

1 Corinthians 15:1-11

Mark 16:1-8

SACRED LAUGHTER

On December 7th, 2007, a window washer who was working on a building in Manhattan fell when the scaffolding from the 47th floor collapsed underneath him. Doctors who treat trauma patients are used to seeing patients die from a 10th floor fall, but this was going to be something else altogether. The man went into a coma for a few weeks and then began to recover his movement and his speech. It was the doctors who were speechless. They said that if you believe in miracles, this was certainly one of them. The man and his family were extremely religious, and they were expressive in their thanksgiving to God for the gift of healing – and life. Nobody in New York City was unaware of this news story. Everyone knew about Alcides Moreno, and how he was expected to make a full recovery. (Guerric DeBona, *Lectionary Homiletics*, Mar. '09, 76)

While the story of Alcides Moreno's fall from the 47th floor is no laughing matter, nevertheless, the circumstances of falling from such a great height and surviving are almost hilarious in their absurdity. And, we can laugh – or, at least rejoice – in that we know the story has a happy ending for Mr. Moreno and his family. We share in their joy for this one, who should have been dead, returned to life once more.

I think you can see where this is headed. On a far grander scale, the Church throughout the ages celebrates, with great joy and laughter, the resurrection of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. By all accounts, this One was dead – killed on the cross for the sins of the world – and buried in a sealed tomb. However, on the third day, God raised Jesus up from the grave, and life has never been the same since - thanks be to God!

For almost two thousand years, Christians have believed and given witness to the good news found within the Apostle Paul's letter to the Corinthians: "Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures." The risen Lord appeared to Peter and the other disciples, then to more than five-hundred brothers and sisters, James and all of the apostles, and last but not least, to Paul himself. Easter reminds us anew that God will not be defeated by death. Jesus was dead and gone for three days. But, he rose again from the dead, and that is a laughing matter for the joke was on Death, who was cheated out of a victim. Furthermore, Christ's powerful resurrection victory makes possible our own resurrections – both beyond and before death. If you believe that good news, then life is filled with sacred laughter!

In Eugene O'Neill's play *Lazarus Laughed*, which is based on the familiar biblical story found in John's gospel (chapter 11), the focus is on Lazarus, who was raised from the dead by Jesus. How did he respond to his new life after four days in eternity? Did it make any difference to Lazarus in his view of the importance of things in this world? The conclusion is that it made a tremendous difference. Having seen the things that count in eternity, Lazarus measured the things of this world by a new standard. He had no fear. Very often, looking at this world, he gave a low, musical laugh (hence the play's title). He would see people straining every nerve to amass piles of money; he laughed at that. He saw the pretensions of the Emperor Tiberius of Rome and laughed at such vain display. When the emperor threatened to put him to death, Lazarus laughed all the more for he knew that no one could destroy his soul. Because he had seen eternity, Lazarus knew what counted in the long run or forever. He could laugh, not in derision but in confidence, having perceived things on a scale of values different from others around him. (*The Ministers Manual for 1981*, pp. 219-220)

We are reminded that God's ways are not our ways in the world. Our expectations may be in for a real jolt when they encounter God's revelation - and, in this case, God's resurrection power - at work. In Mark's gospel account of the resurrection, the three women went to the tomb early on the morning after the Sabbath to finish anointing Jesus' body for burial. They expected the stone to be securely in its place;

they found it already rolled away. They expected to see Jesus' dead body in the grave; but they saw, instead, a young man (or angel) in a white robe. They expected it to be an ordinary day, albeit a sad one; instead, the angel told them that Jesus had been raised and he was going ahead of you to Galilee – "there you will see him, just as he told you."

Can't you just imagine how the women's deep grief - when it was encountered by the divine revelation and good news of Jesus' resurrection – immediately turned to shock and then rejoicing at this unexpected turn of events? If we try to walk (no, run!) in those women's shoes, back to Jerusalem to faithfully tell Jesus' disciples and especially Peter that Jesus had been raised from the dead, can't we feel their fears subsiding and quickly being replaced with sacred laughter and out-and-out joy? What a turn of events!

We rejoice for we know – not with tangible, scientific proof but by faith alone – that death has been conquered. At the end of 1 Corinthians, chapter 15, the Apostle Paul taunts death with this song: "Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" Then, Paul goes on to answer these questions with this affirmation of faith: "Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." The risen Christ makes all the difference for you and me in this world and the next.

How many times have I heard, or have you said, at the time of a funeral, "I don't know how people can deal with the death of a loved one if they don't have faith?" In making this remark, we are not trying to be smug; and, we are certainly not better than anyone, who lacks faith. We are simply acknowledging that due to our faith in God, who raised Jesus from the dead, we have hope and confidence that the Lord will raise our loved ones into the heavenly kingdom. We know that, if we were on our own, we would be hopeless. However, by God's grace, we have experienced that our hope and our help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth, and who raised Jesus from the dead as well as all who believe in his name. That is good news to be proclaimed and not hidden.

