

“Funny Thing About Easter”
The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.
Sunday, April 8, 2007

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Sermon Text: Luke 24:1-12

Holy Father, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of every heart be acceptable unto You, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Now, the season of Lent is over. For 40 days, I've been calling all of us sinners, and we are, but not today. Today, we celebrate the fact that we are loved and forgiven. Lent is over. Life has won over death. Love has won over sin. Grace has won over judgment. Easter is a time for laughter and rejoicing.

You remember Isaac from the Old Testament, the son of Abraham, and Isaac, the son of Sarah, whose very name, Isaac's name in Hebrew means “laughter.” Abraham laughed. Sarah laughed. When God does impossible things through people who trust Him, it is okay to laugh! It's in the Bible. There is laughter in this story of God's dealing with His people from the very beginning.

We sit here too somber. Easter! Sin and death are defeated! Skirmishes and battles remain, but God has won the war! Now we may truly live and truly love and truly laugh and be with God forever just by doing what Abraham and Sarah did, by trusting God!

The early church told jokes at Easter. Augustine, Gregory of Nyssa, and John Chrysostom, they all believed that God played a practical joke on the devil by raising Jesus from the dead. Early theologians called it the Easter laugh. The risus paschalis in Latin, the Easter laugh. They used to go wild at Easter! There are some records of congregations chasing their minister through the town with buckets of water trying to drench him and then have a party afterwards. I don't recommend that! It was like a team after they had just won the game in dumping the Gatorade on the coach. The Easter laugh! This should not be an overly somber day. It's Easter!

Their understanding of what God did in Jesus sort of went like this. It may sound strange to us, but this is the theology in its simplest form. They believed that God hid his fullness within the human body of Jesus, and when the power of death seized the body of Jesus, it was unaware of the hook of divinity, which lay hidden within. When Jesus descended to the dead and then up again, Jesus burst open the gates of Hell and death – thus the Easter laugh! The risus paschalis!

It may sound, when I first say it, as if I'm going a little too far, but you know the Trix commercial? The Trix commercial, silly rabbit, Trix are for kids! It is that attitude in this theology. Silly devil, you cannot kill God! The Easter laugh.

We get hints of this idea from the Gospel of John, the first chapter, verse 5, where it says that Jesus was coming into the world. In these theological terms, the light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it, and in some translations, cannot comprehend it! Evil, evil we see in the world, evil we sometimes see in ourselves, evil has a strutting confidence that it knows, but it knows nothing but self. Evil cannot

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comprehend that goodness, holiness and light have more power than evil and corruption and darkness. Evil is ultimately stupid and passing away. It thought the Holy Man, Jesus, was done on the cross. Surprise! The Easter laugh! It is not over until God says it is over.

Easter is the preview of the laughter and the celebration to come. The disciples slowly began to understand the Easter event, and it gave them tremendous courage and confidence. They went from men locked behind doors and shuttered windows to brave and fearless apostles.

I'll tell you a true story. Some missionaries to the Arctic were trying to put together a translation of the Bible in Inuit language, the Eskimo language, and they couldn't find a good word for joy. They needed the word for joy. They found 37 words for snow, but only, and they didn't need them, but no word for joy! The missionaries went to the Eskimo people, and they were trying to figure this out, and they saw a whole pack of sled dogs, of Huskies who had finished their work for the day. The Huskies were playful and smiling as dogs can smile sometimes, and just happy that their day was over. They said they wanted a word that describes what those Huskies feel. The Inuits said okay and they gave them the word. Months later, the Inuit Bible was complete, and it was Easter, much like today, and this is the English equivalent of what the congregation heard. The disciples were in the upper room for fear of discovery, and Jesus appeared to them, and when the disciples saw the Lord, they wagged their tails. A whole new kind of liturgical dance!

