

A lot of years during Holy Week I watch the movie Godspell. I did this year. Anyone ever seen either a live performance or the movie?

Godspell's writer originally put it together for his master's thesis in 1970. It became a Broadway musical and then was made into a movie in 1973. I've seen a couple live versions and the movie I've watched several times.

Variations of the live version were a staple of youth drama productions for decades after the original. I think it might still be.

Jesus Christ Superstar came out more or less the same time. Both arose out of the Jesus Movement, a Christian revival among young people in the 60's and early 70's.

Many of the lyrics and most of the dialog come straight out of the Bible. It's set in 1970 and has a definite 1970's hippie vibe.

Godspell has had its share of criticism. Jesus and the disciples are made up as clowns which doesn't sit well with some people.

It doesn't exactly follow a real cohesive story, but if you already know the story, you'll easily recognize the parts. It's more of a series of songs, skits, and monologues – a sort of hippie Jesus vaudeville.

Its biggest criticism is that there's no bodily resurrection of Jesus.

Mostly, I love the music. It's probably why I keep getting drawn back to it. And while its lack of depth has sometimes been a critique, even minus a physical resurrection, what they did with the music in the finale was kind of brilliant. I'll come back to that a bit later.

But what it mostly has...and probably why I especially wanted to watch it this year...is joy.

There have been lots of Jesus movies and Jesus TV shows over the years. As I said, Jesus Christ Superstar was Godspell's contemporary.

Recently, The Chosen has taken the world by storm. I've loved both of those, but they are both much more serious than Godspell.

This has been a very serious Lent. Fear, fury, sorrow, anxiety...all have accompanied us as we've trudged through this 2026 Lent.

The readings have presented us with a profound critique of power that has an acute relevance in our own time.

We have walked with Jesus toward the cross. Thursday and Friday evenings we focused on Jesus' death and put ourselves at the foot of that cross.

I don't know about you, but I'm ready for some joy.

Mary went to Jesus' tomb definitely not expecting joy. She went there to grieve. She watched her friend die in agony.

Unlike the other gospels, she's by herself. And she doesn't need to bring oil and spices to anoint his body. Those were already supplied by Nicodemus at his burial.

Her experience from the time she arrived at the tomb till her proclamation to the disciples was an emotional roller coaster.

She arrives and finds the stone rolled away...she thinks the body's been taken away. When Peter and the beloved disciple return with her, they are no help. Now still grieving and also probably frustrated and fearful, she goes into the tomb.

There are angels there...but they don't help either! All they say is woman, why are you weeping?

I mean c'mon guys! You're angels! You should know.

Then a voice from behind her also says whom are you looking for? It's not until Jesus says her name, Mary, that she recognizes him.

The shepherd called her by name...and she knew. Grief, fear, frustration give way to first some confusion...a gradual dawning...and then...pure joy.

She runs back to the other disciples. You can hear the joy and excitement in her voice...guys! I have seen the Lord! I saw Jesus! He's alive!

One of my sources for preaching John is a video and podcast series made by professors from Luther Seminary. One of them, Dr. Karoline Lewis, also wrote one of the commentaries I've used.

On the video for the resurrection of Jesus, she opened with, this is the video for the resurrection of Jesus. It's so exciting!

And she meant it. You could see it in her face and her body language. She was joyful! Almost shaking!

In her written commentary she talked about Mary's joy in announcing I have seen the Lord.

She said that it should be the goal of every preacher on Easter – to have people walk out and say joyfully, Pastor I saw Jesus today!

Nothing like adding a bit of pressure to an already sort of high-pressure Sunday. Of course the preacher doesn't carry that weight alone. But it is my hope that we do carry out of worship today some of that joy that Mary experienced.

Which brings me back to Godspell. At the beginning, there's a sort of cacophony of city sounds and voices. Then a clear voice begins and builds...Prepare ye the way of the Lord.

People start dumping their briefcases and portfolios in the trash and start skipping toward the voice. There's a lot of skipping in Godspell...a sure sign of joy.

The voice is John the Baptist of course, singing from a city fountain. He baptizes those who come, and then Jesus appears. The setting is different, but it's really pretty close to the actual story. John was sent to prepare the way for Jesus to come into the world.

Fast forward to the finale in the movie. Jesus is crucified on a chain link fence. His followers are stricken and weeping as they take him down.

Then one of them looks up to the sky and starts singing, Long live God...long live God...

The others join. As they carry Jesus they all join in. Then, the clear strand of Prepare ye the way of the Lord joins in and the two are woven together.

There's laughter, more skipping and pure joy.

The music moves from resurrection...long live God...to carrying Jesus into the world...prepare ye the way of the Lord.

Jesus didn't just come into the world once. Through his resurrection and ascension, Jesus is always coming into the world and we are always called to announce that.

As I said, there's no actual resurrection in Godspell. What happens is they turn a corner behind a building, still carrying Jesus. As the camera follows and makes the turn, they've all disappeared and the sidewalk is now filled with crowds of people. They aren't skipping, but they're all smiling and laughing.

In John's gospel, although Jesus is obviously raised from the dead, it's not actually his main focus. Jesus does not tell Mary to announce that he's risen, although she does do that.

What Jesus tells her to say to the disciples, is 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'

The ascension is how Jesus ultimately accomplishes his mission. Earlier in the gospel, he said I will be lifted up and I will draw all people to myself.

Through death, resurrection and his ascension to his God and our God, Jesus is opening to humanity the same relationship with God that he has. A whole new family is created...children of God.

So when I watch the finale of Godspell, I can see in the crowds of joyful people that new family Jesus created. A family left in the wake of his ascension. A people filled with joy and united with God and each other.

Then, the music changes to the song Day by Day. And there's more skipping.

Here are the lyrics – sorry in advance for the earworm for some of you.

Day by day
Oh, Dear Lord, three things I pray
To see thee more clearly
Love thee more dearly
Follow thee more nearly
Day by day

Thanks to Godspell, it became a 1973 pop hit. But the words were originally written by St. Richard of Chichester, a bishop in the 13th Century.

It is a perfect post resurrection and ascension prayer. It takes seriously the cosmic Word made flesh...it takes seriously the intimacy of a real relationship with Jesus. And it's very fitting for the excited and joyful words of Mary...I have seen the Lord!

As we move into our own resurrection lives, we too pray these things...to see thee...to love thee. And to follow thee.

Amen