

EASTER SERMON for April 17, 2022 Grace Lutheran
TEXTS: John 20: 1-20
TITLE: "The Last Laugh"

My mother died four years ago, at age 104. I thought it would be fairly easy for me to say goodbye, because she was so old and because she had a strong faith and was certainly “ready to go”.

I didn’t conduct the funeral service, of course, and I was very composed at that service, and a few weeks later we had the graveside committal of her ashes. My brothers asked me to do a short “committal” liturgy at the graveside, because there was just the family there, maybe 8 or 10 of us.

And that’s when the tears came! When I thought about this afterwards, I reckoned that I didn’t weep because of my love for her, but rather because of her love for me – a lifetime of love.

Mary’s weeping over Jesus’ death is mentioned several times in today’s Gospel Reading, and no wonder. Mary had been very close to Jesus, and he had died a horrible, shameful death. But also, he had been her dear Teacher, guru and Lord, and more than that, his divine love had turned her life around. She had known his love personally and deeply.

Therefore, at the tomb, when the resurrected Jesus appears to her, she fails to recognize him. She assumes he’s the grounds-keeper. No doubt her eyes were blurred with tears and her mind clouded by grief and darkened by extreme sadness.

Jesus asks her, "Woman, why are you crying?" A foolish question, but Jesus, as a perfect pastoral counsellor, wants her to talk, to let it out.

Finally, Jesus reveals that he is alive, and the women go with great excitement to tell the other disciples. Then, on the evening of that day, all the disciples get a visit from Jesus, and everyone is joyful about the resurrection, even Thomas.

American theologian Harvey Cox called Easter “God’s last laugh.” He meant that death does not have the last laugh, God does. As the old proverb says, “He who laughs last, laughs best.”

The Resurrection of our Lord is a more important celebration than Christmas, and it certainly trumps Good Friday, which we celebrated a couple of days ago. Today we celebrate the revelation of the full Gospel, the complete Good News that the disciples were then commanded to spread abroad and communicate to the ends of the earth. This story of Jesus, which seemed to end in death and grief and sorrow, ended in joy and gladness! The good news is as St. Paul wrote: He arose and we will rise with him. Death no longer needs to be feared. It’s merely a doorway into an unimaginable realm of glory.

So, our faith is a joyful faith. We too will have the last laugh.

Over the centuries, Christians have not always emphasized the joy of Easter, but often wallowed in the misery of Good Friday, perhaps because they had a lot of repressed grief that was not socially acceptable to express except on Good Friday.

Johann Sebastian Bach wrote a song called “Komm, süßer Tod, komm selge Ruh” (Come, sweet death, come, blessed rest), which was one of Bach’s most popular works. He’s expressing a desire to depart this life of suffering and enter eternal peace and rest. Recently a singer named Arianna sang a song with that same name (Komm Susser Tod), but the lyrics are very different! Her song is about looking forward to death because life is futile and not worth living. That’s far from Bach’s message!

Anyhow, most Christians over the centuries have not dwelt on the misery of Good Friday, except to give thanks that Christ atoned for our sins on the cross and enabled us to be forgiven and no longer burdened with the guilt of our past.

Instead, most Christians down through the ages have rightly emphasized the Resurrection. It was the main message of the first Christian apostles and evangelists, as Paul explains in today's Second Reading, which is from First Corinthians 15. Paul calls the Resurrection "The Death of Death". The "last enemy" to be conquered will be Death. So there's no need to be sad. We will have the last laugh!

Back in the twelfth century, the Russian Orthodox Church inaugurated a Holy Humour Day, to be celebrated on Easter Monday. On that day, they did nothing but sit around telling jokes! They said they were imitating the Cosmic Joke that God pulled on Satan when God turned the tables and snatched Jesus out of the realm of the dead.

This concept of "holy hilaritas" spread to the Catholic Church in the Middle Ages. Hilaritas is a Latin word which doesn't mean mindless giggling, but is more like a wink and a chuckle when you get a joke. Unfortunately, in the 1670's Pope Clement X prohibited this holy hilarity. Many Protestant Reformers also attacked the practice. Which is not so surprising, because the Reformers were pretty serious guys, and they lived in a grim and fearful time in history, when people wore black and believed in all sorts of ghosts and goblins and witches and genii and "things that go bump in the night".

In the later Middle Ages, things began to change. For instance, in Bavaria, in southern Germany, it became a custom in many of the Catholic churches that, at the end of the Easter Mass, the priest would leave the altar and come down among the people and lead the congregation in what was called the "Risus Paschalis" which means "the Easter laughter." The priest would tell funny stories and sing comical songs, and some priests even danced and brayed like a donkey, and the church would ring with laughter.

They were celebrating the joy that Jesus Christ is alive and free and loose among us! They were rejoicing that all the forces that conspired against Jesus to lay him in his tomb, all the hate, the fury, the violence, the vaunted powers of kings and empires – God had made them a laughingstock through the victorious Resurrection of the Messiah.

Martin Luther's wife, Katie Luther, after witnessing one of her husband's melancholy moods, dressed herself entirely in black clothes, as if going to a funeral. When Martin asked why she was dressed in black, she replied, "Well, I thought from the way you're acting, God must be dead!"

I once did a study on humour in the Bible and I found there are many instances of humour there, although it's mostly sharp irony rather than laugh-out-loud humour. Unfortunately, this usually is lost in translation from the Hebrew and Greek original.

We need to always remember what Jesus said: "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart (BE OF GOOD CHEER), I have overcome the world." In other words: "Don't worry, you will have the last laugh."

Umberto Eco wrote a marvellous mystery novel called "The Name of the Rose", about a group of monks in a medieval monastery, and one of the monks says: "Laughter is weakness, corruption, the foolishness of our flesh. It is the peasant's entertainment, the drunkard's license—and most insidious of all—it dulls our fear of punishment which is the only thing that keeps us in line."

Well, it's not fear of punishment that sustains our faith. It's mainly the joy we have in the Good News of Easter!

Today, above all days, is a day to be joyful over the good news of God's love, a day to celebrate God's making the last first and the first last, of God's making fools turn out to be wise, and turning the

wise into fools. Such is the upside-down way of God, whose Son's resurrection is like the unexpected punch-line in a long and entertaining story.

Maybe you heard the joke about the Iowa farmer who was very proud of his 200 acres of rich, productive land. One day a Texas rancher visited him and asked: "Is this your whole farm? Why back in Texas, I get into my car at 5 am. in the morning and drive all day; and at dusk I just reach the end of my ranch." The Iowa farmer replied, "Yeah, I used to have a car like that too."

Laughing is good for us; it releases tension and stress. It takes us out of our selves and our problems for a few minutes, and it reminds us that God wants us to smile and have a positive outlook on life, in the midst of so much around us that's negative.

I hope our laughing is an expression of our joy and thanksgiving to God for giving us the last laugh in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Happy Easter!

Amen.