

Sermon on Sunday 23 August 2026 by Rev. Alan Stewart

Readings: Isaiah 51. 1–6, Matthew 16. 13-17



The Four Corners of Joy

It was the question on everyone's lips: Who *is* this man?

And amid the speculation, it's Peter who's worked it out. 'You're the Messiah', he says. And Jesus is impressed. 'God's revealed this to you', he says. And then, curiously, he tells them to keep shtum about this revelation. 'Don't tell a soul', he says, 'for now, let this be our secret'. But why? Why let people continue to speculate and puzzle over his identity? Why the mystery?

What's clear is that Jesus knew he wasn't the kind of Messiah most people were praying for; not a military or political leader. So maybe, he's buying time to redefine those ideas of who the Messiah is and what he would do. Also, it's possible that a revelation like this could actually inspire an uprising against the Roman occupation, with a lot of unnecessary bloodshed. He knew the only blood which needed shedding was his own. So, in the meantime... keep them guessing.

I wonder how Peter felt about keeping this monumental secret? Maybe, he felt the thrill of being an insider; 'I know something you don't!'. Or, maybe he was frustrated, just itching to tell others this burning secret.

Life is full of secrets, and one secret I think we'd all love some insider info on is the secret to more Joy in our lives. I don't know about you, but for me at times, Joy

feels in particularly short supply. It's something in fact the Canadian writer Kate Bowler goes in search of in her wonderful book 'Joyful Anyway'.

Kate has survived a stage four cancer diagnosis, and although she feels like she should be grateful, she's still plagued by what she calls 'the ache'; the ache for meaning, for connection, for Joy. And so, she goes on a quest to find the secret to Joy. It's a book full of humour and humanity and honesty, written in handy bite-size chapters. I'd recommend it! And in one of those chapters, she talks about meeting an expert in behavioral science at a dinner party, to whom she confessed 'I'm trying to figure out how to be more joyful'.

His response was interesting. 'Approach Joy', he said, 'in the same way you'd approach a jigsaw puzzle'. Curious. When you begin a jigsaw, where do you usually start?... Usually, with the *corners*.

'Exactly,' he said 'What are the corners of what you're hoping for?'; what are the corners of Joy.

In other words, what are those, let's say, four foundational things in life which you already know bring you the greatest Joy? Because this is what we need to nurture; this is where we need to invest.

And that of course will be different for each of us.

Personally, I find this idea really helpful. Often, I treat Joy as an unexpected added extra to life, rare little moments that surprise you with delight. But what if Joy is something we need to work at and invest in? Joy of course isn't meant to be permanent and it only actually makes sense alongside the non-joyful, without which we wouldn't know what Joy is.

So, what are the four corners or cornerstones of Joy for you? What are the four areas of life which bring you the greatest Joy?

While you're thinking about that, maybe I could share with you where I've got to:

1. Family. Sounds obvious, but I know that I let these relationships drift. I know it can be weeks between talking to my sister for example. So, lately I've been investing more consciously; writing letters with Rachel to our kids telling them how phenomenally lucky the world is to have them in it; going for a

trek in their favourite hills. While Elijah's home, watching Father Ted together, cooking him his favourite food. Joy!

2. Creativity. Again, I let this drift. So, I've starting doing a ceramics course. Please do hold me accountable to a promise I've made to myself that I'll do another exhibition of my doodling sometime soon! It's good for me. Joy!
3. Prayer. You might expect a vicar to come up with that one, but actually when I don't pray, the world feels off-kilter. I can so easily feel lost or a little hopeless without the perspective it gives to life. So, invest in prayer, preferably within the great outdoors. Joy!
4. And lastly, what I'll call Acceptance. The older I get the more conscious I am of my mortality. So, I'm investing in accepting and befriending the fact that I won't be around forever. Also, throughout my life, I've had a complicated relationship with my body, so I'm learning to stand in front of the mirror and say 'This is me!'. Joy!

What are the corners of your Joy?

The joy that Peter may have felt when he worked out Jesus' identity would soon be eclipsed by the events that followed. He would go through the turmoil of broken dreams, the guilt of abandoning and denying his best friend, the trauma of seeing him suffocating on a cross.

But just as death could not hold back a resurrection, so Joy would return, richer because of the suffering, because of the grief, because of the ache.

Kate Bowler writes 'There is joy in everything except despair'.

She quotes the novelist Kaveh Akbar who writes 'I hope that when there is laughter, it's laughter made wise by having known real grief. And when there is grief, it is made wise by having known real joy'.

Kate again writes, 'Joy brings fireworks that light us up from within. And in a moment of pure aliveness, nothing incomplete matters. It's not that anything is complete. It's that nothing incomplete matter'. She goes on to say 'Joy is different to its cousin happiness... Joy goes all the way down... There are times when we need to draw Joy into our own bodies like drawing a breath'.

Joy is here, waiting to be nurtured and invested in. So, what breath of Joy can you draw into yourself in this moment?

There's a beautiful little verse in the book of Nehemiah which reminds us that despite everything, the Joy of the Lord is our *strength*. This Joy from the Lord and this Joy we take in the Lord, is strength; strength to body, strength to mind and strength to soul. So, may Joy delight and strengthen you today, because of, and despite everything.

Amen

Matthew 16

¹³ When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?"

¹⁴ They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

¹⁵ "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?"

¹⁶ Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

¹⁷ Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. ¹⁸ And I tell you that you are Peter,^[b] and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades^[c] will not overcome it. ¹⁹ I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be^[d] bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be^[e] loosed in heaven." ²⁰ Then he ordered his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

Isaiah

51 “Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness
and who seek the LORD:

Look to the rock from which you were cut
and to the quarry from which you were hewn;

² look to Abraham, your father,
and to Sarah, who gave you birth.

When I called him he was only one man,
and I blessed him and made him many.

³ The LORD will surely comfort Zion
and will look with compassion on all her ruins;
he will make her deserts like Eden,
her wastelands like the garden of the LORD.
Joy and gladness will be found in her,
thanksgiving and the sound of singing.

⁴ “Listen to me, my people;
hear me, my nation:
Instruction will go out from me;
my justice will become a light to the nations.

⁵ My righteousness draws near speedily,
my salvation is on the way,
and my arm will bring justice to the nations.

The islands will look to me
and wait in hope for my arm.

⁶ Lift up your eyes to the heavens,
look at the earth beneath;
the heavens will vanish like smoke,
the earth will wear out like a garment
and its inhabitants die like flies.
But my salvation will last forever,
my righteousness will never fail.

Change name from Simon to Peter (Rock)