

John 20: 1-18 "Butterfly Moments" Rev. Janet Chapman 4/17/22

In case you hadn't heard the news, summer church camp is back on again in person and I am so excited for our kids to have that life-transforming experience of attending church camp. Great memories are born out of such encounters, not the least of which is the joy of being deep in the beauty of God's creation. One of my favorite stories from church camp comes out of a discussion a group of kids were having about the purpose God has for everything in creation. They began to find good reasons for clouds, trees, rocks, rivers, animals and just about everything else in nature. Finally, one of the kids said, "If God has a good purpose for everything, they why did God create poison ivy?" The discussion leader gulped, and as he struggled with the question, one of the other children came to the rescue saying, "The reason God made poison ivy and poison oak is because God wanted us to know there are certain things we should keep our cotton-pickin' hands off of!" Today I proclaim to you the truth that there are certain things we should keep our cotton-pickin' hands off of, as I broke out all over my body after disposing of poison oak which I proudly thought I had handled appropriately and been ever so careful to wash off afterwards, but apparently not careful enough. So, the joke's on me, literally.

As I have battled the irritation of this vine which grows so prolifically in our area, I have wondered how often God laughs at our foolishness believing we have mastered creation, mistakenly thinking we are in control of all that is around us. Our egos grow out of control, believing there is nothing we aren't capable of. I remember as a child believing that I could make an egg hatch that had fallen out of a robin's nest. I took the egg inside and put it under a lamp turning it over every night before going to bed and counting the days until it was supposed to hatch. It never did and when it began to smell, my mom made me toss it. I remember reading a story of a little boy who found a cocoon hanging from a branch which he detached and brought home with him to see if he could have his own pet butterfly. Growing impatient on how long the transformation was taking, he took a hair dryer to the cocoon warming it with the hot air until he finally saw the cocoon begin to move. The being inside was trying to get out. He was so excited. First came the antennas, then the big eyes of the butterfly, legs pushed out and then the wings, both severely underdeveloped. The wings

were crinkled together and couldn't even unfold. Its birth had been so rushed by the hot air that the being wasn't able to fully form into the beautiful butterfly it was supposed to be. After a few minutes, the creature died and the boy was devastated. Once again, an example of arrogance gone awry, of tragic comedy in its truest form.

Easter has been understood as a type of divine comedy, especially when we take the definition of comedy to be a drama in which the central motif is the triumph over adversity, leading to a successful conclusion. Dr. Nancy Taylor points out that since the earliest days of the church, Easter has been regarded as a joke, a supreme joke, the best joke in all the world and the last and best laugh ever. For us, these two millenia later, it's not easy to get the joke because we know the ending. In an effort to recover the surprise of Easter, come with me back in time, to the beginning of what we call the Common Era, to the time of the Roman Empire in the land of Palestine. In a gruesome manner, the Roman Empire executed a peasant with an attitude, a peasant who refused to pledge allegiance to the Empire and refused to regard Caesar as a god. Rome kept no record of this event, for in their eyes, it was a minor incident. This Jesus and his followers showed no signs of violence, no threats of terrorism, no promises of takeovers, not even a manifesto, except maybe to love one another. Yet, Jesus is put to death and the first Easter joke is upon none other than death itself. Death, which was far more powerful than the mighty Roman empire, is made a laughing stock by Easter. Death, which always gets the last word and the last laugh, is replaced by Life. In the Easter story, the joke is on Death, who meets its match and then some in the peasant named Jesus.

The second joke is best illustrated by considering what did not happen this past Friday. Do you know what fails to occur every Good Friday in this country? The vast and mighty machinery of the New York Stock Exchange fails to rally itself into business on the Friday before Easter. It is closed in deference to a Palestinian peasant, an itinerant preacher who lived over 2000 years ago, whose memorable teachings include: "Do not store up treasures here on earth where moths can eat them and rust can destroy them and where thieves can break in and steal them, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven." The New York Stock Exchange was frozen last Friday and this extraordinary three-day closure of the

powerful and massive machinery which manipulates our economy is in deference to Jesus of Nazareth. Imagine with me what may play out every Good Friday in heaven: Jesus' family and friends all gather together, the saints and the angels, all in heaven on the morning of Good Friday and at 9:30 a.m. precisely, they grow silent, heads cocked, ears straining to hear as they listen for the opening bell. And when the clock reaches 9:31 a.m. EST and the bell hasn't sounded, they all erupt into peals of uncontrollable laughter... bent over, belly-aching laughter. It is a laughter of absolute and utter incredulity at the power and reach of Jesus and his teachings.

In the *Divine Comedy*, Dante tells of the night of Good Friday in the year 1300. Dante comes to himself, in a dark wood, where the straight-way is lost. There Dante meets the spirit of Virgil who promises to guide him on a journey to heaven. However, they must go through the harrowing bowels of Hell, because one cannot find heaven without walking through times of deep suffering. After departing hell, Dante draws onward and upward to the celestial sphere. As he draws close to paradise itself, he hears a faint and distant sound. Straining his ears, Dante listens, then smiles, nods to himself and proclaims: "It sounds like the laughter of the universe." In another literary classic, Eugene O'Neill wrote a play called "Lazarus Laughed." The play tells the story of Lazarus after Jesus brought him back from death. People ask Lazarus, "What was it like?" In his post-death life, Lazarus tells people there is no death as they have perceived it. But more than what he says, it is what he does that convinces people. Lazarus laughs. He laughs at everything, even death. And the more Lazarus laughs, the younger and stronger he becomes. And his home in Bethany is called "House of Laughter."

For anyone who has paused to watch a butterfly flit from flower to flower or simply fly through the air, it is hard not to smile. Maybe we ought to do more than just smile, but let the laughter break through. For these are not creatures we control; they do not pay attention to our timelines or expectations; they are freed from cocoons that once engulfed them in metamorphosis, and are now fully transformed into the beings God has designed. The joke is on anyone who thinks they can alter or control such a miracle. Through the spirit of St. Francis, who preached to the butterflies and the flowers, to the cornfields, stones,

forests, earth, air and wind, claiming them as his own brothers and sisters, we are reminded that we are connected to all of God's universe. Just as resurrection is active in God's universe, so it is real within us. In the end, the joke is on anyone who thinks death is final because resurrection moments, butterfly moments, are as real now as they were in the first century. In the end, no matter what happens, no matter what any of us faces, death is dead and God wins, you and I and all God's creation win. If you listen carefully, strain your ears a little harder, you just might hear this day, "the laughter of the universe!" Thanks be to God!