

**Easter Tears**  
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church  
April 19, 2020- Livestream  
Reverend Peter Jonker  
Psalm 126

I chose Psalm 126 for the Sunday after Easter. Maybe a bit of a strange choice. It is kind of a mournful Psalm. Peter are we going back to Lent? We're in the Easter season now! Easter is the season of joy! Well...that's true. But I think Psalm 126 is an appropriate choice for the Sunday after Easter. *That's because there's always a letdown after a big celebration.* That's the dynamic at Christmas. In the peak of the season, you have all sorts of celebrations: the Hallelujah chorus, the Lessons and Carols service, the Christmas Eve candlelight service. It's a season of full churches and beautiful music. Then comes the Sunday after Christmas. The crowd is suddenly small. There are no more trumpets. The liturgy is ordinary. It feels like a letdown. The same thing happens at Easter. Palm Sunday Maundy Thursday, Easter...and then back to ordinary life.

It's not just a church dynamic of course, it's a life dynamic. There is a book I know that has a great title. I have not read this book. I actually have no idea if the book is any good. It's probably terrible. But I love the title. It's called "*After the Ecstasy, the Laundry.*" Isn't that a great title? After the ecstasy, the laundry. I think that's a great title because it's so true to the experience of life. We have these moments of transcendent happiness, we have these moments of ecstasy where we celebrate and hope rises high in our hearts...and then it's back to the laundry. This dynamic plays out in all kinds of places: After the new baby, the diapers. After the Easter dinner, the dishes. After the wedding, the marriage. After the graduation party, the job search. That's how life goes.

Psalm 126 is a good Psalm for our ordinary days, our letdown days. Why do I say that? Let's look at the Psalm again. The Psalm starts with a picture of a one of those big celebrations. You see that in verses one and two. The Lord has restored the fortunes of Zion, and the people are in the streets of Jerusalem celebrating! They are singing and dancing. Their mouths are filled with laughter and their tongues with songs of joy. People are hanging out of balconies waving flags and cheering! As the Psalmist says, it's like something out of a dream. Why are they so happy? It's not specifically stated in the text, but every commentator I read this week thinks that the Psalmist is describing the scene when the people return to Jerusalem after the Babylonian exile. They've been there 70 years. They thought they'd never see home again, but now here they are! It was like a dream. Everyone was happy. Everyone was celebrating.

Now, here's an important question. What is the Psalmists' position with respect to that happy scene? Is he in the middle of it? Is he experiencing it? No. The day of celebration is in the past. Verses one and two are past tense. The Psalmist remembers the celebration. He recalls how happy he was on that great day. And what sort of situation is he in right now? What sort of situation do God's people face? Whatever it is, it's not great because he's asking for help. "*Restore our fortunes like streams in the Negev!*" The Negev is a desert in the south of Israel. Most of the time it's completely dry, but when the spring rains would come, the dry riverbeds would fill with water and the desert would bloom. But there is no bloom in the Psalmist's desert, and no water in his streams. He's dry. "*Restore our fortunes O Lord.*"

This fits the historical reality of Israel after it returned from exile. There was a big party when they returned, but after that life was hard. Israel remained a small, weakened, and occupied state. Persians and then Greeks and then Romans ruled over them. Sometimes that rule was benign. Often it was cruel and oppressive. The people lived small hard lives. “*Restore our fortunes O Lord, like streams in the Negev!*” After the ecstasy, the laundry. After the liberation, the struggle. After Easter, the coronavirus, the joblessness, the isolation.

So Psalm 126 is a good Psalm for the week after a big celebration. God uses this psalm to breathe some hope into our hard reality. What does this Psalm teach us about how to navigate in a post-Easter world? First it trains us to live our days between memory and hope. As we make our life’s pilgrimage, this psalm *trains* us to move between memory and hope. Trains. I use that word specifically. It doesn’t *teach* us to live our days between memory and hope, it *trains* us to live our days between memory and hope.

Why trains? It has to do with how this psalm was used in the past. In the way the Israelites would have prayed this psalm, God wasn’t just teaching them some disembodied fact, some intellectual truth for their head; through this Psalm, God invited them to participate in His hope. The psalms were prayed in worship. The psalms were used in liturgy. This psalm in particular is one of the psalms of ascent. That means when pilgrims would go to Jerusalem for one of the annual feasts, they would pray this psalm with other pilgrims as they walked along the road. When you say a song together in a liturgy, when you recite this psalm with a group of people walking together along the road, and then sing it together at the temple, you’re not just putting a truth in your head, you are participating in the psalm. You are joining in the community of this psalm. The Spirit is weaving the psalm of the fabric of your life. It’s the difference between knowing what a swimming pool is, and jumping of the diving board into the deep end of the pool and feeling the water surround you and lift you up. This psalm doesn’t just teach you, it trains you.

So in the middle of a hard time for their community, God’s people make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem for a feast and on the way they recite this psalm. What is the psalm training them to do? It’s training them to remember. It’s training them to remember all the good things, all the saving things, all the faithful things God has done in the past. Remember when He saved us to Babylon? Remember how happy we were? Remember how He brought us through the red sea and we sang a song on the other side? Remember how He resurrected Jesus when we had completely given up hope? Remember all the times God has rescued us? The psalm trains us to remember. Memory.

