



Round Hill Community Church

Sermon: June 7, 2009

The Quiet Way of Joy, Robert B. Culp

Luke 24:13-35

For whatever reason, I found myself in a rather wistful mood a couple of weeks ago over the Memorial Day weekend. Beyond the tender remembrances of loved ones who have died and the poignant sense of gratitude for those who gave their lives in devoted service within the armed conflicts and wars we have known, I thought about my years of growing up in the small western Pennsylvania town of Punxsutawney ... and about certain things I missed from my childhood.

I fondly thought about Carlino's, a tiny neighborhood grocery store and grill within walking distance of our home, where everyone was known by name and where they served the best-tasting hot dogs and hamburgers in the world. I remembered McLaughlin's Pharmacy where after school my dad and I would often get a chocolate malt and munch on some roasted Spanish Peanuts, as he would ask about my day. I recalled the football and basketball games where it seemed the entire town would turn out and cheer, whether our team won or lost.

Indeed, countless scenes from an American Graffiti type of town came to mind as I reminisced about what it was like "growing up in the shadow of the groundhog" in the 50's and 60's – from Defilice's pizza, the George Brown Community Swimming Pool, Easter Sunrise services and breakfasts ... to bowling on Saturday mornings, devouring peanut butter sweet rolls at Ruth and Harry's Restaurant, participating in the myriad of activities at the local "Y" and, of course, the festive celebrations of Groundhog's Day.

Of all the things I miss from my youth, though, heading the list is the experience of the backyard games we would play in the summer time, especially those games played at dusk. For these were games that not only involved flashlights and hiding the flag, but also enlisted the culinary skills of our moms. I don't know how the tradition started, but every summer, over a two-week period of time, the mothers somehow arranged for a schedule of treats to be handed out at a pre-determined time at the picnic table on our next-door neighbor's patio. It really didn't matter to us kids that our games would be cut short by the ringing of a bell, because awaiting us at the table would be hot fudge sundaes, popcorn balls, peanut butter fudge, brownies and blondies, and all sorts of other goodies.

So there we would sit on the backyard patio, talking about our games and enjoying all the sweets, with all the moms sitting in the background and talking about who knows what. As for what we were drinking, it was the era of soda pop coolers when soda cost a dime, but 12 cents if you took the bottle with you, after having plunged your arm deep into the icy water and pulled out heaven. And there was a rainbow of flavors in such coolers – Nehi Grape, Choc-ola, Mason's Root Beer, Double Cola, Royal Crown, Orange Crush, and my favorite ... Yoo-Hoo Chocolate Drink. And they were all there on those memorable summer nights.

Every once in a while, in a quiet moment, I would be lying down in Paul Stoll's hammock, and our cat whose name was Happy would pounce up on me, curl up on my stomach, and would start to purr. And it was like a little bit of heaven for me as a little boy. Somebody once said that the quality of any given place increases exponentially if there's a good cat in the picture, and we should all be lucky to have a cat take a liking to you.

So ... to have a cat named Happy jumping up onto my lap made a special place even better for me.

Last summer, Kathy and I had a chance to pass through Punxsutawney on our way to Maryland from Chautauqua, and I decided to make a detour to the old neighborhood on Church Street. It just so happened that as we went through the alleyway near my childhood home, I spied some folks working in the backyard. Much to the chagrin of Kathy, I stopped, got out of the car, and walked over to where the father and mother were doing some gardening and their little boy was playing with some model planes. Somehow, as I looked over the backyard, that space seemed so much smaller than when I remembered our playing “world championship” football and softball games, or engaging in exciting obstacle-course croquet matches, or playing “hide-the-flag” in the gathering dusk.

After I introduced myself and told them I had grown up there, they invited me to sit down at their picnic table, and they motioned for Kathy to get out of the car and come join them at the picnic table. They shared with us a small basket filled with home-grown tomatoes, offered us some brownies, and then opened up their cooler and gave us – to my great surprise – a bottle of Yoo-Hoo Chocolate Drink! So, there I was – a bottle of Yoo-Hoo Chocolate Drink in one hand and a brownie in the other. It was quite delightful. But somehow, the childhood joy wasn’t there. Joy, after all, isn’t something you can just order up and recapture easily. In many respects, joy kind of sneaks up quietly on you somewhat like a cat and then snuggles in your lap, even though you didn’t call out its name. You suddenly look down and there it is – come to pay you an unexpected visit.

The Easter story I read from Luke’s gospel this morning is about two disciples trudging down the Emmaus Road after Jesus had died and had been buried in a borrowed tomb. They were utterly downcast as they were reviewing those tragic events that had come to a cross-shaped end on Golgotha’s hill outside Jerusalem. As they were lost in the sadness of those remembrances, they were joined by a stranger who walked with them, who listened to their painful story, and who then, in response to their grief, unexpectedly talked about God’s narrative of grace and love in ways that touched them and warmed their hearts.

They walked and talked until it was suppertime. When they got close to their destination, they asked the stranger, “Stay with us, please, and have the evening meal with us. We have plenty.” Well, those were lean years in that region, and a free supper was nothing to sneeze at. So he lingered with them for a while. When they were at table, the stranger took some bread and gave God thanks for such providential care in giving food to the hungry and rest for the weary. And then he broke the bread and passed it to them. No sooner did they receive the bread and take a bite than they recognized the stranger as Jesus, and, then suddenly, he vanished from their sight. Quickly, they raced back to Jerusalem to share the joy they knew in the presence of the resurrected Christ.

You know, joy tends to visit us when we least expect it – when we’re 10 years old and drinking deep from heaven’s bottle in the backyard with a cat named Happy purring on your lap, or when life sometimes has bottomed out and Jesus drops in, or when we gather on the church campus for a summery picnic after worshipping the Lord, receiving hot dogs and hamburgers fresh off the grill and enjoying the salads and desserts from many a kitchen. It’s a joy that has “cat-feet quiet” (as someone has put it), coming to us in gracious, unexpected ways.

It isn’t that God is withholding such joy from us, for joy is always looking to climb into our laps. Rather, it’s just that joy sometimes needs a summery, Sabbath-like silence and quiet, and thus seldom jumps into the lap of a busied, harried, and noisy person. It’s only when we stop talking long enough to whisper grace and to be still that joy has a way of rubbing up against us, curling up in our lap, and making its precious, even purring, presence our lap, known.