

How to Cultivate Joy Even When It Feels in Short Supply

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By Tish Harrison Warren - An Anglican priest reflects on matters of faith in private life and public discourse.

In the Bible, there's a question that Paul asks in his letter to the Galatian church that has haunted me for the last couple of years: What has happened to all your joy?

I don't think that many people looking at the church in America today or at broader American society would say, "Now, there is a group of people marked by joy."

In a 2020 [survey](#), happiness and well-being among Americans reached a 50-year low. But it's a deeper issue than just that. Joy is harder and sturdier than mere happiness or positive circumstances, closer in meaning to contentment than amusement. The current state of our cultural discourse seems to be joylessness writ large.

"If you're not outraged, you're not paying attention" proclaims social media, T-shirts, and bumper stickers. "Cry more," another common phrase online, is aimed at political opponents, as in "[Cry more, Lib.](#)" If you spend enough time examining our social media discourse, each cruel remark, each pile-on, each algorithm-rewarded bout of rage produces a picture of society, as if through pointillism. It reveals that we are angry, sneering, bitter and defensive. We rejoice in the tears of our enemies. Joy is in short supply and perhaps seen as a character flaw — evidence of not paying attention.

Beyond social media, [antisocial behavior](#) appears to be on the rise, including spikes in murder, aggressive driving, drug use and random acts of violence. Rates of depression have also soared, particularly among [young people](#). This can be in part attributed to a uniquely difficult few years of isolation and grief due to Covid, but many of these troubling trends began before the pandemic. And even if these Covid years have exacerbated social problems, it is not clear that we can quickly bounce back from the habits of joylessness they engendered. We, as a society, are not well.

Our culture desperately needs to rethink and rediscover joy.

Easter is a seven-week long season of joy that begins on Easter Sunday and stretches all the way to Pentecost 50 days later (the term Pentecost comes from the Greek word meaning fiftieth). In the liturgical calendar, it is the longest season of celebration and feasting. And it is the hardest season for me to keep.

It seems that celebratory seasons would be easier than, say, Lent with its penance, self-denial, and lack of chocolate or alcohol. But, to me, embracing joy always feels like a stretch. I constantly feel out of practice. I enter this season wobbly and weak, like when you first walk around the block after a long illness. I recall a few years ago my friend, the [author](#) Andy Crouch, tweeted about how hard it is to make merry for the whole 12 days of Christmas. He said, "We are not accustomed to prolonged joy." If that's true of Christmas, it's even more so for the whopping 50 days of Eastertide.

I'm sure that for some people, Easter comes easily. Part of what I love about practicing the Christian calendar is it tutors us emotionally — whatever we're like. I spoke to a friend recently at my church who commented that, for her, having grown up in a church that downplayed or ignored grief, having space for the minor keys of Advent and Lent has been healing. For those who tend to avoid negative feelings, penitential seasons call us to slow down, honor loss and mourn the darkness and brokenness in the world and in ourselves.

But then there's those who tend toward melancholy: depressive types like me, who listen to what Barry in "High Fidelity" calls, "sad bastard music." We tend to think that sorrow and despair are more authentic and real than celebration and joy. The last thing we want to be — or be seen as — is happy-clappy.

The church calendar gently chastises us too. It says: "Now, celebrate. Now, begin to notice what there is to be joyful about. Now, pay attention to goodness."

How can I possibly cultivate joy for the entire length of Easter? There will inevitably be traffic jams and illnesses, afternoons when I feel grumpy or mornings that I don't want to get out of bed. But joy can be taken up, even when things aren't going great. "Joy is both a gift and a practice," I wrote in my last book, "but it isn't primarily a feeling any more than self-control or faithfulness are feelings. It is a muscle we can strengthen with exercise."

My kids help. They've learned they can milk this liturgical season for a lot more ice cream than usual. So does my church. During our Easter service, everyone rings bells and people shout "Alleluia." There is a potluck after the service and a bouncy house, tequila and cake. The vibe is raucous.

It is clear to me that sustaining celebration will require that I not go it alone. There is good reason that religious seasons of both fasting and feasting have historically been practiced communally. My family is trying to make time to be with people in real life, feasting with others (even if we just order pizza).

"Joy, like other emotions, longs to be shared," wrote theologian and pastor Angela Williams Gorrell in her recent book "The Gravity of Joy." She continues, "This requires support. Not only do we need permission to be honest about emotions like sadness, anger, and fear, we need permission to be joy-filled. And we need this permission from other people and ourselves." She concludes, "We need other people to help us recall, recognize and reflect on the good."

Joy taps into our deepest sense of meaning, which requires intentional connection to community and to beauty and goodness in the analog world.

Joy is not "toxic positivity." It does not insist that we pretend things are better than they are. It does not refuse to face grief or sorrow. But it does say that they are not all there is and that they are not all that needs to be faced.

For Christians, joy has deep roots. It springs from the hope that Jesus is risen and is making all things new. Easter is a season of joy not because we insist that the glass is

half-full but because Jesus himself, the Bible says in Ephesians, “fills everything in every way.” This means that death is real, but there’s something greater than death. Injustice is real, but it’s not the end of the story. Heartbreak is real but it gives way to redemption. Suffering is real, but it cannot erase beauty.

There is a river by my house that is my picture of joy. It glistens green and life flourishes there. Turtles bask languidly in the sun. Herons grace its rocky shoals. Cypress trees stretch along the muddy shore. But all the beauty on the surface flows from an impossibly deep, ancient place. The river never runs dry, even in the worst drought, because its currents blast from fissures in a subterranean aquifer far beneath the surface. The cool water I wade in and scoop up in my hands has a bigger, lasting source.

It’s the same with joy. We’ve glimpsed deep, eternal springs of grace. We’ve seen a sign that the world will be made new. We can participate in that work of renewal. We can bring joy to others. But, to do so, I have to get to know it first. I have to take Easter’s dare to dive deep into hope.

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