

Easter 2023

April 9, 2023

Diane Wong

Good morning and Easter joy and blessings to all of you. It is a wonderful morning, isn't it? Here, in the church, it is bright and cheerful; the music is glorious; the flowers are beautiful, and if you are sitting close enough to the flowers, you might even detect their scent. There is joy and excitement in the air.

Most people want to find joy and happiness in their lives. I read a few weeks ago that Finland is ranked the happiest country in the world in 2023, and Finland has been in this top spot for six years in a row, and that's because Finland has wonderful services for its people, and their health care is practically free, so people in Finland trust in their institutions and communities, knowing they can depend on being cared for in their times of need, so the Finns are happy.

Yale University has been offering a "happiness" course for free for 2 years, and the course is not just very popular, but "mega popular". The course points out that simple acts like making a social connection, or taking time for gratitude, or taking time to be in the present moment" can change how we feel. Now we might be skeptical about learning to find happiness from a course, but what about people who believe they have lived a happy life?

Recently CNBC interviewed a few people who are over 100 years old and asked them to share simple tips for a long happy life. One of them was Dr. Gladys McGarey who is 102. One of the tips she shared is that during hard times in our life, "just don't get stuck. Or if you do, start looking for the light. It's always there. You just have to keep looking for it." Dr. McGarey says.

Keep looking for the light. We hear the term "light" used more widely nowadays. For me, it equates to God, God's presence, God's grace. And Jesus says in the Gospel of John, "I am the light of the world." So one way to experience joy and happiness is that when we are stuck - in challenging times, in a rut, in our dark places, we need to keep looking for God's presence, to be more attuned to it. I think that's what happened to Mary Magdalene early Easter morning.

On that first Easter, early in the morning while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to Jesus' tomb 2 days after he was buried, to perform the rites of burial, according to the customs and for someone she loved. She went to the tomb even though her world had fallen apart, her hopes and dreams had collapsed, with Jesus being crucified.

As if this was not bad enough, when Mary Magdalene arrived at the tomb, she was alarmed to find that Jesus' body had disappeared. This is how the first Easter begins on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, very dark. That's how Easter starts, when it is still dark, when we are in our dark places?

Now we know from the reading that Mary Magdalene ran to inform Peter and the beloved disciple about the disappearance of Jesus' body in the tomb. And the 3 of them ran to the tomb to find out what happened.

After the 2 male disciples looked at what's happening and returned home, Mary Magdalene continued to stay at the tomb, grieving and weeping, and as she was weeping she bent over and looked into the tomb. And in the darkest time of the day, in the darkest time of her life, she had her Easter experience. She saw the light of the 2 angels in white, speaking to her. The light of the angels shattered the darkness of Mary Magdalene even though she didn't know yet this was happening. She questioned the angles about Jesus' body, then Mary Magdalene turned, interacted with the strange gardener, and realized to her amazement that the gardener was Jesus, when he called her by name.

Yes, she felt absolutely hopeless. And even in her desolation, grief and hopelessness, she looked into the darkness, then wrestled with the 2 angels, so to speak, turned a different direction and experienced God. She saw the light.

There are dark moments and places within us. If I look into my own self, I'll see myself falling asleep in the garden, denying the truth out of fear, and failing to be present for the people who need it the most. Sometimes I am afraid to make the brave decisions.

There are plenty of dark places in our world, with countless people and animals hurt, suffering, and dying unnecessarily because we humans fail to be good stewards. And it is easy for us not to look too deeply because the situations

sadden us and we feel so powerless and helpless to rectify the situations. And so we continue with our life as usual.

But the story of Mary Magdalene shows us that in our helplessness, fear and sense of failure, linger in those dark places and look inward, not to be stuck there nor pretend that everything is fine; but to understand ourselves and the situations, and see where God is, and hear God calling our name so we can turn, change our mindsets, see possibilities, and experience our Easter joy, happiness and hope.

God is always present, and we just need to turn a different direction, take a different path to experience God's voice, calling us by name. We need to experience our Good Fridays so we can really experience, appreciate and savor our Easter moments. Maybe you have those experiences.

Earlier in my life, a couple of my friends pursue career paths that were determined by their parents who felt those careers would provide stability and status for their children, e.g., a doctor, lawyer. One friend made peace with her choice, but another friend actually hated what he was doing as a dentist. He wrestled with it every day and questioned his future, his life. He asked me one time if I knew that dentists have the highest suicide rate amongst the medical professions.

It took a long time for him to eventually have the courage to see that it was ok to free himself from his parents' hold and try the path he had wanted. He finally followed the light and gave himself permission to change directions. He came to appreciate much better his life and how he saw himself. He is much, much happier, and his new life is testimony to the new life of the Resurrection.

The former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams says that the Resurrection is more than an idea we talk about or believe as a doctrine. "It's something we become, something we "prove" in the living of our stories. Our lives become the testimony to the risen-ness of Jesus by living a life in which Jesus is the never-failing source of affirmation, challenge, enrichment and enlargement."

This is not always easy to do. Mary Magdalene was able to do it because she knew she was loved by God. When Jesus called her by name, she recognized

Jesus' voice, the one who loved her, cared for her, looked out for her, and sought only her good. And so she turned and answered, and followed Jesus' directions. She trusted in God's love for her.

The brother of Harriet Beecher Stowe, Henry Ward Beecher, a theologian stated, "The strength and happiness of a man consists in finding out the way in which God is going, and going that way too." For that, we need to trust in God who called us by name, who loves us and seeks only our good.

So, no matter our disappointments of dreams unfilled, our worries of declining health or the state of affairs in the world, our grief over the death of someone we love; whatever the dark places we are in, linger in them and look for the Light of Christ, God's presence, hear God calling our name with love. addressing us in a tender voice and reaching out to draw us to Christ to give us peace, hope and joy.

That's why we do what we do on Sunday mornings - our celebration and worship, the preaching, prayers and hymns because through these things God calls us by name once again, shining light in the darkness and brokenness of our lives, bringing us back to God's unending love and into a whole new world filled with divine possibility and the promise of a Creator determined to redeem the world in love. Here we learn to hear God's voice and turn. Here, we are reminded that Christ is risen. Amen.

Inspired by David Lose, Debi Thomas, Sara Miles, Gennifer Benjamin Brooks, Joy Moore, Jim Friedrich