And then in verse 6 the psalm trains them to look forward in hope. Those who go out weeping, carrying seeds to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with them. The psalm ends with the promise that these hard days will not last! God will deliver us! These tears may flow for a night but joy will come in the morning.

We are part of a community of pilgrims-the church. We are following Jesus down the road to the new Jerusalem. And as we go, the Holy Spirit is training us in memory and hope. When we get together every week, we don’t just teach the promises of God, we sing them and pray them, and taste them and see them. At the baptismal font, God bathes us in His hope. The Holy Spirit forms our heads and our hands and our hearts and our mouths, the Holy Spirit fills us with real resurrection hope. The kind of hope that can find ourselves in anxious times, like the times we’re in today, and we can keep moving forward in faith, hope and love.

So this Psalm trains us to live between memory and hope. Memory of God's saving acts. Hope in His future. It also promises that as we move from the salvation in the past toward the promises of the future, there will be joy in the journey. Real Joy.

What is real biblical joy? Let me paint two different scenes for you. Scene one: a spring break pool party at a beach in Florida. The party is at a huge hotel pool, right off the beach at a resort. There's a DJ set up pumping out dance music at the front and at the back there's an enormous bar area. The whole place is full of college kids on spring break. Young men and women, in bathing suits, holding Solo cups. They are completely into the party. They're dancing close together. They are laughing and smiling! They are posing for selfies and raising their hands in the air. There's not a frown to be seen.

Scene two: 1945 in the Netherlands on the day that Holland is freed from Nazi occupation by the Allied troops. There are thousands of people in the streets and they are cheering as the trucks come into town and the soldiers march by. They are waving Dutch flags. There's lots of smiling and laughter in the crowd, but there are lots of tears too. Some of the people waving flags are also weeping as the soldiers come in.

Which of these celebrations is a picture of joy? Is it the spring breakers or the Dutch people? I think we all would agree that the Dutch people celebrating their liberation is a better picture of joy. Why is that? Weren't some people crying at liberation!?! No one was crying at the spring break party! Actually the tears are the reason we see the second one as joy. We know, we understand instinctively, that joy isn't just good times and happiness; Joy is hope and laughter and happiness in the face of adversity. Joy is joy *because* it has been through pain and hard times, joy is joy *because* it's cried many tears, but now finds itself in a place of blessing and happiness. It's like our Psalm tells us. *"Those who sow in tears will reap in songs of Joy. Those who go out weeping carrying seeds to sow, will return with songs of joy carrying sheaves with them."* Somehow the tears are a part of the joy. Somehow tears are the seeds of joy.

It all comes how you steer your pilgrimage. When you face sufferings and hard times, how do you react? Many pilgrims see suffering and they try to steer around it. They avoid it. That's what those spring breakers are doing. Spring break parties are an attempt to avoid pain and attempt to forget about responsibilities and duties. It's escapism. Our society trains us in to deal with our pain this way. Our society says it's never good to feel pain or sadness. If you're facing hard things, society says, "Have a couple of glasses of this and, trust me, you will forget your troubles." "Binge this show with all the crazy people on it! It's wild. All your problems will fade into the background." We are constantly offered amusements and distractions and substances that promise to help us steer around our pain.

*The gospel suggests a different path. Armed with the hope of Jesus, we steer towards the pain.* Jesus said, pick up your cross and follow me-go toward the tears. Jesus says, those who want to save their life must lose it-go toward the pain. And Psalm 126 says, "Those who sow in tears will reap songs of joy – the tears are part of the joy." Follow Jesus and your path will lead toward your own pain, toward the pain of your neighbor, toward the pain of the world. But that's not just the path of pain, it's the path of joy!!

We pilgrims make these steering choices every day. It's 4 o'clock and there's an hour before dinner. You can do two things. You can watch that Netflix show you've been bingeing, or you can call your Aunt Marge who you know is having a hard time during the lockdown, living alone as she does. The show is really tempting. It's fun. A total escape. Aunt Marge is complicated and prone to repeating herself. Sometimes she weeps on the phone. Only one of

these two activities has in it the possibility of real joy. *“Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of Joy.”*

If you feel let down after the big celebration of Easter, if only a few days after the Alleluias you found yourself in tears, don't be surprised and don't be afraid. You're on the path of Jesus. And Jesus is on the path with you. He's behind you and in front of you. He's behind you in his resurrection. You turn around to see Him and He says...don't worry! Remember I conquered sin and death. None of those things in front of you are stronger than me. He's ahead of you in glory. He's gone to prepare a place for you. There He is in the new creation urging you forward. He's sitting on the throne and He's surrounded by people who have finished their journey. You probably know some of them. They are so full of joy. So fellow pilgrims, don't be afraid! Just keep going. As you travel, fix your eyes on Jesus. Your journey will end, and on that day, the tears you sow today will reap a harvest of joy. © Rev. Peter Jonker