

“Satan, the Joke is On You”

Date: April 1, 2018 **Place:** Lakewood UMC **Occasion:** Easter Sunday
Texts: 1 Corinthians 1:18-25; John 20:1-18 **Theme:** Humor, April Fools, resurrection, reversals

Satan, the joke is on you. Take a look at this video.

God is the creator of comedy and laughter. God has to have a sense of humor when you think about it. Just look at the hippos, the giraffes, or even the ostriches. Look at them, and I think you'll want to laugh. Add to that the fact that Easter is on April Fools' Day this year.

It almost makes it twice as funny; like the resurrection wasn't already hard enough to accept. Now the preacher has to convince you, on April Fool's Day, that this is for real. "Really?! Come on, God, my job is hard enough."

How did this happen, that Easter falls on the same day as April Fool's Day? Well, Easter always falls on the first Sunday following the first full moon of the spring equinox. (Tell me that formula wasn't worked out in a committee meeting!) So, with that formula, the day of the week always stays the same, but the date itself can vary by as much as six weeks.

And this year Easter falls on April 1st. Yes, April Fool's Day, a combination that hasn't happened since 1956, 62 years ago. Well, the focus for us should not be on All Fools Day, but rather on the glorious resurrection of Jesus. But that doesn't mean we can't find humor in it.

The resurrection, in many ways, is a joke on those in power at the time of the crucifixion. They thought once Jesus was dead, he would be out of their way, things would go back to normal, and they would continue their reign of power. But the joke was on them. They may have used an

instrument of death as a way to deal with Jesus, but they couldn't make him stay dead."

Imagine the poor women who went to the tomb to prepare the body for a proper burial. On Friday, the beginning of the Sabbath for the Jewish people, the most they could do was to lay him in the cave wrapped in burial cloths. Once the Sabbath was over they could come back and anoint his body with the burial perfumes, probably myrrh and possibly frankincense.

But when they get to the tomb, the stone is rolled away and Jesus isn't there. They run back to tell the other disciples. Peter and John race back to the tomb to see for themselves. And just as the women had said, the tomb is empty. And they return home.

Mary Magdalene stays, alone outside the tomb, crying about her Lord. At a certain point in the story, Jesus shows up. He didn't yell, "April Fool's!" That would have been too cruel. Instead he whispers her name, "Mary." And in that instance she knew that Jesus was alive, risen from the dead. And her sorrow was turned to joy, her mourning into dancing.

Easter is the greatest day in human history; it is the great reversal of the human situation. No longer do we have to fear death; God has overcome it. Easter is God's April Fool's joke on the whole world.

Writes Rev. Frank Yates of Amarillo Texas: "Easter is the morning when the Lord laughs out loud, laughs at all the things that snuff out joy, all the things that pretend to be all-powerful, like cruelty and madness and despair and evil, and most especially, that great pretender, death. Jesus sweeps them all away with His wonderful resurrection laughter."

When I first learned that Easter was on April Fool's Day, I wondered how in the world I was going to make the connection. And then I discovered a wealth of material that connect the two. Episcopal Bishop

William Frey of Ambridge, Pennsylvania writes, “What, after all is a joke? Isn’t it something that turns the table on the expected, something that hinges on the un-predictable or unreasonable? There’s nothing more unreasonable or unexpected than the resurrection of Jesus. And to believe in it is to be part of that huge practical joke that God plays on those who trust blindly in the sufficiency of human reason to unravel all problems and to answer every question.” (endquote)

In 1 Corinthians 1:27, Paul says, “God has chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise.” We put our faith in a belief that many find silly, incomprehensible, and even foolish. So be it.

Though the world considers it folly and foolish to believe in the resurrection, I will believe it. For I have found in my own life that the only way to new life, is to die. Christ has died that we might live. This is our hope. This is our faith. This is not a joke. As Paul says again, in 1 Corinthians 4:10, “I will be a fool for Christ’s sake.”

Since the earliest days of Christianity, Christians have talked about the Easter laugh. Church historians indicate that there is considerable evidence that during the early centuries of Christianity, Easter celebrations went on for days and even weeks, marked by great joy, laughter and festivity. In modern times those celebrations have faded away.

For many people it is a quaint thought, a fairy-tale hope of life after death. More serious and rational people say that when you die, that’s the end of life, end of the story. Even in many churches, it’s hard to tell that people really grasp and understand the profound impact this event has on history and on our faith. Did someone forget to tell them the punchline?

Occasionally you can come across a Greek Orthodox or Byzantine Catholic Church that still observes the old-country customs. Rev. George

Mihalke of Holy Trinity Byzantine Catholic Church in Sykesville, Pennsylvania tells about a custom in his church:

“In our parish we have managed to maintain the joy of our ancestors during the Easter celebration. On Bright Monday and Tuesday (the days after Easter) we chase each other around after the services, drenching and being drenched with water. It’s quite a sight – the women pursuing their pastor in his cassock down the street and around the grounds, drenching him with water. I’m sure the neighbors think us quite mad!”

Indeed, they are fools for Christ, but sharing in the joy of what Easter represents. The message of Christ did not end with Good Friday; it lives on. The man Jesus did not stay put in the ground after he died; he rose again, the exalted and risen Christ. This is not a joke.

It is the foundation of our faith. And if we truly believe it, it brings us much joy. That’s the take-away message this Easter. The risen Christ brings joy. The celebration of Easter should be joyful. And don’t forget, we are Easter people the other 364 days of the year. Joy is, or should be, a defining characteristic of being Christian.

I’ve had this picture displayed on the screen during my sermon. It’s a painting by Jack Jewell entitled “The Risen Christ by the Sea.” Many see it as a representation of the Easter laugh, which theologians have discussed down through the centuries – God’s last laugh on the devil when God raised Jesus from the dead.

The painting depicts a strong, joyful, laughing, triumphant Christ, surprising his disciples at the Sea of Tiberias. Might he be inviting us all to laugh with Him? Might he be inviting us all to share in His laughter – the Easter laugh? Might he be sending us an Easter message – that joy can be found on both sides of the cross?

On the very eve of his crucifixion, Jesus said to his disciples, “These things I have spoken to you that my joy may be in you and your joy may be full.” (John 15:11). Now listen, the man knows he’s about to be nailed to a cross, *and he’s talking about joy!*

Let me conclude by repeating 1 Corinthians 1:27: “God has chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise.” And so, with great joy I say to you: “Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!” Amen.

This sermon borrows illustrations from *Holy Humor: Inspirational Wit and Cartoons*, by Cal and Rose Samra, Carmel, NY: Guideposts, pp. 71-75.