

Easter Joy

- Happy Easter, brothers! The greatest aspect of Easter Joy is in knowing that Jesus defeated death and promised to raise us up to a new eternal life with him in Heaven. This is reason for a lifelong celebration that should keep us living in joy every minute for the remainder of our lives. But for some reason it doesn't.
- Some of us may remain ecstatically joyful for days or weeks into the Easter season. Others of us lose that feeling of joy within a few days or less. It is a sure thing, though, that at some point after Easter day, we all will get caught up in the trials and routines of everyday life.
- Inevitably, either tribulation or boredom will steal our sense of Easter Joy. This doesn't kill our Easter Joy, though. We will eventually discover that we still have it. But we will have lost the momentum of the Easter jubilation.
- This was the topic of Father Kelly's Easter homily. He pointed out that people are either "Good Friday" people or "Resurrection" people. He also said that all of us vacillate between both, but our objective should be to live as "Resurrection" people.
- While he didn't define the terms, I took him to mean that we alternate between living with competing attitudes of pessimism and optimism; living with fear or living in hope.
- This seems to be the ever present challenge of my life. I seem to fluctuate between positive and negative attitudes; between feelings of sorrow and joy.
- At the beginning of Lent, I prayerfully pondered this issue while on my week-long silent retreat. My retreat director had steered me to pray with John 20:11-18 to reflect on Mary Magdala at Jesus' tomb.
- In John's Gospel account, after Peter and John ran to the tomb to verify that it was empty, they left to tell the others and Mary Magdala remained outside the tomb weeping. She eventually turned away from the tomb and saw Jesus but did not recognize him. She thought he might be the gardener.
- She tearfully implored the gardener to show her where Jesus' body had been taken. Jesus woke her from her grief by simply calling her name "**Mary!**" Mary Magdala instantly recognized his voice and all she said was "**Master!**"
- Jesus then told her to stop holding on to him because he had not yet ascended to the Father. He then directed her to go tell his brothers that he was going to God their Father. Mary immediately went to tell the disciples what Jesus had said.
- When I prayerfully reflected on this scripture reading, I readily empathized with Mary Magdala's sorrow. She had a unique relationship with Jesus unlike most of the other disciples.
- She had been physically and spiritually rescued by Jesus when he cast out the seven demons possessing her. He gave her a new life, which she then gave back to him as a loyal disciple.

- Everything she knew of her own future was wrapped up in Jesus and his earthly ministry. It was no wonder she was blinded by grief when he had been tortured and killed. It was no wonder that she didn't recognize him in her deep sorrow.
- But the second that she recognized his voice, her joy returned fully, and she was able to move forward returning to the rest of the disciples. It seems that her joy returned instantly. I realized during my reflection that Mary Magdala is a model to emulate.
 - First, she knew that her worth, her life's purpose, was due to and owed back to Jesus. Her life was centered on him.
 - Second, she knew his voice. As soon as she heard him and understood that he lived again, her attitude and outlook changed.
 - Last, she was obedient to his voice and quickly acted on what he said. She put her love and hope in him into action reinforcing her revived joy.
- In reflecting on this Gospel story, I saw that I have also gone through this cycle of extreme mood swings, although maybe not as quickly as Mary Magdala. As Father Kelly pointed out in his homily, we all experience suffering in our lives in many different forms. Sometimes it is mild annoyances and sometimes it is devastating news.
- What I discovered about myself is that, as my faith and love of Jesus has grown, I have been able to return from negative thoughts and attitudes much more quickly. This allows me to preserve the momentum of my Easter Joy for a longer period into the liturgical year.
- Father Kelly advised us to go back to our beginning and review our lives in light of the Resurrection. I have been doing this for several years, and it has made all the difference for me. I can now more quickly rebound through cycles of sorrow and joy as Mary Magdala did.
- But coming to the ability to do this seems like something I stumbled into. I wasn't purposeful in doing this initially. It was an outcome of trying to satisfy my spiritual thirst. However, when looking back, I can plainly see a process that I would like to share with anyone who could benefit from it.
- Reflecting on my own life and my gradual transformation over the past 15 years, I now understand as Mary Magdala did that my new outlook on life is due to Jesus and is now owed back to him. My transformation hasn't been as quick and dramatic as instantly casting out seven demons, but I did have demons of my own that I had to confront.
- This couldn't have happened for me until I became a more prayerful person. Jesus can only reveal to us things about ourselves if we are open to a quiet and private discussion with him.
- My starting point was in trying to answer the question "*Who am I?*" This drove me to step outside of myself to categorize my strengths and weaknesses, my prevailing attitudes and habits both good and bad, and consider how I had been influenced throughout my life.
- This was a slow process at first because there were things about myself I was blind to. There were also traits I desired for myself, but these were not the absolute truth of who I was.

