

There's an unmarked trail off Highway 105 not far from Valle Crucis, North Carolina that seemingly leads nowhere. If you blink you'll miss it and realize your error only once you've passed by an abandoned steam engine on the east side of the highway.

There's an open gravel space nearby, too overgrown to call a parking lot or an overlook and there are rarely any cars parked there. It's precisely when there are no cars there that you want to make sure to stop and make your way down the trail. But then again, the first time you go, it might feel good to see someone else is already there.

The trail, too, is overgrown, but the branches easily give way to hands and feet moving down the trail, not unlike the guards who are physically paralyzed by the angelic proclamation of Jesus' triumph over death.

The first time you go head off down that trail, it can be kind of scary. *Where are you taking me?* you might wonder inside your head or aloud to those you thought were your friends before they brought you down this windy trail. You can almost hear banjo music in the trees even though all the other sounds from back up the hill fall silent. You begin to wonder what lies through the limbs and beyond the stones. *It can't be as good as we've been told. Will there be anything worth seeing when we get there?*

The trail ends at collection of stones. Maybe at one time they were a single, formidable, large stone there at the edge of the Watauga River. Now they rest in pieces probably victims of the WPA laborers or TVA employees who were charged with damming up the Watauga at this very point some years ago. Once imposing, they now serve little more purpose than to support the towels and sandals and water bottles of those who've come to visit what lies beyond the stones.

As you'd expect the dam has created a pool--a swimming hole you might call it--in the river's path. Now that the dam is no longer used to generate electricity, adventure seeking adolescents use it to escape the world back up on the highway.

Fear has welled up inside you as you moved past the defenseless branches and around the once giant stone in pieces.

It stays with you as you put your towel and your sandals and your water bottle with the others and walk to the edge of the dam.

What you're there to experience isn't the trail or the branches or the stones, but the pool - the pool full of brisk, refreshing, motionless water. It's a pool that you've been told before is deep enough to leap into feet first, that no one has ever reached its depths from that 18 foot leap, and that once you leap it's an experience that will have you climbing back up the riverbanks to leap into again and again and again.

If you're lucky enough to be there when someone else has showed up before you, you might be lucky enough to see them there at the edge to tell you once again, what you've been told before: there's nothing to fear!

But you have to make that first leap. You have to look beyond to sense the joy that's calling you in and back out. You have to see for yourself that what they say is true.

And so in your fear you've made it past the branches guarding the way, and the stones in your path, and you've heard the good news again, and something happens. Something tells you what you've been afraid of up to now isn't there. You remember what you've been told. Joy awaits you beyond your fears.

So, at the edge of the dam, with your toes hanging off, you leap. You feel the wind. You feel the freedom. You realize it's true!

You splash down and you feel the cold deep water. You realize you can't reach the bottom of the depths of that pool full of joy and you come back up and you breathe that mountain air and you can't swim fast enough to the edge to get out and do it again and to tell the others standing nearby who are still nursing their fears. *He was right!*

And you get up and you run up the river bank, adrenaline pumping, fear lingering but dissipating, joy rising and you tell everyone else with you to jump.

Some jump right in, others are lingering still wondering and worrying. But the news is out there and the joy continues to build.

In that moment of reaching the stone, the Marys were fearful. There were guards. There was a huge stone. They weren't sure if what they'd been told before could be true. But then they are reminded by the angel what Jesus had told all of his disciples before:

Fear and death could not contain him, that the best efforts to let them win would fail, that joy would await them after three days behind the stone.

There was fear that they were wrong. Fear that Jesus was wrong. Fear that they were crazy. But that washed away and made room for joy when they realized they weren't - that the depths of God's love can't be measured and can't be contained, that everything they went through, everything they endured and felt and left behind was worth it.

The greatest moments of our life, and the very truth of our faith, are filled with fear and great joy. They are marked by the joys we find conquering our worst fears. I quite literally almost broke Elizabeth's hands during our wedding because I was simultaneously terrified of the responsibility of becoming her partner and overjoyed at the prospect of joining our lives together.

Joy conquers fear. Love conquers hate. Life is stronger than death.

And the angel tells them to go and tell the others. They don't need to tell each other. They don't need to tell the guards. They need to run and tell those who aren't there.

When we find a swimming hole like the one down an unmarked trail on Highway 105, it can be easy to want to keep that joy to ourselves. We want to keep the overgrown gravel turnaround as overgrown and unnoticeable as possible. If too many people find out about it, we're afraid the joy might go away. We might not be able to leap into that pool's freedom anymore because there will be too many people swimming down below.

And that's where the swimming hole and the truth of the resurrection diverge.

Yes, we leap at this point in our tradition, trusting that Jesus was right all along and now seeing that for ourselves. But when we hit the water and realize it's all worth it - that every sacrifice we make, every risk we take in service to love others and seek justice, and heal a broken world is backed up with the boundlessness of God's love and ability to reconcile, we run.

We run up the bank and past the stones and through the branches and back to the highway and we start telling everyone who we see what lies down the end of that trail. We stop traffic to direct people toward it. We clean up the trail and spruce up the gravel. We tell what we've seen to those who are fearful, to those who are unsure, to those who believe there are reasons

it can't be true and limits to love and measurable depths to God's grace because there are no limits or depths or boundaries to what God can do.

We leap, but we don't leave the same as we entered. We can't leave this place like that. If we do, it's just like any other Sunday. There's news to share that makes all things new!

Christ is Risen! Alleluia! Amen.