

Easter Day 2011

There is something poignantly moving and also subtly hilarious about this story of the women coming to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body that first Easter morning. I once heard someone with a slightly twisted sense of humor—like mine—refer to these women as the original Spice Girls.

You know, our Orthodox Christian friends have a tradition of telling funny stories on Easter as a way of underlining the amazement and wonder of the day. So, just for today, instead of being God's frozen-chosen, let's become Orthodox.

Did you hear about the poor rabbit that was killed by a car?
The driver pulls over feeling terrible.
Another car stops quickly and a woman grabs a spray can from the trunk.
She rushes over to the dead rabbit and douses it with the spray.
Miraculously, the bunny comes to life, jumps up,
waves its paw at the two drivers, and hops down the road.
After about ten yards, the rabbit stops, turns around, and waves again.
Then it hops down the road another ten yards, turns and waves.
This goes on until the rabbit is out of sight.

The first driver is astonished and asks the woman what was in the spray can.
The woman gives him the can.
He reads the label, "Hair Spray: restores life to dead hair. Adds permanent wave."

Or, a man walks into a pub in Dublin for the first time.
After finding a seat, he orders three pints of Guinness.
When they arrive, he drinks all three, by himself, taking a sip out of each pint in turn.
He does this every day for a week, after which time the bartender works up enough nerve to suggest that the beer might be fresher if he ordered them one at a time.
The man laughs and explains that he is one of three brothers,
one of whom lives in Australia and the other in America.
The day they parted to go their separate ways,
they promised that they would each drink this way
to remember the happy days they had together in Dublin.
At that, the bartender nods his head approvingly.

The man becomes a regular at the bar
and he always drinks his Guinness in the same way:
three pints drinking them each in turn.
One day in late February, the man, looking rather somber,
comes into the pub and orders only two pints of beer.
The bartender and other regulars notice the missing pint and guess its significance;
something must have happened.
After the man finishes his two beers, the bartender approaches him and says,
"I don't want to interrupt you in your time of sorrow,
but since you are such a faithful customer, I feel that I should offer you my condolences.

*This sermon was written by The Rev. Theo Park and delivered at Christ Episcopal Church, Red Wing.
Fr. Theo thanks all those whose material he has borrowed and apologizes to those he has overlooked.*

I am sorry about your brother."

The man looks momentarily confused and then says,

"Oh, oh no, no cause for grief. My brother hasn't died. I've just given up beer for Lent."

And I know you remember Jesus' friend Joseph of Arimathea.

He was a respected pharisee in the leadership of the Jewish political community.

Joseph took a great risk by asking for Jesus' body after the crucifixion

and it was his new and expensive tomb in which Jesus was buried.

But you probably don't know about the neighbor who cornered him a few days later

and said, "Joseph, that was such a beautiful, costly, hand-hewn tomb.

Why on earth did you give it to someone else to be buried in?"

Joseph just smiled. "Why not?" he said. "He only needed it for the weekend."

The image of Jesus in the tomb brings us back to Easter

and the proverbial elephant in the middle of the room.

We all look around it as if it doesn't exist.

The name of this elephant is death.

As you probably noticed, all the humorous stories I used this morning

are stories making light of death.

Because so is the Gospel!

This passage from Matthew is wonderfully funny, and it's humor all about death.

Now, humor often depends upon surprise and the reversal of expectation,
and that's exactly what happens here.

The women are shocked and amazed, struck speechless,
by what they see in the graveyard.

And what *do* they see?

Where they expect something—a body—they find nothing.

Where they expect a quiet hush they encounter an earthquake and a flash of lightning.

Then—and surely there is humor in this—they are told not to be afraid!

By a glowing supernatural manifestation, no less.

Finally, for those of us hearing the story,

there is the delicious internal irony that Jesus who should be dead has come to life

and the guards who should be living have become like dead men.

Funny, funny, funny.

If it were shown on tv today, you might imagine the women as Lucy and Ethel,

or Laverne and Shirley, or maybe Grace with Will and Jack in drag,

with a heavy laugh-track in the background.

But the women don't get the joke at all until they see Jesus, and he speaks to them.

Only then do they understand the punchline:

Death itself has been trumped and life is promised to all.

