

“Living Stones”

Introduction: I wonder: What emotions have you brought with you to worship today? As the ancient but poignant question puts it: How is it with your soul? Further, what emotions have you heard expressed today, or have you experienced since arriving here? I raise these questions because I am well aware that though Easter is to be a day which brings great joy to our hearts, that joy is not the only emotion we may be experiencing. In fact, as we look back at our worship so far, at our songs and our texts and our prayers, we see that they express a wide range of emotions, from fear to confusion to sorrow, as well as to joy! This multiplicity of emotions is an invitation, I think, to be honest with our emotions as we come to this day, and to see where God might want to take us. I'd like to consider three with you this morning: sorrow, joy, and love.

I. Sorrow

A. Let's begin with sorrow, or as it's sometimes put, weeping. We heard that emotion declared right off the bat in our psalm of approach: “Weeping may go on all night, but joy comes with the morning” (Ps. 30:5, NLT). Why, on this joyful day, did I have us begin with weeping? Because there's a lot of it going on in our world right now, and if we look closely, there was a lot of it going on in the last days of Jesus' life. Jesus is no stranger to tears.

B. Consider three quick snapshots. The first took place just a few days before Jesus rode into Jerusalem on that day we know as Palm Sunday. Jesus had received word that his good friend Lazarus was gravely ill, but Jesus seems to have taken his sweet time getting there. When he finally did arrive, Martha and Mary, sisters of Lazarus, were not too happy with him. “If you had been here my brother would not have died,” both sisters cry out to Jesus on separate occasions. After Mary's cry, Jesus asked where Lazarus was buried. Then he went there, and in the shortest verse of the Bible we read: “Jesus wept” (Jn. 11:35). But perhaps that is one of the most powerful verses as well. It shows that God, in Jesus, knows, and shares, our tears. He is not skipping over the reality that life is often really hard; it very often reduces us to tears. The living God cries, he laments with us, in the face of suffering and death.

C. A second snapshot of weeping can be seen when Jesus, after sharing the Passover meal with his disciples, heads to the Mount of Olives where he prays with them in a favorite garden of his called Gethsemane. Luke tells us that the disciples fell asleep while praying there. Why? Because they were “exhausted from sorrow” (Lk. 22:45), they had become overwhelmed by their grief, their tears.

Do you know that exhaustion? I think, after all we've been through in these last couple of years, and after all that has erupted in just the last few weeks, you probably might. Not only just trying to manage your jobs and your children and your parents and your budgets, but just watching the news can be emotionally exhausting.

Again, we see that Jesus knows such overwhelming emotion. He is overcome by sorrow (Mk. 14:34). His anguish, Luke relates, led his sweat to become like drops of blood falling to the ground (Lk. 22:44). Jesus knows, from personal experience, what those moments are like when our tears get the best of us.

D. A third snapshot of weeping comes right after the followers of Jesus discover that his tomb is empty. After the disciples return to where they were staying, Mary Magdalene (not the sister of Martha) remains at the tomb. The text from John tells us that she was reduced to tears, thinking that someone had stolen the body of Jesus (Jn. 20:11-13). As NT Wright suggests, Mary here is embodying and expressing the sorrow of generations, the long lament that stretches from the experience of Israel enslaved in Egypt, to the loss of the holy city and the despair of those experiencing exile in Babylon, to the frustration at the sight of the poorly rebuilt Temple in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah, to the unhealed hurts that rise to the surface in many of the Psalms. Tears are part of the reality of our existence. Significantly, Jesus doesn't run from them; he identifies with them. He identifies with us.

