

4th SUNDAY of EASTER –2008

The other day, one of our kindergarten religion teachers told me about the time she asked her class: “Does anyone know what today is?”...A little girl held up her hand and said, “Today is Palm Sunday.”...“That’s right!” the teacher replied. “Does anyone know what next Sunday is?”...The same little girl yelled out, “Next Sunday is Easter.”...“Right again!”...the teacher said...Then she asked, “Does anyone know what happens on Easter?”...The same little girl answered again, “On Easter Sunday Jesus comes out of the grave.” ...But before the teacher could say anything, the child kept going, “But if he sees his shadow, we’re gonna have 6 more weeks of winter.”...(OK, so she got Easter and Ground Hog’s Day mixed up)...Of course, this didn’t really happen, but it could’ve.

I told this story because we are in the middle of the Easter season, and I felt I should at least say something about the central event of human history – the foundation of our faith – Jesus Christ rising from the tomb,...conquering death and giving us the hope, the promise of a glorious life after death. ...But today I want to talk NOT about the promise of life after death, but about what Jesus promises us in this life...right here...right now...I’d like to zero in on the last verse of our Gospel, where Jesus, referring to His flock, His sheep - which of course includes us – says, “I came that they might have life and have it more abundantly.”...What Jesus is saying is “I not only want you to have life. Not only a beating heart. Not only a breathing existence from day to day. But an abundant life.”

Now, millions of people get up in the morning. They go to work or to school. They come home. Eat dinner. Watch TV. Go to bed...and after 60, 70, 80 yrs, they kick the bucket and that’s it. If so, then they’re missing out on one of the very purposes for which Jesus said He came to earth...Jesus is saying, “There’s more to life than that! More to life than just the rigors and routines of daily existence....I came that you might have life and have it more abundantly.” ...and the Good News my friends is that if we are not experiencing the abundant life right now,...it’s not too late...It’s not too late...Jesus has something more for us.

So, what is this abundant life Jesus offers us?...Is it having our homes, our garages and our bank accounts filled with all that we want?...No, that can’t be what Jesus meant, because God never promised us an abundance of material things...Some of us are blessed with it,...many of us are not...If that was what Jesus meant by abundant life, then there are millions of believers who would never experience it. ...One of the best pieces of advice I ever heard regarding material possessions is this: “Never cry over anything that can’t cry over you.” ...Do you realize most of the stuff that we care so much about, doesn’t care about us?... When was the last time your house or your car or your 47” plasma TV gave you a hug?... For Jesus, abundant life is not about stuff...it’s not about material possessions.

By abundant life, maybe Jesus meant never having to experience pain or suffering or tears?...Could that be what He meant?...No, because God never promised us a life free of hardships and heartaches...Everyone – rich, poor, in between - will have their share of troubles and trials...Jesus and His disciples certainly had theirs... OK, abundant life isn’t having lots of stuff...it isn’t freedom from problems and pain...So, what is it?...What is this abundant life Jesus came to give us?...Well, as I reflected on this question, I realized there’s no simple answer, but as I read further in John’s Gospel, I came upon words of Jesus that point us to one major characteristic of the abundant life He wants for us...In Jn 15:9-11, Jesus tells His disciples that if they love one another as He loves them, then they will be filled with His joy so that their joy will be complete...There it is folks: JOY - Christian joy - is part of the abundant life that Jesus promises to us if we follow Him, if we live His way....He wants His joy to be our joy. He wants the joy He experienced in the love of His father, in the promises of His father, to be the joy that

we fully experience, the joy that lives in us,...resides in us,...is part of us...Jesus wants this joy for us because He knows that we are gonna need it in order to make any sense of what happens in this life, and to get through its trials and troubles without getting too battered and bloody...Jesus wants us to have His joy.