The joy of Easter is worth sharing in whatever words you find best! Two brave church members were going door to door handing out invitations to worship pre-Easter. They knocked on the door of a woman, who was not happy to see them. She told them in no uncertain terms she did not want to hear their invitation to worship, and she slammed the door in their faces. To her surprise, the door just slowly bounced right back open. She tried again. She put her back into it. She slammed the door hard. The door just bounced right back open. She was convinced that these rude church people were sticking their foot in the door or something so she reared back to give it a final slam, but one of them said, “Ma’am, before you do that, you probably should move your cat.”

Laughter is appropriate at Easter. Groaning is not.

St. Francis of Assisi said to leave sadness to the devil. The devil has reason to be sad. We, on the other hand, have reason to rejoice. Martin Luther, who was not known for his sense of humor, wrote this, he said, “God is not a God of sadness. Christ is a God of joy. It is pleasing to dear God whenever thou rejoices or laughs from the bottom of thy heart.” It is pleasing to God when you laugh from the bottom of your heart. The Puritans had it wrong! John Wesley said the same. He said, “Sour Godliness is the devil’s religion.”

God wants His joy, His spirit to dwell deeply within us, and to give us new life and a new ability to love and a new ability to forgive as we have been forgiven. What could be

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more appropriate than to laugh about a God so amazingly full of grace for imperfect creatures such as us? Think of it. The Easter laugh. The risus paschalis. In the resurrection, God has played a cosmic joke on the powers of darkness by raising Jesus from the dead. Now, I want you to picture this. This is my translation, and the words are absolutely wrong, but the tone of it, the tone of it is correct. I'm being a little facetious, but try to picture it.

It was Friday. It was Friday just at the cross, and just then Satan sat down to watch golf on TV. You see, my idea of hell includes golf on TV – every channel, all the time. He sat down after the cross, and he said, “God is not so tough!” A few days later, the resurrection, the Easter laugh, and the party in Hell was over, and the party in Heaven began, and the party in Heaven is still going on! It kicks up a notch every time a sinner comes to himself or comes to herself and accepts God's embrace. Hell is still defeated, and that is what Jesus meant when He said the gates of Hell shall not prevail against the Kingdom of God. Jesus burst those gates wide open!

You know, John Wesley believed, and he acted like he believed that the debt owed to sin and death was paid for all. Universal atonement is what we Methodists have preached and believed from the beginning. God's salvation is offered to any who see their need of a Savior and accept Jesus as the Savior God sent. That theology drove Wesley to do a most undignified thing for an Oxford man. He preached from stumps and fields and outside coalmines and in taverns and wherever to tell them the good news that God loves you so much that God sent His son to take on sin and death for you, and furthermore, God won!

It is God's desire to give you the Kingdom of Heaven, to give it, take it. Take it and rejoice in it. Live it and pass it on! So as we sing our closing hymn in a few minutes, don't sing to your shoes today. You know what I mean, look down and sing to your shoes. Don't do that. Not today! On this day of all days, sing out like you know it and as if you mean it and have heard it for the first time. God was in Christ making peace by the blood of His cross. For me, for you, and for any and all who will come! You need not fear death or judgment. Breathe easy! Enjoy life and follow the spirit urgings to new and more meaningful life. You are loved and given new and eternal life, and forgiven because of Jesus' cross and His resurrection.

Someone has said that joy is the serious business of Heaven. Joy is the serious business of Heaven.

Now, another true story on me. It's not funny to me. It may be funny to you. It's true. We had a community Easter sunrise service years ago when I preached in Rock Hill, and the tradition was that we had a big breakfast under a big covered area first. We had the breakfast, and then we had the service later. It was my Easter to preach, and the pastor in charge asked me this question. He said, “Are you ready to preach or should we let them enjoy themselves for awhile?”

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Well, would you like less preaching and more joy? Me, too. BUT, I’ve done all this research, and I have just a little bit more.

I’ve done some research, which convinces me, and it’s a little off the side, but some of you have asked me about how we figure Easter and why it moves around. Well, in my research, I now know, I am convinced that there were church committees, there were committees making decisions in churches in the first century. I can prove it! Do you know how the date of Easter is set? Do you? Easter is the first Sunday after the first full moon after the vernal equinox. The first Sunday after the first full moon after the vernal equinox. Now, think about that. I rest my case. That is the work of a committee!