II. Joy

A. If weeping is where we need to begin, gratefully, Jesus doesn't keep us there. Again, as we heard the psalmist promise, "weeping may go on all night, but joy comes with the morning" (Ps. 30:5). Jesus doesn't leave us in our tears. He comes to Mary after he has risen and gently speaks her name. In like fashion, we hear in Mark's resurrection account that Jesus has a special message for Peter, one that John spells out in chapter 21 of his gospel. Peter, who had been reduced to tears when the impact of his denial of Jesus had hit his heart (Mk. 14:72), was given by Jesus the grace of a new beginning. The "joy" is not that within 24 hours all of our problems will melt away. The joy is that tears and suffering and sorrow will not have the last word. As the last chapters of the Bible detail, when Jesus returns and comes to dwell with his people in his fully restored new creation, "[God] will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away" (Rev. 21:4).

B. The challenge of this is that we're called to live much of our life before the sun fully rises on that new creation. We're called to live in the grey, often murky time of dawn. A term that is sometimes used to describe this space is *liminal*, from the Latin *limin*, meaning threshold. A threshold is something we must cross over on the way from one place to another. The Christian story is actually lived on the threshold. The hoped-for reign of God is *already* here; it has been inaugurated in the figure of Jesus in his resurrection by which God laid the cornerstone for his new creation. But that creation is *not yet* complete and so we live, as Christians, in the liminal time, the threshold space, between the already and the not yet.

III. Love

A. How, then, are we to live there? How might the joy of what lies ahead, of what is promised and secured by the resurrection of Jesus, draw us forward from our tears? That's when I think Jesus calls us to move from weeping to joy and on into love. Drawing on all of those stone images we looked at last week, Peter calls us to be living stones (1 Pe. 2:4-5):

As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him—you also like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood.

We are to live as a "holy priesthood," in such a way that we share the love and the mercy that we (like Peter) have experienced, in order to draw others to the stone of life that is Jesus.

Some amazing examples of this kind of love came across my desk a few weeks ago from Ukraine, a place that is filled with tears but also in which followers of Jesus are living out the resurrection in love.

Here's how one man, Joshua Searle, involved in a mission in the town of Dnipro, describe the "living stones" that he sees:

The horrific events of recent weeks have caused Christians in Ukraine to reflect on what it means to be a follower of Jesus in a time of war. For my Ukrainian friends, words such as 'discipleship' and 'mission' have taken on new meanings. They are no longer academic concepts but have literally become matters of life and death.

The war, for all its suffering and hardship, has given Christians in Ukraine unprecedented opportunities to engage with their local communities. Our charity, Dnipro Hope Mission, is privileged to equip not only 'professional missionaries', but also 'missional professionals' in Ukraine.

One of our partners, Alexander, who before the war was working as a vet, is now engaged full time in delivering life-saving medicines to care homes and orphanages on the frontline in Eastern Ukraine. He often has to literally dodge bullets on his way to deliver essential supplies. In this context, 'discipleship' involves real courage as well as compassion.

Another friend of ours, Roman, worked as a lecturer. He now uses his skills as a communicator and linguist to write very powerful reflections (in English) about the cultural and spiritual changes that he is observing in Ukraine as a result of the war. He thereby helps people throughout the world to grasp the deeper issues at stake in this war.

One of my own relatives, who was working as an opera singer before the war, now finds himself on the streets of Dnipro filling sandbags and digging trenches. He puts his professional operatic voice to good use by singing Ukrainian folk songs and Christian hymns while out on duty. By his 'singing ministry' he helps to lift the spirits of people caught up in this new frightening and surreal situation.

In the village where my wife grew up, elderly women have discovered a new vocation: to bake pies for a local Ukrainian garrison defending the region from the Russian invaders. The pies are sent to a local church, where they are given to Ukrainian soldiers returning from the frontline.

These testimonies of ordinary people doing extraordinary things challenge us to think about what we can do on our own 'frontlines'. Although we might not find ourselves literally on the frontline in Ukraine, all of us are still called to join in God's mission to transform the world into the image of his Kingdom.

Joshua T. Searle, Chair of Trustees, [Dnipro Hope Mission](#)

As we live in this already but not yet, liminal, threshold, space, may the God who weeps with the world give us grace to experience the joy of his resurrection, and in the midst of our tears, live lives of love fueled by that joy.