

**TRINITY EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH  
MINOCQUA, WI  
SERMON FOR EASTER SUNDAY, APRIL 4, 2021**

***Yes, and I will continue to rejoice,<sup>19</sup> because I know that this will turn out for my deliverance, through your prayer and the support of the Spirit of Jesus Christ.<sup>20</sup> This matches my earnest expectation and hope that I will in no way be put to shame, but with all boldness, as always, so even now, Christ will be magnified in my body, whether by life or by death.<sup>21</sup> Yes, for me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.***

(Philippians 1:18b-21 EHV)

Got joy? From a pastor's perspective, this is a day that's been two years in the making – in-person Easter worship! (Chris Farley GIF). Seriously, though - doesn't everything about today just fill you with joy? It's resurrection day! Jesus Christ is risen from the dead. He lives, he lives, who once was dead. He lives my ever-living Head! Death has been swallowed up in victory, sin is paid for, and Satan is defeated. God gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!

Joy? Yes, except for the guy who cut you off in traffic on your way here. It's Easter, for crying out loud! And then there are those people you have to deal with, you know, the ones who came with you and then some of the folks that you run into while you are here. Joy? Sure. Some.

When you are a pastor with young children, Holy Week is never boring. When our four kids were younger, Holy Week stress levels were off the charts. I remember one Holy Week in particular – about a dozen years ago - in the midst of writing four sermons for the weekend – Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and two for Easter – I was working on an Easter sermon and writing about the joy that is ours because of the risen Christ.

I was working on one side of the house and from the other side of the house I hear, "Dad! Dad!" I ignored it, engaged in the joyful task of writing a sermon about joy. Again, "Dad!" Now I'm thinking, a bit less joyfully, "Not now." The shouting persisted. "Dad, the toilet overflowed!" That was it. I don't have time for this. I'm too busy writing a sermon about joy! The only person who finds joy in a situation like this is a plumber/he prefers it be during regular business hours.

It struck me then – as I was soaking up the flood from the bathroom floor – that I wasn't very happy at the moment but I could still have joy. Jesus was still alive, my sins were still forgiven, even my immediate sins of anger and frustration and impatience.

Let's not confuse happiness with joy. Happiness depends on circumstances. Happiness is a graduation, a wedding day. Happiness is a Starbucks giftcard, or to personalize that – a Musky Shop giftcard. When the giftcard is spent, happiness is gone. When graduation is over, it's on to the next thing, the next event, the next stage in life. Happiness is fleeting, temporary. Joy, true Christian joy in Jesus is deep-rooted, long-lasting.

Paul is not in happy circumstances. He's under house arrest for preaching the Gospel. But you'd never know it. Except for a couple of specific references to his situation, you'd never know he's in prison as he writes this. That's why we call this the epistle/letter of joy. The challenges and circumstances of life weren't getting him down, because he had joy in Jesus. The theme of this letter can be found in ch. 4, ***"Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: rejoice!"*** (v. 4)

His perspective on his current situation? ***"I will continue to rejoice, because I know that this will turn out for my deliverance, through your prayer and the support of the Spirit of Jesus Christ."*** (v. 18b,19) Unjustly imprisoned, he's confident that Jesus will make everything work out. There's more: ***"This matches my earnest expectation and hope that I will in no way be put to shame, but with all boldness, as always, so even now, Christ will be magnified in my body, whether by life or by death."*** (v. 20) He finds his confidence and courage for living life day by day in Christ. ***"For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain."*** (v. 21)

Living and working for Christ each day gave Paul great joy, but dying, he knew, would bring him gain. Even greater joy and greater life was waiting for him in heaven. All made possible by the death and resurrection of Christ.

We need this. Every one of us, everyone everywhere, we need the death and resurrection of Christ. Too many look for happiness and joy in a place, a pill, a person, a position, profit or pride. None of these provide lasting joy. None of these rescue us from who we are and what we've done. By nature, we're dead in sin, blind to spiritual truth, enemies of God, sinners in thought/word/deed who fall short of the glory of God. Any overtures on our part to make things right are filthy rags, offensive to a holy and righteous God.

But Jesus Christ, Paul told the Philippians in chapter 2: ***"made himself nothing...(was) made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!"*** (vv. 7,8) In that death, Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 1:10 – ***"Christ Jesus has destroyed death and...brought life and immortality to light through the gospel."*** And this isn't just for other people – it's personal – for Paul, for you, for me. His words are our words: ***"Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into this world to save sinners, of whom I am the worst."*** (1 Timothy 1:15) When I fall, he lifts me up. When I fail, he forgives. When I am weak, he is strong. When I am lost, he is the Way. When I face trials, he is with me. When I face death, he carries me home. ***"For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain."***

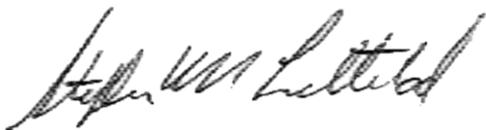
You know loved ones who know the truth of that, especially the second half of that verse. ***"To die is gain."*** And we look forward to the reunion, to joining them hand-in-hand to stand face-to-face with Jesus. Until then, to live is Christ. Until then, we have joy in Jesus.

Back in 2014, Easter was on April 20<sup>th</sup>. About two miles west of the church I served in Phoenix, there was a little church that put up a banner for Easter. I wish I'd have taken a picture. Here's a re-creation. It read: "Easter, April 21 9 a.m. worship...2000 eggs." There are two things wrong with that banner. First of all, April 21<sup>st</sup> was a Monday, and if they waited til then, they missed Easter that year. Second, the most important thing to put on a banner about Easter is...we have 2000 eggs for the egg hunt? No Christ is risen or He lives or rejoice? Talk about missing Easter in more ways than one.

I want to challenge every one of you not to make the same mistake. I don't want you to miss Easter. You're thinking, "We're here. It's the right date. How can we miss Easter?" Here's how. Stay home from worship next weekend. And the weekend after that. Joy will fade. And you will miss Easter more every day. You will experience happiness from time to time – something goes right at work, a giftcard to your favorite store, your kids clean their room – but life won't let up. Traffic, stress, cranky cabby people wherever you go, the unexpected twists and turns life throws at you. You'll forget that there is extraordinary joy to be found in ordinary days, joy in Jesus. You will miss Easter.

Over the next few weeks, we're going to work our way through Philippians. We'll look for joy in anxiety, humility and suffering, among other things. Surely, you and I could use more of this extraordinary joy. Know anyone who could use a little more joy, the kind of deep-seated lasting joy in Jesus no one can take away?

Keep your head high. Keep your eyes on Jesus. Let nothing move you. Let nothing get you down for too long. Because the tomb stands empty. And God will empty your grave too. The resurrection renders death and the devil toothless, and makes life worth living whatever the circumstances. It puts everything in proper perspective: ***"For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain."*** Say it with me, ***"For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain!"*** Christ is risen...



Pastor Stephen Luchterhand  
Minocqua, WI