The church does all sorts of things strangely, sometimes upside down. Today is a joyful, spiritual day, but sometimes, with the best of intentions, we give spiritual support when practical support is called for. Other times, we throw money and clothes at people who just want another human being to care and to listen to them. We do occasionally get it wrong.

Another true story. This really happened. Several women were visiting in a former church. They were visiting an elderly friend, a friend who was ill. After a while, they got up to leave, and they said, “Well, we will keep you in our prayers.” The lady shot back, she said, “Listen, I can do my own praying. Could you just do the dishes before you leave?”

Easter laughter can travel from the sublime all the way to the practical. God has met our spiritual needs and told us to spread that word and to meet the more mundane needs of our neighbors. Who are our neighbors? Anyone with needs.

Before you leave upset that I have called Easter a joke, I want you to think about what a joke is. Usually it is when the tables are turned, when something unexpected, something unpredictable happens right at the punch line. There is nothing more unexpected, nothing more unpredictable than the resurrection of Jesus. To believe in it is to be part of that huge cosmic joke that God plays on all of us who blindly trust in the sufficiency of human reason to unravel all the problems and to answer every question. We cannot. We have better toys now, and we have better weapons, but in all of our progress has humanity grown one millimeter in our compassion for others or in our capacity to forgive enemies? Have we grown? Can we grow without God’s Holy Spirit to empower us and to guide us?

Easter is a cosmic joke. The forces of evil, the powers of darkness in the world always believe they have one trick up their sleeve – death! When forces of evil take power, they rule with the threat of death. Death is an ally to evil. Death is the result of evil. Evil seems to think that death is the ultimate power. Only when we believe in the resurrection can we quote the Scripture and mean it, “Oh death where is thy victory? Oh death where is thy sting?” You see, the empty cross and the empty tomb mock death’s power.

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We spend a lot of time thinking about death, and sometimes we act as if we believe that death has the final word, but the Gospel says God wins and death has no power, death has no hold on God’s children.

I want to close with something a bit unusual. This is not, this is not a laugh, but it does underline the power of Easter. A clergy friend of mine on our Internet list wrote this the night before Easter just a few years ago. I saved it. It’s personal so I’m changing the names. She wrote this the night before Easter before she had to preach. She said, “I need your prayers this night. Tomorrow I preach my first Easter sermon since my 18-year-old daughter died. My heart is broken, mostly for myself. I lost one of Vermont’s premier athletes, prospective valedictorian, and she could also sing like an angel, but most of all, she was kind and beautiful and still loved her mommy enough to crawl into my bed almost every night to tell me about her day. I loved her more than I can ever say, and tomorrow, for me, preaching Easter is no longer academic. I’m telling this congregation, even without saying her name, what it is I believe, that because Jesus so loved God that He walked all the way perfectly fulfilling God’s will for His life, He died, but it doesn’t stop there! God lifted Jesus up out of that grave. Death could not hold Him. Christ is risen! Because my daughter walked this world with Jesus, she, too, is risen with Christ. God help me! This is almost too hard to do. Please pray for me. May your prayers help me be a witness to this congregation, to those who come just to dress up. May they go home hearing something that actually is life or death. Thank you. Reverend Michelle”

Easter is a lot like real life. There is laughter, and there are tears. Through God in Christ the secret we know that gives us joy over all, no matter what, is that in the end laughter, love, and light win! God wins! That is the message of Easter.

Hypolitus an early church father, who died for his faith in 235 AD, wrote this Easter hymn. One ancient Easter hymn, join then all of you, join in our master’s rejoicing, rich men, poor men, sing and dance together, you that have fasted, and you that have not fasted, make merry today. Christ is risen. The world below is in ruins. Christ is risen. The spirits of evil are falling. Christ is risen. The angels of God are rejoicing. Christ is risen. And the people say, He is risen indeed. He is risen indeed. Amen.