**April 1, 2018**

**The Least Push of Joy**

**John 20:1-16**

I was driving down Preston Ave. on my way home from church when I heard someone on the radio offer a quote to his listeners and his quote remained with me. He was referring to the weather in Virginia like--how it can snow and close schools one day and be 80 degrees a week later. He said, “There is no such thing as bad weather, only inappropriate attire.” (In other words, if it’s raining outside and you forgot your raincoat, you can’t always blame the weather.)

And so as I began to write this Easter sermon while reflecting on a poem by Emily Dickinson, I thought maybe his comment could apply to other things, like reading poetry. “There is no such thing as a bad poem, only how we prepare ourselves to listen to it.” So before we get to The Resurrection of Jesus, I want to invite us to open our ears, hearts, and minds and listen to this short stanza. (It’s actually the one printed in the sidebar of the bulletin.)

*“I can wade Grief --  
Whole Pools of it --  
I'm used to that --  
But the least push of Joy  
Breaks up my feet --  
And I tip -- drunken --  
Let no Pebble -- smile --  
'Twas the New Liquor --  
That was all!”* *Emily Dickinson, 1862.*

**Prayer**

**Gracious God, God of the Resurrection of Jesus, God who has, in the past, lifted us up when we felt dead and brought us back to life, help us now to plunge into the deep waters. Trip us up with your joy and send us out into the world off balance, filled with the new wine. And if, right now in our pew, we are teetering between doubt and making sense of why we came to church this morning, lightly push us out of our heads, gently nudge us away from ruminating over the past, and send headlong into the waters of renewal. Refresh us, reorient our spirits, and restore our joy. Amen.**

**Sermon**

Building trails, planting trees, encountering grizzly bears, and being a passenger in floatplanes and helicopters: these experiences describe my summer job with the US Forest Service in the Tonga National Forest along Alaska’s panhandle, near Sitka, AK in my early 20’s. It was a wild summer.

On a day off, I remember, a group of us taking a Forest Service boat and speeding up an inlet to go hiking into the interior. We docked the boat on a small stretch of beach, but one thing we didn’t consider were the changing tides. And so, after a day of hiking, when we returned to our boat, the tide had come in and now there lay a body of frigid ocean water separating us from our transportation back to camp—about 30 yds. And, being 20 years old, I thought no problem. I stripped down, hoisted my pants and shirt above my head, and began to wade across the water. (Looking back, I suppose I could have left these items on the shoreline behind me, but I was 20 years old and when you are twenty years old, you think you can do anything.) And how many movies had I seen where the hero wades or swims across a river, holding something above his head?!

About 10 feet into my attempt, the water reached up to my neck and the prospect of hyperthermia brought me back to reality. I dropped my clothes in the water and began to swim furiously. The water was so cold, so life sucking, so paralyzing. When I finally reached the boat, all I could do was lie on the deck, wet and exhausted. I was such a fool.

That’s what we do.

We fearlessly wade into the mysterious waters of living; we wade in believing we can confidently and easily make it to other side—we wade into our studies, attend classes, hope one day we will land a good paying job, get married, find the-love-our-life, start a family, have security, and live in endless bliss, but 10 feet in, the chilling water overcomes us, numbing our senses and our dreams. We had it all worked out. We thought we were strong enough, but the icy water drains us of our energy. We try to keep our balance, we try to stay in control, keep our eyes on our goals and objectives, but it’s so hard to keep going…and that’s when realize we have been wading through the waters of grief.

Someone once wrote of grief,

*Grief is like the ocean; it comes on waves ebbing and flowing. Sometimes the water is calm, and sometimes it is overwhelming. All we can do is learn to swim.*

Look at the deep pools of grief the disciples and Mary must wade through on their way to the empty tomb. Mary Magdalene, upon seeing that the tomb is empty, runs to Peter: ***“Someone has taken the body and I don’t know where they have put him.***” And her news sets off, what I would call, a grief-stricken wildfire of emotion. Simon Peter and the other disciple embark on a footrace to Jesus’ tomb and suddenly we’ve gone from a missing body to running a 5 K with the winner receiving…what? The honor of getting their first, I guess?

