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THE COMEDY OF EASTER

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Matthew 28.1-10

After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him. This is my message to you.’” So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them and said, “Greetings!” And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”

A very daring minister once asked the kids during the children's time one Easter if anyone knew what the resurrection was. One replied that it was the day Jesus came out of the tomb and saw his shadow and then there were six more weeks of winter. Before the pastor could reply, another child raised her hand to say that resurrection was the time when Jesus came out of the tomb and hid colored eggs all over the yard for the kids to find. Before the pastor could respond to her, another kid said "I don't know what it is, but I know that if you have it for more than four hours, you're supposed to call the doctor." That brought the house down and was the last time the minister asked the kids to explain any theological mystery.

It's good that we should laugh this morning. After all, it's Easter and it's been a long winter. Laughter is part of what makes us human. Among all of God's creatures, human beings are the only animals who both laugh and weep—for we are the only animals who are struck with the difference between the way things are and the way things ought to be. In those priceless moments when we are keenly aware of the incongruity of this world, humor results.* Here is the very essence of Easter: hope for the way things ought to be, even when we are stuck with the way things are.

The great theologian Reinhold Niebuhr says that the very essence of sin is to take ourselves too seriously. And if that be true, the very essence of grace is to receive the gift of laughter, particularly when the most laughable incongruities consist of the gap between who we are and who God would have us to be.*

Humor occurs when we are put in our place. A pie gets thrown in the face of a smug, haughty woman in an overly-expensive evening gown who looks down on those in humble attire.

Humor occurs when we realize we are not in control even if we think we're in control. A cool, calm, collected gentleman slips on a banana peel and ends up sprawled on the sidewalk.

Humor occurs when the human situation is exposed and we realize the tragedy of taking things too seriously. A mother lectures her decked-out-in-their-Easter-best-kids about getting their clothes dirty only to find them splashing in the mud puddle like happy little children.

And so we come today when the Jesus of history becomes the Christ of faith to celebrate the comedy of Easter. When he was on this earth, Jesus spent his days reveling in the comedy of God's grace. He spent his life shattering the conventional wisdom that God loved some people but not others, undermining systems that oppressed and marginalized. He exposed the unholy by telling little jokes that made some people laugh, some people cry and other people angry.

Jesus told about God the comic shepherd who gets more of a kick out of finding that one lost sheep than the 99 who had sense not to get lost in the first place. He told about how much easier it is to thread a camel through the eye of a sewing needle than it is for haughty people who think God favors them to really know God. He told the comedy about the hated but good Samaritan who helped the wounded Jew left for dead alongside the road. He laughed at the paradox of little children being more insightful than educated adults. When he told the accusers of a woman caught in adultery that only those without sin could stone her to death, the woman left laughing and weeping for joy; the embarrassed accusers were doing anything but laughing. The humble people laughed with giddy delight; the haughty, pious, privileged folks turned purple with rage because the comedy exposed their hypocrisy. There's rich comedy in saying that when you've done it to the least of these, you've done it to God! The kingdom of God, Jesus said with a broad smile that stretched from one end of the globe to the other, is one that includes prostitutes, welcomes thieves and sees in even the drunkard the countenance of the divine.

The story is told of a neighbor who saw a boy sitting on the curb crying. When asked what was wrong, the boy replied that he couldn't see Jesus. The neighbor assured the boy that no one can see him. Then a nun came by and told the boy the same thing. At this point a rather inebriated man staggered out of the bar near the boy, and overhearing the conversation said to them all, "Well, I'm Jesus Christ and I can prove it." He took the boy by the hand, and with the neighbor and the nun following closely at his heels, walked back into the bar. As he came through the door, the bartender yelled out "Jesus Christ, are you in here again?" Even the bartender recognized the comedy of Jesus being seen as a drunkard.

A theatrical comedy is defined as a story depicting situations in which people ultimately triumph over adversity. The comedy of Easter is laughter at the improbable amid the impossible, the surprise that life can be abundant amid the death of all that we depend on to make it so. The comedy of resurrection does not overlook the perception of God's absence or the God who doesn't seem interested in answering our prayer the way we want it answered. The tragedy is in giving up because we think God has given up; the comedy is in persevering against the odds. Easter is nothing less than the quintessential holy joke that with God nothing is impossible.

Gibby Monokoski was a man of only 63 years when he died ten days ago, his body ravaged by cancer for several years. But he never got angry about it. When his wife Susan asked why, he laughed. He laughed a holy laugh. It wasn't a cavalier laugh; it wasn't a nervous laugh to cover up his anger. It was an honest, bold response from a man who wasn't going to let this disease control him. What was the point of anger except to churn up more anger? To be angry is to succumb to power of the disease. He was determined to overcome this disease, and he did. He died sooner than he wanted to, but he didn't lose the battle. He refused to let cancer define his life. He refused to let cancer keep him from doing what he wanted to do. He refused to let cancer stop him from enjoying every day, even in the midst of pain. It wasn't, as Susan said, that he was in denial, but in defiance of the possibility that this would get him down. It did not conquer him; he won and it was the holiest of comedies well-lived.

Jesus died believing God had forsaken him. "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?" was his agonizing cry from the cross. Like every human being, he suffered; he died. He wasn't rescued from the cross any more than the 6,000 others crucified with him that day. At the time, he didn't know the possibility of resurrection. But God surprised him, and everyone around him. The comedy is in the unforeseeable of an Easter morning when one couldn't even imagine it on the Friday before. There is no Easter resurrection without a Good Friday death. But it is Easter that allows us to call the dark day of death on Friday, good. What could be more comedic than to be able to laugh in the face of death and call it good?

Where is the resurrection when you work night and day in a thankless job and yet find yourself deeper in debt? Where is the resurrection when your child gets caught in an ugly cycle of drugs and alcohol and you are helpless to stop her? Where is the resurrection when, after working forty years, you realize you're about to lose your home? Where is the resurrection when you wake up one morning and realize you don't really give a damn about anything anymore? Where is the resurrection when you have lived longer than you want to, or aren't going to live as long as you'd hoped? These are the Friday's that are black as night and dark as hell and are anything but good. But the story isn't finished; you and God are still writing the script. You haven't given up yet, have you? You are here today. You are still navigating your way through the muck and mire of each day, aren't you? You get out of bed and make your way through the day and the month and the year. Then you, too, know something of Easter's resurrection.

Once upon a time, the story goes, a preacher ran through the streets of the city shouting, 'We must put God into our lives. We must put God into our lives.' And hearing him, the old monastic rose up in the city plaza to say, "No, sir, you are wrong. You see, God is already in our lives. Our task is simply to recognize that."** To miss that is a tragedy; to believe it, even when we can't see it, is the comedy of Easter. Amen.

--Gary L. McCann

**And The Laugh Shall Be First: a treasury of religious humor.* William H. Willimon. From the introduction, (pp. 9-12).

**Joan Chittister, OSB