

Fatness

Isaiah 25:6-9

John 20:1-18

It poses the same mortality risk as smoking 15 cigarettes a day. It creates a 29% rise in heart disease, a 32% rise in stroke risk, and a 27% higher risk of premature death. One study shows it causes 6.7 billion in excess Medicare spending. *Each year.* What does all this damage? According to an article in a recent issue of Discover magazine, the answer is loneliness. The author, Elizabeth Svoboda, cites the pandemic as one important cause of the isolation so many feel. But she also makes a sobering point: "Institutions that once fostered social connections, such as churches and community-based organizations like Rotary Clubs, are shrinking or disappearing." Ouch.

"Our brains function more efficiently when we are with others, writes Julienne Holt-Lunstad, a professor of psychology and neuroscience at Brigham Young. It seems that loneliness causes us stress, which in turn causes inflammation in our bodies. Over time that inflammation can lead to chronic vascular disease, diabetes and Alzheimer's Disease. Even brief periods of loneliness can sap our energy. So we in the church have something people are wired to need. To need desperately. This Easter, why not resolve to respond to the gracious, sacrificial, risen Son of God in two ways: to enjoy the fellowship of the church, often and when possible, in person; and to help others to do the same.

Isaiah chapter 25 contains a vision of a communal “feast of fat things”. Isaiah starts it with, “On this mountain...” This refers to Mt. Zion, the Temple Mount. The feast image literally refers to the animal sacrifices conducted in the Jewish temple. But its symbolic meaning stretches far beyond meat from slaughtered animals. Isaiah enumerates several of these meanings: the veil that is spread over all nations would be destroyed. All the people of the earth would be able to see the Lord. God would “swallow up death for ever.” (As Christians we believe that God accomplished this in the person and work of Jesus Christ.) Furthermore, the Lord God would dry up all tears, “the reproach of his people” would be taken away. Their guilt, and the distance it caused between God and themselves, would disappear.

Thus the title of this sermon, Fatness, refers not to being overweight. It refers, rather, to the sumptuous, generous gifts the Lord gives to those who trust in God. As Isaiah writes, “let us be glad and rejoice in our salvation.” Let us do just that: be glad. Rejoice in our salvation. And strive by the power of God's Holy Spirit to live in such gladness and joy that we become living, breathing witnesses to the healing and hope we experience in the community of the church.

In Acts 2, on the Day of Pentecost we will observe in a few weeks, the newly Spirit-inspired disciples acted with such happiness observers supposed they were drunk. On a day off in the middle of a mission trip, a youth group visited Tahquamenon Falls, a cool place in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. They got on a kick of telling the corniest puns and jokes they could imagine. They could not stop

laughing. They skipped. One pair of girls even danced the swing to the voices of two other girls singing a song from a musical in which they had performed near the end of the school year. They finished the outing with a group tradition. The pastor yelled, "All right, before we get on the bus, count off!" In unison they yelled back, "One!!!" Every one of them at precisely the same moment.

An older woman who happened to pass by at that moment asked what sort of group they were. "We're our church's youth group," one boy said.

"I'm not sure I believe that," the woman said. "I've never seen a church group have so much fun." When the pastor shared her comment with the whole group on the bus, they laughed even harder.

Certainly, certain seasons and events in church life call for reflection, for somberness. We just emerged from Lent, one of those seasons. But now we have entered the season of Easter, of Good News, of brightness and light. Why not act like it makes us happy? Spring is coming! Jesus has risen! Don't worry, be happy!

As God so often does, God has reversed the normal order of things. Lent speaks to us of sin and guilt, sorrow, sacrifice. But God has ended that season and replaced it with the most joyous season in the church year. And it was always a part of God's plan. We so often get caught up in the negative. Why did I say that thing that hurt my friend so terribly? Why did my beloved family member have to die from such a

wasting disease—or why did they have to die so suddenly? As the Apostle Paul asked in his first letter to the Corinthians, what if Jesus did not truly rise from the dead? Paul noted that would mean life has no meaning, no hope. Twenty centuries of Christianity would be nothing more than the longest-lived con game in history.