And when Peter and the other disciple finish their race and look inside the tomb, although they had heard Jesus tell them several times that he would rise again from the dead, they don’t understand or at least, they don’t want to understand. They are up to their necks in the waters of grief. And what do Peter and the other disciple do next? They hang their heads and go back home. Grief does strange things to us. Grief clouds our understanding of the greater picture. Grief and the effects of hyperthermia, I believe, have a great deal in common. Just look at Mary.

Her mind and emotions are so filled with grief, tears pouring from her eyes, the weight of her loss consuming her, that she doesn’t recognize Jesus when he standing in front of her. 20:13-16

*Woman, why are you crying?” the angels ask her. ”They have taken away my Lord, and I don’t know where they’ve put him. “As soon as she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she didn’t know it was Jesus. “Woman why are you crying?” he asks her. “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him and I will get him.” And Jesus said to her, “Mary.” And she turned and said to him, “Rabbouni,” which means teacher. . .*

***and at that moment, Mary’s heart filled with joy.***

Go back to Emily Dickinson’s poem. Dickinson seems to be telling us that she can wade whole pools of grief, she used to that, she carries grief around like a child carries his or backpack to school; she does it every day. But the least push of joy tips her over and sends her stumbling over her feet like someone who has had too much wine. And in that moment, that moment of release, the dawning realization that death has no hold on her, Mary’s grief is jolted, shaken, transformed into joy.

Christian Wiman, professor at Yale’s Institute for Sacred Music, attempts to define the word “joy” for us:

“From Aristotle to C.S. Lewis, we have tended to draw a stark line between happiness and joy: happiness is a disposition or evaluation; we are happy when we experience pleasure and when things go our way.

Joy, by contrast, is an emotion: there is always an element of being seized and a loss of self. . . . Joy: that durable, inexhaustible, essential, inadequate word carries you where it will.”

When Mary hears her name, joy seizes her and her vision clears. Joy grabs hold of her; and joy, that durable, inexhaustible, inadequate word, carries her where it will and she immediately stumbles forward to embrace Jesus.

“Not yet,” Jesus rebuffs her, “Not yet.”

I’m with Emily Dickinson.

The least push of joy sends us to a new place, a place of liberation, a place of protest against cynicism and those who would destroy our joy or substitute money and power for what the soul desires. As Christian Wiman puts it, joy “banishes all the retrospective and anticipatory mental noise we move through most of the time.”

Think about it. The smallest recollection, the tiniest incident, the smallest observation can suddenly transport us to a place of joy. It doesn’t take much.

I saw the unpredictable and impulsive nature of joy played out this past week. Did you notice a change in the weather? We went from a high of 41 on Tuesday to a high of 81 on Thursday. Thursday morning, I went to work wearing a sweater and coat and by afternoon, I was in shirtsleeves. Ladybugs suddenly appeared climbing on our porch screen, flies buzzing, birds singing, flowers blooming, I could almost hear Karen Carpenter singing, “Why do birds suddenly appear….” It was as if nature flipped a switch and UVA students were suddenly running up Rugby Road and down Gordon Ave. wearing shorts and rejoicing. It doesn’t take much to find joy, but that’s not how joy works. Joy finds you.

I still remember one afternoon having coffee with Jack Maddox, a history professor from University of Oregon. Dr. Maddox had a photographic memory. He had memorized the Bible, chapter and verse, as well as The Book of Confessions. He was an intimidating intellectual giant. So while you may have wanted to talk about baseball scores, Dr. Maddox was always up in his head, somewhere above the ether, solving theological and political problems. But on this occasion, he wanted to share with me that he had been going to church on Sundays and noticed how everyone at the church was trying to recruit him, talk to him, and invite him to church events. They invited him to join the church and go out for brunch and stay for coffee hour. And Dr. Maddox described this as a conspiracy. And then he said to me: “It’s a joyful conspiracy at that church, but I think I’ll let them take me.”

At an earlier time, before he went to cross, and after speaking about how he had to leave them but would return, Jesus said to his disciples and friends:

“So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your **joy** from you.”

This is the good news of The Resurrection: that Jesus endured the shame and the cross and rose again that we might have joy and nothing, no one, not even grief can take our joy from us.

It doesn’t take much. Maybe just a slight push or a nudge or the Red Cardinal I announcing to me yesterday that Spring has finally arrived. And when it comes, (and it will come) my prayer and my hope for all of us, is that we would let joy carry us where it will.

**Benediction**

**Hebrews** 12:1-2. *Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely,and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, 2looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake ofjoy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.*