Can we join them in faith and song?

Our Suffragan Bishop Jim Curry was a pilgrim in Mozambique during Holy Week several years ago. He describes how a thousand people gathered on Good Friday evening at the Church of St. Cyprian in Maputo for a worship service of the *burial of Jesus*. Six men carried a black casket up the center aisle of the church and laid it in front of the altar. They lifted the cover and put it off to the side. The Bishop then told the congregation to come forward two at a time to see the one who had died and the one who will be raised from the dead. Two acolytes with arms full of flowers stood at either side at the head of the center aisle. So two by two the people came forward, took a flower in their hands as is our custom when we visit a grave site, and bent over to look into the casket. Bishop Curry stood in line for 30 minutes as two by two people came to the casket and looked in. Finally it was his turn. He took the flower offered to him, stepped forward, and looked into the casket to see the one who had died and the one who will rise to new life. The face he saw was his own.

What a powerful symbol to come forward and see yourself as the one who died and the one who will rise to new life. The Apostle Paul wrote in Romans 6:4-5,

We have been buried with (Christ) by baptism into death, so that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.

Can you see yourself as one who has died with Christ? In his death Jesus embraced our deaths, our brokenness, our suffering our pain. He bore it. He took it upon himself. “*We have been buried with Christ by baptism into his death...*” Later that night Bishop Curry realized that, in addition to seeing himself joined to Christ in his death as an individual believer, that in Christ he was also made one with all for whom Christ had died. Is it possible in Christ to be united with everyone (all people in all places and in all times), in their brokenness, sorrow, sin and death? *See the one who has died.* And see yourself united with all for whom Christ died.

See also the one who will be raised from the dead. As we are joined with Christ in his death we also will be raised with him in a resurrection like his. The promise of that resurrection is not only for life beyond the grave, it is also for life now. As you look in the mirror in that casket see the one who by the power of Jesus’ resurrection is invited to live a new life now. See the one whose sins are forgiven. See the one invited to be reconciled (made right) with God and made right with everyone from whom we are estranged. See the one invited to live a triumphant life. See the one to whom he has promised life eternal. See the one invited to sing with hope in good times as well as when we are hurting and in pain. See the one who will be raised from the dead.

Look in that coffin and see the one who has died and one who will be raised from the dead, and join with those who still sing with Christian hope and courage in Haiti and throughout the world. I think the words of Easter hymn, #196 are perfect for us to proclaim with those who dare to sing their Christian hope in the face of tragedy. (Turn to the hymn in your hymnal and join with me in the refrain.)

*Look there! The Christ, our Brother,
Comes resplendent from the gallows tree
And what he brings in his hurt hands
Is life on life for you and me.*

*Refrain: Joy! Joy! Joy to the heart
And all in this good day’s dawning!
Joy! Joy! Joy to the heart
And all in this good day’s dawning!*

*Good Jesus Christ inside his pain
Looked down Golgatha’s stony slope
And let the blood flow from his flesh
To fill the springs of living hope.*

*Good Jesus Christ, our Brother,
Died in darkest hurt upon the tree
To offer us the worlds of light
That live inside the Trinity*

*Look there! The Christ, our Brother,
Comes resplendent from the gallows tree
And what he brings in his hurt hands
Is life on life for you and me.*

Amen.