In 1980 John Mellencamp produced an album he entitled Nothin' Matters and What if it Did? This title captures the sense, the experience, or not to get too lofty, perhaps even the philosophy of life that so many people share. It's all a con game. Might as well get while the getting is good. Or as the author of Ecclesiastes put it, “Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die.” Ecclesiastes has caused some controversy over the years. On a quick reading it seems to promote the despair we all feel at times, and that so many feel all the time. But as Bible scholar Bruce Metzger put it in his book, Reminiscences of an Octogenarian, “When we live long enough, perhaps we can come to understand the difference between weariness and despair. If it becomes increasingly difficult to get up in the morning, we nevertheless have had the opportunity to gain wisdom. This, I think, is the main theme of Ecclesiastes.” The darkness and hardship that accompany most of our lives need not defeat us. Because we have the Easter message to cheer us.

As John tells the story of Easter morning, at the crack of dawn Mary Magdalene enters the cemetery where they had buried Jesus. “It was still dark,” or maybe it was just the dusk before the dawn, for she “saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb.” Apparently she felt too much fear to investigate for herself; she “ran” to

Simon Peter and “the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved.” Many commentators have identified this second man as John himself. The attribution makes sense but we cannot prove it. At any rate, the two men ran back to the tomb, with the second disciple reaching it first. Like Mary, he stopped at the entrance. Peter, as his bombastic self, charged right inside. He found Jesus' burial wrappings lying on the floor, some in a heap, some neatly folded.

John makes it clear the two men did not yet understand that Jesus had risen from the dead. He tells us they “went back to their homes.” Perhaps they could think of nothing else to do. Mary stayed put. Once they left she “stooped to look in the tomb.” John claims she had a brief conversation with two angels. She told them she did not know where “they” had taken Jesus' body. She, too, did not—could not—understand what had happened. Then she turned and saw Jesus, whom she did not recognize. That word, recognize, comes from the Latin, in which it literally means to think again. She was about to learn a thing that would change her thinking forever. Jesus spoke her name. *Then* she recognized his voice and his face. She wanted to hug him in her joy, but he asked her not to, “for I have not yet ascended to the Father.” They parted. Mary returned to the other Jesus followers and “told them that he had said these things to her.” I wonder whether they—especially the men—believed her?

I wonder whether we do? The darkness and hardship that accompany most of our lives need not defeat us. Because we have the Easter message to cheer us. And what is that message? That in accordance with the scriptures, Jesus died and rose

from the dead. The prophets of Hebrew scripture had long predicted this. That Jesus performed the will of the Father, that he obeyed even to the cross. That Jesus both before and after Easter morning explained why he did these things. As John records elsewhere, God and Jesus as God so *loved* us that he died, that every person who believes in him would have eternal life.

We need to recognize, to rethink, the audacious Good News of Easter. We live in a lonely time and place. People who give us brave smiles often lack any real connection with other people, let alone God. We know all too well that we are imperfect, that we disappoint God all the time. Yet by the grace of God we belong to the people of God. If you asked me to list the ten things I have the most pride in accomplishing during my life, I would instantly reply that our marriage of nearly 43 years comes first. Next would come fathering and launching two admirable human beings into the world. Now they work on the same project with their own children, our grandchildren. And today I get to celebrate both of these things in person. They will come to Easter dinner at our home. That makes me...is *happy* a strong enough word? Grateful. Humble. But having played a part in creating the culture of that youth group that all yelled "ONE" together would occupy a high place on that list. Watching them grow in faith and joy made every person around them...*happy*?

No, joyful. Grateful. Humble. As we should feel as followers of Jesus on this, the day he came back to life from the dead. Jesus provides us with the fatness of life. Celebrate that on this day.