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We Are Witnesses of These Things

It is the joy. What shines from the story when the disciples find Jesus in their midst as they gather together, is the joy. You can still feel it almost leaping from the pages after 2,000 years. The disciples are overcome with it. It changes everything for them. It is not the kind of joy defined by Merriam-Webster (the online version): “the emotion evoked by well-being, success, or good fortune or by the prospect of possessing what one desires.” No, it is not that kind of joy. It is a kind of joy that begins with the recognition of Jesus in their midst, and the words that he speaks to them: “You are witnesses of these things.” They begin to understand the journey, looking back.

It all begins for the disciples on that day when Jesus gets into the boat. He gets into Simon Peter’s boat, which is docked at the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Imagine the sea in the faint morning light, the surface of water just beginning to emerge from the darkness. The fishermen are washing out their nets. They have been working all night long and are looking forward to food and rest. Yet Jesus picks that moment to get into Peter’s boat. He says: “Row out farther, into the deep water.” Peter points out what should be `obvious: “Master,” he says, “We’ve worked all night long but have caught nothing.” But his protest is mild; he says, ”Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.” You can almost see him shrug. He rows out into the deep water, and suddenly he find his nets so full that they begin to break, and the boats that arrive to help him begin to sink with the weight of the catch. Peter is overcome with fear. He falls down at Jesus’ knees and says: “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!” He is stunned and frightened by who Jesus might be, and shocked into the awareness of his own limits and weaknesses in the presence of this mysterious man. His impulse is to flee. But Jesus replies, “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.” And Peter, and his partners, James and John, leave everything at that moment to follow him.

What if the disciples hadn’t gone on the journey with Jesus? What if they had said, “No?” What if Peter had followed his instinctive response when he said, “Get away from me, Lord”. It is not as if he would have had an empty life or a bad life without that fateful encounter with Jesus. But oh, all that he would have missed! He would have missed the encounters with people and the healings along the way, the changed lives, the intriguing parables Jesus told that we still ponder to this day; the joy of the crowds as Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey. He would have missed the breaking of the bread around a table in Jerusalem. He would have missed that moment when he said, “I do not know him,” at Jesus’ arrest, and the cock crowed and Jesus turned and looked at him. He would have missed his own bitter weeping, the terror of the crucifixion, the sorrow of the disciples’ abandonment of Jesus, the fear that sent them into hiding after his death. And he would have missed the joy when Jesus appeared to the disciples and showed them his hands and his feet, and said, “It is, I, myself.” The joy of beginning to understand all that this journey had been leading toward, the surprise and wonder that all the time the disciples had been expecting a spectacular manifestation of God’s reign in the world, and realizing that this path Jesus had walked *was* the way. The joy of being witnesses of these things. The joy that changed him so radically that we find Peter in the Books of Acts, when he and John are arrested and threatened with punishment for the things they have been saying, and together they reply, “we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard.” (Acts 4:20). How far he has come from saying, “I do not know him.”

There is a light shining in Peter and the disciples, and nothing can stop it, not all the forces of the Roman Empire, not even that tool of the tyrant, the threat of execution. New Testament scholar Nicholas Thomas Wright writes: ““Resurrection [is] a politically revolutionary doctrine ….The tyrant knows that death is the last weapon he possesses, and if someone is raising the dead, everything is going to be turned upside down.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

There is a poem by Maya Angelou, entitled Touched by an Angel, that seems to me to fit the experience of the disciples:   
We, unaccustomed to courage  
exiles from delight  
live coiled in shells of loneliness  
until love leaves its high holy temple  
and comes into our sight  
to liberate us into life.

The disciples were unaccustomed to courage. They were exiles from delight. They might have lived in loneliness, had they not been liberated into life, into the adventure of a community who became witnesses of these things.

Erich Auerbach, a professor of classical literature, describes the turns in Peter’s life in the New Testament as a pendulum, of the kind that swings back and forth to extreme opposite positions in a grandfather clock. He says that there is nothing like Peter’s experience in all of classical antique literature, the literature of the Greeks and Romans. Auerbach writes: “Viewed superficially, [Jesus’ arrest] is a police action and its consequences; it takes place entirely among everyday men and women of the common people; anything of the sort could be thought of in antique terms only as farce or comedy. Yet why is it neither of these? Why does it arouse in us the most serious and significant sympathy? Because,” he writes, “it portrays something which neither the poets nor the historians of [the antique period] ever set out to portray: the birth of a spiritual movement in the depths of the common people...What we witness is the awakening of ‘a new heart and a new spirit.’”[[2]](#footnote-2)

It did not come easily, this awakening. It did not come without risk and cost and without great swings of the pendulum. But when the disciples begin to see, when their minds are opened to understand the meaning of the events of Jesus’ life and death, a light begins to shine, and it is unstoppable. “You are witnesses of these things.”