I'll never forget the time in my second pastorate when I came across a file in the church office, and inside was the funeral service for one of the previous pastors of that church. I pulled the file out and, as I was looking through the material, I came across the sermon that was preached at the funeral. I decided to sit down and read what the Presbyterian minister had to say on that particular occasion. I read from beginning to end and, to my great surprise, there was not one mention of Jesus or Christ or resurrection or heaven. I have to confess to you: I didn't know such a thing was possible for the Witness to the Resurrection service of a believer in Jesus Christ. I was stunned!

Midway between 1 Corinthians, chapter 15, the Apostle Paul is refuting some who said there was no resurrection of the dead. For the sake of argument, Paul adopted that stance, and by doing so, he said, "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those who have died in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied." Then, Paul said, "But," and whenever you read the word but in the Bible there's going to be a change in direction. "But, in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died... for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ."

As many of you know, our son died at the end of January after a 3 1/2 year battle with cancer. When Andrew was born in September of 1977 that first Christmas spoke to me in a very powerful way. As I held our newborn son, I was overcome with profound awe and joy when I realized that God sent his only Son into the world in the very same way. And now, thirty-one years later, I grieve Andrew's death to be sure, but, at the same time, I am experiencing the power and the glory of Easter in a new and profound way like never before. There are times when we cry because we miss him so very much, but let it also be said that there are times of sacred laughter. Why? For this reason: while our culture would say we have lost a son, our faith assures us that our son is found and is alive and well in the kingdom of heaven; and we shall be with him again and forever!

Christ has been raised and there is life beyond the grave! While that is true, we are remiss if that's all we believe. Our cause of sacred laughter stems from the fact that there is life before the grave as well!

Resurrection and transformation can and do happen in the here and now. The angel's message to the women centered on the divine rendezvous in Galilee where Jesus' disciples will see and be with him. Peter, who had denied Jesus three times just prior to the cross, would especially see Jesus and experience forgiveness before being empowered by the Spirit to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ. In the epistle lesson, before Paul became an apostle, he persecuted the church; but then he met the risen Christ on the road to Damascus; and Paul himself was raised up to new life, especially witnessing to the risen Lord among the Gentiles.

By the same token, Jesus will meet us in our own Galilee or Martinsville or wherever. He will come to those ordinary places where we live, and move, and have our being and do extraordinary things for us and with us. The scriptures challenge us to look for the risen Jesus where we live; and, as we seek we will find – or, better yet, we will be found by the Lord and given new life. The resurrection invites us to reinvest in life with holy zeal and to carry on Jesus' ministry for the sake of the world. Dr. Donald G. Dawe has said, "When the power of addiction is defeated, broken bodies are healed, guilt is forgiven, anger is overcome, failure is transformed, barriers are broken-down, community is established, the risen Lord is at work. The power to transform has been let loose in the world and nothing can stop it, not even death itself. What we need is the faith to receive it." (Lectionary Homiletics, April 2000, p. 29) By faith, let us believe in and live out Christ's resurrection on both sides of the grave. Let us laugh and give thanks that God's ways are not our ways, and that Christ is risen from the grave in order to love us in the hereafter but also in the here and now!

It's been seven years since I first told you this story, so I think it's about time I told it again – especially because it contains the truth of our hope found in the risen Christ. A small town in Texas decided to put on a holy Week pageant for the neighboring communities. Thus, various people in the town were assigned different parts to play. The character of Jesus went to the most unlikely person – a big, burly oilfield worker. He seemed an odd choice to be typecast as the Lord but he had a nice beard, and, since Jesus probably had a beard, the man was awarded the part. After several weeks of rehearsals, the folks of that town were ready, and the day of the Holy Week pageant finally arrived. When they got to the part of the play where Jesus was being led away to be crucified, one little man, filling in as part of the crowd, got really caught up in the emotion of the drama. He joined in the shouts of "Crucify him! Crucify him!" as Jesus was led away toward Calvary. Then, in the midst of shouting insults at the top of his lungs, the little guy was so pumped up that he spit in the face of the character playing Jesus as the actor walked by carrying the cross on his back. There was stunned silence. Then, the big, burly oilfield worker stopped in his tracks, reached up and wiped his face and beard dry. He looked at the little man and said, "I'll be back to take care of you after the resurrection!" (Homiletics, April-June 1992, p. 9) That is surely the Gospel truth!

By the grace of God, revealed in the crucified-yet-risen Lord Jesus, let us continue to enjoy sacred laughter. And, may we live our lives in such a way that we give tangible proof that the resurrection of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, is indeed a certainty – to the glory of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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