What helped eventually was taking a couple of personality tests to more objectively characterize how I thought and behaved.

- The first was the Briggs-Myers Personality Test. It assesses our cognitive approach for taking in information, processing it and acting on it. The second was the Enneagram Personality Test. It assesses our emotional approach for engaging with others.
- If you have never taken these tests or it has been a long time since you have, I would recommend taking them. There are many online sites where you can take these tests for free. Don't let the test results box you into a personality type, just let them reveal things about yourself you may not readily see.
- After understanding my own personality traits better, I was better able to review my life to understand how I became the way that I am. What I discovered were some answers to the age old question "*God, who are you?*"
- While we are undoubtedly products of both our genetic makeup and our environment, it soon becomes apparent we cannot pin everything about ourselves on the influences of our parents and the early life experiences we had. We soon realize that God is at work in our lives from the beginning.
- However, almost all of us do not see that initially, especially in our early years. But our lives are a partnership with God. We clearly have some control and responsibility for ourselves because he has given us free will. Our choices help shape who we become for better or worse.
- But this isn't all there is to us. God has gifted each of us with unique capabilities and character traits that cannot be readily explained by our life choices or environment. Over time, we can begin to see mysterious aspects of life that seem to be God's fingerprints.
- We begin to better appreciate how much God loves us and moves with us throughout our lives. This helped me to understand how much I owe to God for who I am and what I am now able to do for him and his church.
- As I understood how God walks with me through my life, I began paying closer attention to my surroundings to sense his presence. I began to better appreciate and use the gifts of our physical senses and the gift of a sensitive heart.
- I am now even more attracted to natural beauty and tastefully creative man made beauty. I am a more empathetic and loving person. It is in observing, feeling and sensing beauty and love that I better know the "voice" that Jesus uses with me. These things return me to Easter Joy right away.
- This motivates me to prayerfully consider what Jesus is drawing my attention toward. It is normally through these short prayerful moments that I get an understanding of what he may desire of me or for me. I recognize his voice in a unique way just as Mary Magdala did.

- Sometimes what I hear is my own wishful thinking. It is when I act on these prayerful thoughts that I learn whether or not I fulfilled his will or my own. If I am flooded with feelings of joy from any good that comes of my actions, I know it was his voice.
- If the feelings of joy do not increase in me from my actions, then I know these were likely my own passing thoughts of what might be good. But this is not joy lost, just an opportunity to move forward in life on an alternate route on my searching journey toward God. As long as I feel joy in my heart, I know that I am on a path to him.
- It is when I don't feel joy that I stop and reassess what I am doing or confront the suffering I may be experiencing. Depending on the circumstances of the issue and my environment at the time, this realization of lost joy may come within minutes, hours or maybe even most of a day if I am being too self centered.
- Thinking through the suffering of the moment or the day is often all I need to do to understand that my eternal Easter Joy is still present within my heart. I just need to open my heart to let it shine.
- I have gone through this cycle many times over the past few years. The more frequently this happens, the quicker my return to everlasting joy.
- This, brothers, is what I believe it takes to be "Resurrection" people. If you no longer struggle with this, I am happy for you. If you do struggle with this, then I am also happy for you. The struggle means you haven't given up.
- I assure you, God's Joy is in you. All you need to do is surrender your heart completely to him and let him show you!

Peace Be With You,

Marc Barrett