A more recent disciple spoke about this light. She said, “A city that's set on a hill cannot be hid*.* I don't mind my light shining; I don't hide that I'm fighting for freedom because Christ died to set us free.”[[3]](#footnote-3) This was Fannie Lou Hamer, a woman who was called to the civil rights movement. In August 1962, at the age of 44, she was the first to volunteer when the Rev. James Bevel, an associate of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., gave a sermon in Ruleville, Mississippi and asked who would be willing to register to vote. Born into a family of sharecroppers, Hamer had worked in the fields picking cotton from the age of seven. She is known for having said, “I am sick and tired of being sick and tired,” and she became known for breaking into song during moments of doubt and despair in a way that strengthened and energized the people around her during the struggle for voting rights in Mississippi. “This Little Light of Mine” was one she sang often. The stories of her singing reached Bob Moses, a leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee who told an organizer, “find the lady that sings the hymns.” He recruited her to join their organization.

One night in 1963 Hamer and other activists were arrested in Winona, Mississippi on false charges on their way back from a literacy workshop in [Charleston, South Carolina](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charleston,_South_Carolina). They were brutally beaten in their cells that night. Charles Marsh, an author who has written about the civil rights movement, tells the story: “But then the next day something happened that slowly transformed the killing despair of the jail and dispersed the power of death. ‘When you're in a brick cell, locked up, and haven't done anything to anybody but still you're locked up there, well sometimes words just begin to come to you and you begin to sing,’ [Mrs. Hamer] said. Song broke free. Mrs. Hamer sang:

Paul and Silas was bound in jail, let my people go.  
Had no money for to go their bail, let my people go.

Paul and Silas began to shout, let my people go.  
Jail doors open and they walked out, let my people go

"Singing brings out the soul," she said. ...Mrs. Hamer did not sing alone. Sitting in their cells down the hall, June Johnson, Annelle Ponder, Euvester Simpson, and Lawrence Guyot joined her in song. Church broke out, empowering them to "stay on `the Gospel train' until it reaches the Kingdom.  Their singing,” Marsh writes, “Did not remove their suffering or the particularities of their humiliation; rather, it embraced the suffering, named it, and emplotted it in a cosmic story of hope and deliverance.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

Fannie Lou Hamer’s experience in the Winona jail strengthened her resolve. She continued to organize for voter registration, speaking in the cotton fields and in churches at night where, as Marsh describes it, “She “create[d] a great reservoir of energy for all her brothers and sisters in the movement; experiences of sheer joy, as well as the dark nights of the soul when glad emotions were spent, were sustained by the spiritual energy radiating outward....The meetings were not simply pep rallies for wearied foot soldiers--but a very powerful social ritual."[[5]](#footnote-5)

The kind of joy Fannie Lou Hamer expressed in those meetings doesn’t deny the experiences of suffering. It’s the joy of a radical resistance, a refusal to relinquish one’s spirit to those who claim power over it and threaten it. When Jesus appeared to his disciples, he bore the marks of the crucifixion on his hands and feet; it’s how they recognized him. The marks of his suffering were not magically erased. He brought them back into life with him, the marks of solidarity with those who suffer.

Is it even responsible to talk about joy when there is so much suffering in the world? When every day, we are aware of numberless acts of violence around the world, of millions of refugees, of millions of prisoners, of people struggling just to survive, of our earth groaning under the weight of the demands being placed on it, of animals living lives of hell in factory farms and laboratories? Ask them: should we be concerned with joy? Yes, if our joy comes from a light that has been lit among us that nothing will stop, then one of the most subversive things we can do in the face of so much brokenness is to carry that light into the world because it is no mirage, it is not a ghost, we have seen the hands and feet of God with us, and this God is about overturning tyranny and prisons and hells and systems of sorrow.

In the apostolic exhortation that Pope Francis released in 2013 called Joy of the Gospel, a lengthy document that says “no” to many things the world is facing, e.g., no to an economy of exclusion, no to an inequality which spawns violence, no to a financial system that rules rather than serves, he also says yes, to joy, over and over again. He writes: “Instead of seeming to impose new obligations, [Christians] should appear as people who wish to share their joy, who point to a horizon of beauty and who invite others to a delicious banquet. It is not by proselytizing that the Church grows, but ‘by attraction’.... For if we have received the love which restores meaning to our lives, how can we fail to share that love with others?”[[6]](#footnote-6)

We are witnesses of these things. We may be unaccustomed to courage, we may feel our weaknesses keenly, we may say, “Lord get away from me, for I’m not good enough!” but Jesus is in the boat with us and it’s time to row out farther.

We may not be called to the center of a great historical movement, we may not have the kind of pendulum swing that Peter experienced, but we have been liberated into life; we have stories to tell, the marks of our wounds to show. We are witnesses of these things.

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3. JSU 1877 Jackson State University. “A Voice That Could Stir an Army: Fannie Lou Hamer and the Rhetoric of the Black Freedom Movement.” Accessed April 15, 2015. http://www.jsums.edu/hamerinstitute/resources/flhspeeches/. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Marsh, Charles. “God’s Long Summer.” Washington Post. Accessed April 14, 2015. http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longterm/books/chap1/godslongsummer.htm. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. "Evangelii Gaudium : Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World (24 November 2013)." Evangelii Gaudium : Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World (24 November 2013). Accessed April 17, 2015. http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\_esortazione-ap\_20131124\_evangelii-gaudium.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)