

The Year Easter Came Early

MARK 8: 31-32

Detailed Outline from the Sermon on March 23, 2008

So why did today come so early?

It's not your imagination. The last time Easter was this early was 1913. The next time is 2228 (220 years from now. In 227 years Easter will be on March 22, as it was in 1818).

So who decides? In the Western Church, Easter is on the first Sunday after the first full moon after the first day of spring (a.k.a. the Spring Equinox). Clear as mud?

Here's the real problem – it's tough enough to get ready for Easter. With our two biggies, Christmas and Easter, we generally are so ready for Christmas that we're glad it's over...with Easter...

- ...the date moves around.
- ...Lenten habits have been lost by many or most.
- ...March madness, spring breaks, little league and other activities abound.
- ...People around us are barely joining in and they really don't know what to do with Easter. With Christmas, they know that it's the birthday of an influential figure in history. But how do people with ill-defined faith celebrate Jesus' death and resurrection? Apparently, with rabbits.

Imagine with me

A time, a church, a people, a place,
Because of orchestrations in space,
Too slow to soulfully embrace
The climax to Son of Man's story.

With so little time to reflect or prepare,
To contemplate, mourn, consider or care
Of the sufferings God-Man was born to bear,
They simply were not ready.

No new pastel dresses or bonnets or hats,

No Seder feasts or Lenten fasts,
No family traditions layered to last,
Easter took them all by surprise.

They filed into church and sang the great hymn,
With hallelujahs muffled and dim.
Like pumice rock that can only skim,
Truth lay captive on the surface.

Church labored in languor from the start.
Resurrection strained to play its part.
But how do you raise an uncrucified heart?
It's like raising Lazarus from a nap.

All nature knows from storms and gales,
The rocks cry out, the trees tell tales
Of how real joy and praise prevails
From a tomb, from the dark, from the depths.

The brighter light regales the reflective soul.
The contrast makes elation whole.
So let suffering play its supporting role,
Forever upstaged by hope.

The kinship of joy and pain

Newsweek (Feb 11): *Happiness: Enough Already*

America's obsession with happiness: books, CD's, programs, medications, enthusiasms of every kind designed to make us happier.

One researcher observes, with data, that this can lead to "half-lives" and "bland existences" because of "the craven disregard for the value of sadness."

From *Beethoven* to *Abraham Lincoln* to *Picasso* to *Woody Allen*, flashes of genius were actually born from the depths of melancholies that flirted with depression.

The premise: quit fighting the sadness. Learn to embrace the dark and the deep, and find yourself in a new and richer place. I would call that *joy* – which sometimes gets a bad wrap as a lesser fruit of the Spirit. That misperception is based on bad definitions that

mistake layers of joy for thin happiness. We too often think of joyful people as hollow people, because we've defined joy as mere happiness.

A friend recently *prayed* for me, "Lord, give Keith enough melancholy to bring out his best thinking and his best work, but not so much that it steals his energy."

What a prayer!

Flying a kite: tension, release, attentiveness, focus;
And all of it goes better if there's a bit of a storm brewing.
The mystery is in the wind...

The truth is in the *tides* – ebbing and flowing, falling and leaving the beach barren and dry, and just when it's starting to smell, here comes a new rush of refreshment.

The secret is in the *seasons* – just when you think you can't handle one more downpour, or one more freezing cold morning, here comes spring and life and smells and birds and barbeques.

But I'm not that elastic!

Tell me about it...physical therapy has been teaching me to be more elastic.
The downside – I should have done this earlier! I might never have been injured.
The upside – I'm going to end up in better shape than before. That means new agility and elasticity or it won't happen.

And that's our real issue...emotional and relational agility and elasticity. What am I getting at? Not just learning the art of coping with sorrow and securing its place in the broader of life. Really, the question is am I elastic enough to embrace relationships, to love and give and involve myself. Am I willing to walk knowingly into a lifestyle that's likely to result in some suffering?

C.S. Lewis: Shadowlands, "It doesn't spoil it; it makes it real."

"The pain then is part of the happiness now. That's the deal."

Jesus said, "You must become like children..." Relational elasticity.

Jesus said, "Take up your cross..." Walk knowingly into involvements that will be costly.

Realistic words from Jesus:

"In this world you will have troubles." (John 16:33)

"So protect yourself, pull away, play it safe?" No.

"The son of Man must suffer many things...rejection...death." (Mark 9:31)

"So I think I'll catch a boat to the Riviera!" said Jesus? No.

"We're going to Jerusalem. I'm going to be betrayed, condemned, mocked, spit on, tortured and killed." (Mark 10:33-34)

"Everybody ready to go?"

Peter's reaction to Jesus? He takes Jesus aside. "Never, Lord! This will never happen to you!" In other words, "Lord, I love you and I can't stand the thought of you being anything but happy."

Jesus' words are harsh, "Get back, Satan."

The truth about our lives

We too often live in fear – fear of investing, fear of getting involved, fear of caring too much, fear of getting burned, fear of getting used, fear of getting hurt, fear of pain.

All the while, our coaches philosophize, "No pain, no gain, you bunch of weenies!" And they were closer to the truth than we ever knew. Life begins to teach us that *championships* are born out of drilling to the breaking point and daring to push through the pain until courage and sacrifice become habitual. *Piano concertos* are born out of drilling and daring to push through the mountain of pain (pushing past every temptation to quit) until freedom and pleasure and creativity meet us on the other side. And *maturity* waits for us on the other side of the storm, once we've learned to lean into the pain, embrace suffering until it loses its hold on us, make sacrifice a way of life, and then ride the winds of renewal and resurrection. Jesus says over and over in many ways that the fullest, richest and truly happiest way to live is to give ourselves away.

The Easter Message

Jesus has won the battle over the two big hairy monsters of life. His death conquered sin; his resurrection put death in its place. Behind us. Still, there's more.

"In this world, you will have tribulation, but be of good cheer. I have overcome the world."

"The Son of Man will be betrayed, condemned, tortured and killed, and on the third day he will rise again."

"In this world you will have troubles", but nothing can separate you from God's love; you are more than conquerors if you hold onto Jesus; no pain is wasted in the hands of our God who loves to redeem our hardships like gold out of the fire; He even tells us to dare to pile up the rubble of our trials and tribulations and use them as footing on which to build virtual skyscrapers of joy.

And if that sounds frightening, remember that the story begins and ends with these words, spoken by messengers straight from God.

"Do not be afraid."

And Jesus said the same thing.

"Do not be afraid. Trust in God. Trust in me. In my father's house there are many rooms. If I go, I will come back for you and take you to be with me forever. I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father but by me."