

Dr. Carl L. Schenck
Manchester United Methodist Church
Easter Sunday March 31, 2002
“Dance”
Jeremiah 31: 1-6, Matthew 28: 1-10

I have a confession to make this morning. I hate the way that Christians, and particularly clergy, are portrayed on television. Have you ever seen someone in a sitcom or television drama who was supposed to be a pastor or for that matter a very faithful layperson? Clergy are always portrayed as long faced, grim, spoiled sports. I hate it. And how long has it been since a television drama or sitcom had a character who took their faith journey seriously? We don't see any evidence on television that faith is a real part of the life of real people. And most of the time, as I say, those who are associated with the church are portrayed as grim, joyless sort of people.

There is a story about an archbishop who fit that stereotype. This bishop particularly was allergic to liturgical dance. Just hated it! Well, there happened to be in that diocese a priest who was young and foolish and didn't know any better. When the bishop came to worship at that church, there was a liturgical dance in the service. The dancer made her way down the center aisle waving streamers and banners. It was a beautiful and lovely dance that ended with her putting a lily at the feet of the archbishop. Following the dance, the archbishop leaned over to the young pastor and said “If she asks for your head on a platter, she gets it!”

Well, that's the way we are often portrayed on television. Or sometimes we see the other extreme. The goofy, grinning, smiles of the supposed Christians whose entire theology and spirituality is summed up by saying “Love Jesus and grin and you'll be healthy and wealthy and wise. ” We tend to get one of those extremes or the other on television, but we know that in the real world many real people are on a journey of faith with Jesus Christ. We know that to be Christian is neither being grim and joyless nor being people of Pollyanna, rose colored glasses who do not understand just how difficult life can be. For you see, for all the great joy of Easter morning, Easter is impossible without Good Friday. Easter does not happen except on the heels of the crucifixion. And so, we are a people—unlike the way we are commonly portrayed—we are a people who understand joy at its highest point because we also have faced the long dark nights of Gethsemane. Christians are people who understand the hot burning sun and bleeding death of Golgotha. Those stories of temptation, betrayal, pain and death are the stage settings of the joy and the hope of Easter.

Our two lessons today invite us to think in these ways. The first is a bit of prophecy from the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah. If there ever was an Old Testament prophet who earned the stereotype of being dour, judgmental, gloom and doom, everything is going bad, it must surely have been Jeremiah. Jeremiah lived in the most difficult of all times. He lived in a time when personal immorality and social injustice were almost universal in the society. He lived in a time when people traded their faith in the god of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob for bowing down to all the various gods of their culture. They worshiped the gods who would promise prosperity or even good weather. Oh my, how like that time is our time.

Jeremiah lived in that time and he lived with a burden of the message that God had given him. Jeremiah's message was that those days of unfaithfulness, those days of social injustice, those days of idolatry would shortly come to an end. All across a long career of 40 or 50 years of warning and warning and warning, his message always seemed to be gloom and doom. Except there were moments, there were brief shining moments, when Jeremiah looked beyond the calamity that he saw for an unfaithful people. There were moments when he looked far beyond into the future and he dreamed of a day when—beyond judgment—God would bless God's people. Then Jeremiah, that dour grumpy old prophet, said these words in the name of God, “Again, I will build you up. You shall be built. Again, you should take your tambourines and go forth in the dance of the merry-makers.” You

shall take your tambourine. Ah, what a word for us on Easter! You shall take your tambourines and go forth in the dance of the merry-makers.

Or look at that Easter story which Amy read for us. The story of the two Marys going to the tomb. Can't you imagine how very early on that Easter morning the two women went to the tomb? Can you see their posture and their gait as with hesitation and sorrow and the burden of the horrors of all that they had seen in the days that preceded, they made their way in the dark to the graveyard? Can't you imagine their walk through Jerusalem and the city gates towards the tomb? Their walk must have been the slow deliberate pace of the heavy laden. The spices which they carried, must have seemed to them to weigh a million pounds.

And then they arrive at the tomb and the stone has rolled away. An angel announces that Jesus is risen and instructs them to go back to the city and tell the disciples what has happened. And then as they begin to go back, they see Jesus himself, the risen Lord. Then in their joy, they return to Jerusalem. Picture how different that walk must have been. The scriptures say they ran. I imagine them running and spinning and dancing with all the joy of the moment. How great a contrast it must have been from that weary procession out to the tomb of death as compared to that exuberant, light hearted liberated race, dance back to the city.

Easter's joy is built on the realities of loss and injustice and pain. It springs forth in joy and victory. Victory that comes with a price. Victory that comes over death, after death, not instead of death. One of the psalms of the Old Testament suggests that those who know God would be those whose broken bones dance.

So, I ask you this morning, like the Marys on the way to the tomb on Easter morning, do the burdens you carry seem almost so heavy you cannot walk? We, in our own company and congregation this Easter weekend, have had three deaths visit our congregation. We, in recent weeks have seen many of our members be downsized and laid off. No, we do not come to Easter as people who are immune to life's troubles and hazards. Rather we come to the Easter parade as people who have walked the walk in the dark with the spices to the tomb knowing all the losses and all the troubles and all the pain, but arriving and finding that there in the dark graveyard that joy breaks forth. That life conquers death. That resurrection is the last word.

In Greece, it is the custom on Easter that people tell jokes. Easter is the day for the telling of jokes. Everyone tells their favorite jokes to their friends on Easter because on Easter we know that it is love and life and hope and resurrection that have the last laugh. Unlike those grim, dour folks that we see on television that represent Christianity, we know that there is no joy like this day. We know there is no hope like that day. We know that from all the tombs of our own personal losses and pains from all the separation, from all the heartache, from all the losses of life, there springs forth new life, new days, new hope of resurrection still. We come to this day standing on our tiptoes and reaching for heaven and knowing that on Easter there is only one thing that we can do and that is to sing and to dance. Hallelujah! Christ is Risen! Christ is risen indeed! Let's dance!