Now, before you tune me out because you think I'm going to say that you should always walk around with a smile on your face, singing a happy song, acting like everything is OK,...hear me out...Let me tell you what Christian joy really is... Actually, I'll start by telling you what it's not... Joy is NOT the same as happiness...We often think of them as being the same thing, but they are to differnt animals...The Bible mentions "joy" 330 times, and "happiness" only 26 times. ...Happiness depends on what's happening around us or to us...When I hit a good golf shot, I'm happy...Wen I end up in the woods searching 4 my ball, I'm not happy...When my grandson is wolfing down a whole pizza, he is VERY happy...When he's forced to eat brussel sprouts, he is terribly unhappy...I might wake up in the morning feeling happy, but there's no guarantee I'll stay happy thru the day...Someone might get sick,...a bill might come in the mail,...and by the end of the day, I'm anything but happy...Happiness comes and goes,...and can change just like that.

Joy, on the other hand does not depend on what's happening to us or around us....Joy is interior, inside us...It's something deeper;...it's an attitude of the heart that won't change with external circumstances...Joy comes from our relationship with God, from how connected we feel to God...comes from our constant awareness of His presence, of His hand in everything going on in our lives....I was with a patient at Rochester General this week who was getting prepped for major surgery,...She was scared; she didn't want this happening to her...She certainly wasn't happy, yet she had this sense of peaceful joy; she felt God was close to her...that God was walking this dark valley with her...Her joy didn't come from what was happening to her, it came from her feeling the closeness, the love of God

This is the joy Jesus wants for us – the joy He experienced throughout His life...all the way to the cross...The joy that comes from knowing that God loves us...that we are never alone...that God is in control...that God is working everything out...nothing is outside His reach...This is the joy that is part of the abundant life Jesus came to bring us...Now, we can't be happy all of the time because we can't control most of what's happening in our life...But we can have this inner joy, this inner peace, no matter what's going on in our life,...when we remember the One we belong to,...the One who is involved in every tiny part of everything that happens to us,...the One - Jesus tells us in Matthew's Gospel - who knows us so well that He knows every hair on our head,...and whom we can trust to give us whatever we need...Now, some of you might be saying, "Come on Deacon Ron, how can I be joyful in spite of my circumstances?...You don't know where I am... You don't know what's going on with me."

Well, I understand that...You don't know where I am either...I know it's easier to have joy when things are going good,...when your health is good...when your refrigerator is full...when your wallet is full...when your grades are good....**when the guy or girl you like, likes you back. ...when your parents aren't on your back all the time**...when your marriage is in good shape...when your kids are doing well,...when you like your job...Yah, it's easy to be joyful then...So, what are we supposed to do when things aren't going so good?...Sit down and have a pity-poor-me party?

Or should we instead listen to God speaking to us in the Bible? Not only in the words of Jesus, but in the words of the God-inspired writers...like Isaiah 43: *"When you pass through the deep waters, 'I will be with you; your troubles will not overwhelm you... The hard trials that come will not hurt you. For I am the Lord your God!"*...Or like the Psalms: *"I want you to trust me in your times of trouble, so I can rescue you and you can give me glory."* (Ps 50)... *"Why be so gloomy*

and discouraged? Trust in God. Then I shall praise him for his wondrous help; he will make me smile again." (Ps 43)...My friends, these words are from God – this is God speaking to us - telling us we have good reason to be filled with joy...even when things look dark...If we don't take God at His word, who do we trust?

Let me end with a quote from the evangelist Billy Sunday who noticed an absence of joy in many of the people he preached to: "If there is no joy in your religion, you've got a leak in your faith."...In other words, if there's no joy in your life, you have a problem...You've got a leak someplace and you need to find out how to deal with it...If we're going to wait until everything in our life is just how we want it...if we're not going to be joyful until all the leaks are patched in our lives, ...then we're never going to experience the joy – the abundant life Jesus came to bring us...It would be like sitting in a chair under a leaky roof and letting the water drip on our heads. But the Good News is, we don't have to keep getting wet...All we need to do is to move our chair. AMEN!