

"Resurrection Joy"
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For Stan and Elizabeth Moore

John 20:1-18
San Dimas Community United Church of Christ

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Scripture tells us that *"Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it...for love is as strong as death."* (Song of Songs 8:7,6) The Easter story proclaims a love that knows no beginning and no end. God's love made known to us at Easter is not a casual love; it is not the love of infatuation or even the love of friendship. The love proclaimed by Easter is a love that is tough, truthful, and faithful, a love stronger than death.

The Easter love story is the rare love that somewhere deep within our souls we know as the basis of all that is beautiful about life. We also know that life has elements of tragedy, terror, and loss that produce in some of us an almost automatic withdrawal from the world as a means of survival. But in spite of life's tragedies, there are stories and examples of profound truth and beauty rising from the dead for *"Many waters cannot quench love...for love is as strong as death."* The question for us this Easter is whether we choose to align ourselves with a love stronger than death or whether we will acquiesce to the tragedies of this world that inevitably brings us down and leads us to death. Love stronger than death *or* tragedy, fear, and withdrawal, which will it be?

Holy Week takes us on a roller-coaster ride from the heights of jubilation and expectation through Good Friday despair and then to resurrection joy; it's the circle of life we spoke of last week. That first Palm Sunday as Jesus enters Jerusalem, his polls were very high; the people tingled with excitement and expectation that Jesus' coming into the great city of Jerusalem would turn their world around; they, the oppressed and beaten down of their world, would find freedom and power, and Rome would be driven out and defeated. But Jesus lived for God, not the crowds. His death and all that came after it for over 2000 years was because Jesus loved God and *"Even crucifixion cannot overcome love...for love is stronger than death."*

Women and men who have tried to follow Jesus and live for God have sometimes found the cost of discipleship to be high. Last Wednesday night I watched a PBS special on Martin Luther King's speech at the Riverside Church in NYC, given one year to the day before his assassination. It was a speech that he'd struggled with for a long time because it was a speech that went beyond what his civil rights work had focused on; it even went so far as to criticize those who'd helped the civil rights movement succeed and who'd signed into law what King and others had worked so hard to achieve. The speech was "Beyond Vietnam." He hesitated to give this speech, and only after his integrity demanded that "he could do no other" did he submit to the calling of his task. After that speech his popularity plummeted. On the day of his death, polls showed that

72% of the country and even 55% of African-Americans disapproved of him. So why did King risk his future influence by branching off into foreign policy?

Cornell West said that for King justice, was at the center of all he worked for: he was a witness bearer and a truth teller. If he was to be a man of conscience, a man of compassion, he had to speak. That kind of love for justice is dangerous. That speech cost King: one friend said it cost King his life. He no longer fulfilled the expectations of those counting on him to champion civil rights. Like Jesus, King did not fulfill the expectations of the crowds. But he completed the mission that he believed God gave him to do, and so after his death the witness of his words live on. King loved God and loved justice and so he chose a love that *“many waters cannot quench or floods drown...a love strong as death.”*

We believe that Jesus' love for God was a love stronger than even death on a cross. My mother-in-law, Liz, shared with me an article by the theologian Rita Nakashima Brock, and this article describes the important distinction between the crucifixion, the tortuous execution the Romans used, and the cross. For the early church, the cross was the image of resurrection, the tree of life, victory over death, baptism and the transformation of the world. It was not until the year 950 that the crucifixion was shown in images.

Crucifixion was what the Roman Empire did to non-citizens, lower classes, and slaves; it was such a shameful death that victims' families would not talk about it. Torture preceded it, and the victim was left to die slowly and painfully and then be food for vultures and dogs. Crucifixion was meant to essentially wipe out the person's existence; their names were remembered no more. But out of the early church arose the joy of resurrection because they transformed the story of Jesus' crucifixion from suffering to love. First, they broke the silence: they were not ashamed of Christ crucified, and so they did not give into the shame and terror the Romans hoped crucifixion would impose. And Jesus died without broken bones from the usual torture, and he died quickly, which (back then) meant mercifully. And the women would not keep silent, but took on the ancient role of professional mourners making laments for Jesus: his existence, even in death, would not be wiped out. Rome was completely impotent to erase Jesus from memory, to deny his humanity, or to end his work for justice, healing, and peace. Jesus' life was wrapped up in a love that *many waters cannot quench or floods drown...a love stronger than death.*

The fourth-century Jerusalem church recited the passion stories once a year in the week before Easter during a day-long ritual of intense grief. However, every week year-round, they told the stories of God's incarnation and resurrection. And every evening, they lit a lamp to mark the presence of the risen Christ who hosted every joyous Eucharist celebration.

*The cross signified this life, this ever-resurrected love that had the power to remember crucifixion but not to be defeated by it. (Brock)**

In our world today it is essential for us to remember that life can spring forth from death. How else can we face the tragedies around us? How else can we face the future unafraid? We find our joy in examples of life and love stronger than death that thrive and grow exponentially and so bring hope to our world. In a few moments, while we share the bread and cup, we will hear the song "Love, Rescue Me." This song was recorded by the Omagh Community Youth Choir for the album *Playing for Change*. This choir was formed in October of 1998 in the wake of the Omagh Bomb atrocity of August 15, 1998 in Ireland. Twenty-nine people shopping on an afternoon two weeks before the start of school were killed; over 300 were wounded. The town was devastated. A group of local musicians set up the choir to bring young people from various backgrounds and traditions, Catholic and Protestant, together to sing for peace and reconciliation, and to find healing and comfort. The choir has gone on to receive international acclaim and to reach people all over the world as they continue sing for change. This choir was born from *love and hope that bombs could not drown out...a love for God's world that is stronger than death.*

So today we come to Easter with the joy that "he lives!" We share our stories of family, faith, and love that are stronger than our deepest sorrows. Perhaps you need to hear that the love for your beloved is stronger than death. Perhaps you need to hear that, in spite of the evening news, there are stories and examples of life and love that death cannot kill. The lamentations of poverty, war, or pain cannot kill the love of God who we have come to know in Christ, because "he lives!" *Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it...for love is stronger as death.* Christ is risen! Christ is risen, indeed! AMEN.

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