Can you imagine how tv would play that? Or a good film director?

After all this running around and pratfalling and guards turning googly-eyed

and passing out and the smart-aleck angel, off the women run.

*This sermon was written by The Rev. Theo Park and delivered at Christ Episcopal Church, Red Wing.
Fr. Theo thanks all those whose material he has borrowed and apologizes to those he has overlooked.*

And then there would be the moment when they pass by Jesus,
not recognizing him in their hurry, and he calls out, "Hi there!"
And the mood changes instantly.
No more laugh track, just a moment of pregnant silence
as the women stare at him and each other,
and then hugs and tears all around and profound joy...and yes, more laughter.

Now don't get me wrong: although I'm playing with its potential for humor,
Easter is about death.
Fleming Rutledge, a thoughtful Episcopal priest and author,
identifies this when she says "I look forward to Easter day more keenly each year
as I get older, because... there isn't anything we can do about death.
It is so damned inexorable, and I do mean damned....
We feel its presence as a hostile, invading power."

The women at the tomb know the presence of death and its power.
And the author underlines this when he says that
even in their great joy at the angel's message they felt fear.
Any of us who have ever lost parents, sisters and brothers, spouses and children
know about the power of death.

It seems to me that if we don't come to Easter with some sense
of the power of death over our lives,
then the surprise and the joy of the Easter message,
the punchline of the Easter joke, may be lost to us.
Not that we have to look far: Easter speaks to a world in which death is a present force.
A world where teen lives are ended before they have really begun;
a world where parents in our community beat children to death;
a world in which hatred is justified because people are part of another religion,
or a different expression of the same religion; a world at war;
a world in which violence has become the effective political tool of terrorists and patriots
alike; a world in which death carries the name famine, cholera, AIDS.

Parts of our world are all we need to know of hell.
It is to these parts that Easter speaks a word.
A word that seems almost superficial if it is not spoken in the shadow of death.

The word is love.
And again there is humor in the situation, the quizzical humor of paradox,
because we are talking about the kind of love that theologian Reinhold Niebuhr
called an impossible possibility, at least for human beings:
that completely self-giving, life-transforming,
caring utterly for others-yet utterly uncaring of self kind of love
that God shows for us in Jesus Christ.
It is a love that surprises and reverses all expectations
and it brings laughter to our lips to contemplate and great joy,
and not a little fear and awe.
Especially when experienced in the presence of the power of death.

*This sermon was written by The Rev. Theo Park and delivered at Christ Episcopal Church, Red Wing.
Fr. Theo thanks all those whose material he has borrowed and apologizes to those he has overlooked.*

In the face of death, the women at the tomb and the earliest apostles experience such a love first-hand, and claim as impossible truth that God has conquered death and will never abandon any one of us. And in doing so they join a long line of comics telling and retelling the oldest joke in the book. I think my favorite version is in Paul, as he writes to the Corinthians. Paul says, with some liberties on my part, "Listen, I'm going to let you in on something that's so crazy you'll never believe it; in fact, it's a mystery! Death has been swallowed up in victory. Ha! How's that for funny? Hey death: where's your sting now, buddy boy? And you grave, where is your victory? Hoo boy, this is rich. It's killin' me!" And you have to know that in this little routine Paul is simply updating material used by the prophets Isaiah and Hosea, both writing some 800 years earlier; so for nearly 3000 years people have been telling this joke about the impossible possibility of God's love!

And still, after all that time, some people just don't get the punchline. "Prove it to me," they say. "Where's the evidence of the resurrection?" I can't prove it; there isn't any evidence, at least not with logic adequate to convince anyone of the truth of Easter. If I were to argue the hard evidence for the resurrection in a court of law I would expect to lose. Because Easter is neither a logical proposition nor an historic event. Easter is an experience, not only of the past but of the present.

If you want evidence of resurrection look around you today. This church is full, as are all the others in town, across America, and throughout the world. The evidence of Resurrection is not in the careful study of biblical texts, or innovative advances in archeology, or the complex arguments of theology. The evidence of resurrection is in the product of those who believe. The evidence of the resurrection rests within each one of you who worships with us this glad morning. It is not a conclusion of the mind but a journey of the heart, not about logic but about surprise and mystery and the reversal of expectations. Easter is a joke, my friends, and the best evidence for its reality lies in its very absurdity. As they say, if you understand, no explanation is necessary; if you don't understand, no explanation is possible.

