

HOPE, JOY, LOVE, AND LIFE (Jn 20:1-9)

I found this Easter prayer on my desk. I don't know where it came from, but it speaks well of why we gather in such great crowds on this day.

“Lord, thank you for the gift of HOPE you gave us on Easter morning. Because of you we know that no problem is too difficult and even death does not have power over us.

Thank you for the gift of JOY you gave us when you were resurrected. Because of you we know that no matter how challenging life may be, in the end, we will rejoice again.

Thank you for the gift of LOVE you gave us when you laid down your life. Because of you we know that there is no sin too great to separate us and we are incredibly valuable to you.

Thank you for the gift of LIFE you gave us when you left the tomb. Because of Easter we know this world is just the beginning and we will spend forever in heaven with you.

We celebrate you, JESUS, with hearts full of praise and gratitude for who you are and all you've done for us! Amen.” (Holly Gerth, writer)

We gather together today all over the world for these gifts which have been so generously given to us, not worldly gifts, but heavenly gifts: HOPE, JOY, LOVE, and LIFE. And because of these gifts our souls can't help but sing because they know their destiny and have been set free from the chains of this earth. Jesus Christ is risen today! Alleluia!!!

The biblical understanding of hope is not a wishing for something better, but a belief that God will provide. Joy is not a fleeting moment of happiness but a pervasive sense of elation regardless of the feelings and the circumstances. Love is not an infatuation with another person but a total giving of ourselves for the well-being of others. Life is not something that is limited to our physical existence but a spiritual existence stretching beyond time and space uniting us with all of creation.

This year seems to be a difficult year for so many of us; I know it is for Mary and me. The falling economy has put so many people out of work for no reason of their own, and the ones who are left go to work each day in fear of losing their jobs, too. We don't know when things will turn around, as we watch our retirement savings dwindle into useless paper. There are no guarantees when it comes to finances in this world; the

seemingly safest investments are nothing more than paper and chaff in the wind. We hear of so many people struggling with their health. Mary, my wife, has been struggling with her eyesight. We have been through a couple of surgical procedures already and are facing more in order to restore complete sight in one of her eyes. The thought of losing your sight can be very frightening. There are no guarantees when it comes to our health or physical well-being; one moment we can be in perfect health and the next moment we might be facing some difficult decision about our ability to survive. We never know what is happening within the intimacy of a marriage relationship; one moment a couple can appear to be the happiest, most compatible people in the world and the next we discover that they can't live together. Three of our children are going through separations in their marriages, and the pain of watching your family break apart in front of your eyes and not be able to do anything to save the marriages is gut-wrenching. The world we live in is so full of uncertainties despite our desire for assurances; it is so full of untold horrors despite our need for safety; it is so full of darkness when we want light. And so we gather together on Easter to hear the message that there **is** light in the darkness, there **is** hope in the despair, there **is** life after death. Jesus shows us the way to hope and joy and love and life.

In his journey from the waters of baptism to teaching and preaching about the love of God and love of neighbor to his horrible death on the cross and finally to the most powerful display of love in his resurrection, Jesus shows us the way for our lives. Our life is not about us; it's not about this world; each of our lives is about living here and now for the kingdom of God in the ordinary everyday experiences of our lives. There is one who is greater than us and a place which is greater than this world. This life is not merely a preparation for a next life, but is actually a way for us to enter into eternal life here and now by living as Jesus did so that upon our physical death we simply move from this world into the kingdom of God. Jesus has shown this to us.

As hard as Mary and I have tried, we cannot understand why these things are happening, but just like Peter who did not understand when he looked into the tomb, we rely on the faith of others to lift us up. The disciple whom Jesus loved saw and believed, and he was able to carry Peter until Peter himself was able to believe when the Lord appeared to him in the upper room. Despite the hard times we are experiencing this year, our hearts are filled with joy because we know that all of this will pass, that God can and will create love out of the most tragic of events, and that it is simply a matter of trusting in Him and following His will for our lives. The Lord will reveal himself to us, too, in His time.

St. Paul in the Letter to the Romans says that "We even boast of our afflictions. For we know that affliction makes for endurance, and endur-

ance for proven character, and proven character for hope, and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.” (Rom 5:3-5) And in another place in the same letter, he says, “In hope we were saved. But hope is not hope if it’s object is seen; how is it possible for one to hope for what one sees? And hoping for what we cannot see means awaiting it with patient endurance.” (Rom 8:24-25)

Jesus did not come to change the world and rid it of all of its problems; Jesus came to change us, you and me. Jesus Christ is our hope, our joy, our love, and our life. He is risen! Thanks be to God! Alleluia! Alleluia!

Deacon Mike Richard
April 12, 2009