Now I can't speak for the world; I can only speak for myself. I know I have changed, or should I say, I know I have been changed. The truth that Christ is risen has forever altered my life. Life is still painful. Life is not fair. There is still death. But the truth of the impossible possibility of God's tremendous love means for me that pain and injustice and death are no longer the subtitles of this life. The truth that Christ is risen means to me that love always lies on the other side of pain; hope always lies on the other side of loss, redemption and new life always lie on the other side of death.

This sermon was written by The Rev. Theo Park and delivered at Christ Episcopal Church, Red Wing. Fr. Theo thanks all those whose material he has borrowed and apologizes to those he has overlooked.

You see, Easter has no real depth of meaning, no personal meaning, until we own it, until we take it from being an objective story to making it our subjective truth. To say that in the resurrection, "Jesus conquered death," means little until that statement is translated by each of us into the concrete reality of our lives. The full power of this day only makes sense when we experience and know that Christ's living presence makes a difference in how we live our lives and deal with our losses.

One last joke at Death's expense:
Richard Lischer, professor at Duke Divinity School, wrote a book about his life as a freshly ordained Lutheran pastor in a little southern Illinois town. In it he tells this memorable tale of Buster Toland's funeral.

Buster was a mechanic at the local garage. His wife, Beulah, drank too much and was high on drugs most of the time. They argued loudly and profanely and bitterly and in the middle of a huge shouting match when he came home for lunch—and there was no lunch—Buster dropped dead. "Dead before he hit the floor," Beulah said, at least a hundred times to anyone who would listen. Now, Buster was a rascal, and his death made the whole community feel apprehensive and worried about his utterly dysfunctional family.

Pastor Lischer helped Beulah through the local funeral plans and negotiations with the funeral director, which were exceptionally difficult. Beulah kept insisting on the most expensive casket and arrangements because she "owed it to Buster," she said. The idealistic young minister managed to alienate the funeral director in the process.

Finally the day for the funeral arrived, complete with the open casket in the narthex of the church. The service was a disaster. Beulah wailed at the top of her lungs through the service and the pastor's attempt at a sermon. He concluded quickly by reminding the congregation that Buster had been a good Marine and father and now the church would assume greater responsibility for his family.

And then the congregation moved to the little cemetery on the hill behind the church. The casket was lowered into the grave. Pastor Lischer said the words of committal and it was over.

Then the military phase of the service began. Four uniformed veterans from the local VFW formed an honor guard and fired their rifles on command three times over the heads of the congregation.

This sermon was written by The Rev. Theo Park and delivered at Christ Episcopal Church, Red Wing. Fr. Theo thanks all those whose material he has borrowed and apologizes to those he has overlooked.

There was even a bugler for the occasion, twelve-year-old Moriah Seamanns, standing halfway up the hill in a pink jumper with a thin white sweater draped over her shoulders. Her new coronet caught the sunlight and she was about to give the performance of her life. Her mother stood beside her to hold her music and to steady her child, like a doe and a fawn in the silence of the spring afternoon.

Then Moriah began to play. She did not play "Taps." She played four stanzas of Handel's great aria from *Messiah*, "I Know That My Redeemer Liveth," arcing each note across the ravine toward the mourners on the hill. It was, Lischer says, "as if her music were a time-delayed message coming to us from a saner and more beautiful world."

As they listened to Moriah, Beulah stopped her cater-wauling and the mourners began to smile watery smiles through their tears. And standing in the lumpy mud of the cemetery, Lischer remarked, "I felt that I could see Easter, and I burst out laughing."

This morning, standing in the lumpy mud of history, in a world that knows only too well the presence and the power of Death, may we too see Easter, and may we greet it with a smile in our hearts and the sound of laughter on our lips.

This sermon was written by The Rev. Theo Park and delivered at Christ Episcopal Church, Red Wing. Fr. Theo thanks all those whose material he has borrowed and apologizes to those he has overlooked.