

RISUS PASCHALIS, NOT RISUS SARDONICUS

Sermon, May 1, 2011

Texts: Acts 2:22-32; I Peter 1:3-9; John 20:19-31

During the 15th century in southern Germany (Bavaria), a delightful custom sprung up in many of the churches. At the end of the Easter church service, the priest would leave the altar and come down among the people and lead the congregation in what was called the "Risus Paschalis", which roughly translates as "the Easter laughter." The priest would tell funny stories and sing comical songs, and the congregation would resound with laughter (*Bavarians are the funny and social Germans; unlike their serious and somber northern counterparts*). Eventually this evolved into a regular annual practice, and the Sunday after Easter became known as Risus Paschalis Sunday. Priests would include jokes and funny stories in their sermons, and would often play practical jokes on their parishioners throughout the week (*some of which, I'm told, could be pretty ribald!*). The congregation would join in the fun as well. Why do this at Eastertime? Because it was a time to celebrate the big joke God pulled on the powers of darkness by the resurrection of Jesus. The powers of darkness thought they had won! But God won the ultimate triumph through the resurrection of His Son from the grave. Unfortunately, this custom didn't last; Pope Clement X outlawed the Risus Paschalis sometime in the seventeenth century. I guess folks were having too much of a good time in church, and that shouldn't be! Today, some churches are resurrecting the practice (*pun intended*) of Risus Paschalis, renaming it Holy Hilarity Sunday; in fact, two years ago I went to one such service at a Presbyterian church in my home town. While I thought the idea a good one, the service itself was a bit over the top ... the sermon, for example, was just one joke after another, every one of which I had already heard before in 27 years of ministry (*except for one, and that was, Q: "How many choir directors does it take to change a light bulb? A: No one knows, because nobody ever watches the choir director."*) ... but I digress. Remember that quote from Voltaire a few weeks ago: "God is a comedian, playing to an audience too afraid to laugh." And Martin Luther – "If you are not allowed to laugh in heaven, I don't want to go there."

The sermon title is a bit of a reach, but it makes a point ... we commemorate Risus Paschalis, not Risus Sardonicus. Risus Sardonicus is a medical condition that manifests itself in a semi-permanent grinning expression produced by prolonged spasm of the facial muscles; it is most often seen in tetanus victims and victims of strychnine poisoning. (*Risus Sardonicus is also a punk rock band out of Scranton, PA, but that's not important right now.*) Those afflicted have raised eyebrows and a permanent open "grin" which appears almost malevolent. Think of the Joker in the Batman comic book; in fact, in one of those dark Batman movies in the past few years, the Joker (*played by Jack Nicholson*) uses a toxic gas on his victims that induced this condition before it killed. *Risus* – Latin for laughter. *Sardonicus* ... the same root word from which we get "sardonic", which means scornfully or cynically mocking. Doctors nickname the condition the *Hippocratic Smile*. Well, I fear some professing Christians may be plagued with the **Hypocritic Smile** ... a forced grin because we are trying to act happy and pleasant. No, we celebrate *Risus Paschalis*, we are not afflicted by *Risus Sardonicus* ... when one knows and understands and laughs the laughter of Easter, when you "get it", the smile is not forced; it wells up from within.

As you know, the dates of Holy Week vary from year to year; the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D. decided that Easter should be celebrated on the first Sunday after the full moon on or after the vernal equinox of March 21 (*now, how's that for a clear directive?*). This means Easter can come as early as March 22 or as late as April 25. Twice in the years of my ordained ministry, 1988 and 1994, this meant Good Friday was observed April 1st... better known as April Fools' Day. In a 2001 Fisherman's News article I wrote of a classic April Fools prank pulled on me one year, which I in turn pulled on then Christian Ed director Brent Richards. I asked my co-conspirator in the church office to leave a message for Brent that a Mr. Fox had called, and wanted Brent to return his call. When Brent returned from lunch, he called the number on the memo to return Mr. Fox's call, and the person on the other end answered, "Good afternoon; Roger Williams Zoo!" Brent was just about to ask for Mr. Fox, and then he got it ... he hung up the phone, came out into the hallway, and hollered, "Aaaaarrggh!"

In preparing for that 1988 April 1 Good Friday worship service, I was struck by the thought that perhaps the greatest, most elaborate, and most memorable prank in history took place that first Holy Week. Think of it ... everyone was convinced Jesus was gone, dead, done away with for good. The Roman authorities thought so; they wouldn't have to worry now about any insurrection. The crowds that cried for Jesus' crucifixion thought so, in their minds this so-called Messiah was a charlatan and got what he deserved; they were now rid of him. The religious leaders thought so; they were convinced they had rid themselves of a perceived threat to their authority and a blasphemer. On a grander scale, the Bible intimates the unseen powers of darkness thought they had pulled off a grand triumph, for they believed they had frustrated the plans and purposes of God. Everyone ... the Romans, the crowds, the priests, and all the powers of darkness were convinced Jesus was gone. Even His closest family, friends and followers were convinced it was the end. And make no mistake; it was a very convincing end! Then, the women come to the tomb the following Sunday morning, and find this angel sitting on the rock, and that angel announces, "He is not here! He is risen!" Personally, I am convinced that angel was grinning from ear to ear, and I can almost imagine him adding, "Gotcha!"

Now, don't get me wrong; I do not think of the death and resurrection of Jesus as some sort of joke. I don't make light of the fact that the crucifixion was indeed a terrible event. Jesus paid a harsh price for our salvation, and it was most difficult for those who loved Him to witness the horror. Their master had been humiliated, tortured and killed. All their hopes and joys seem buried in His grave, their cause seemed lost, they were frightened for their lives, they were trying to figure out what they were going to do now, they're hiding and huddling together behind locked doors ... then the startling, surprising, shocking visit from Jesus appearing right there in their midst: He says, "Shalom", which is the typical Jewish greeting of the day, and I'm sure He had a broad grin on His face. "Shalom" may be the rough cultural equivalent of our "Hi There" (or, even more colloquially, "Wassup?")... and we are told the disciples who were there were overjoyed, delighted! The surprise was complete! They got it! And the disciple's joy just bursts out of the lectionary readings this morning; as Peter puts it, they are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy. Can God really do this? Can the whole course and pattern of the universe, life to death, be overturned so that now it reads, life, death ... life? Can't you just see the radiant smiles, the "risus paschalis" exploding across the faces of these disciples, engulfing the room with joy? When our mental faculties prove inadequate to a situation, when the irony and surprise is so unexpected, when the apparent contradiction to all we have known and believed is so blatant, then laughter just takes over.

All of the elements of a classic prank are on display here. A good prank always takes long and careful planning. Who would've guessed what God was up to? But this had been the divine plan for a loo-ong time. The prophets spoke of it, and Jesus even told His disciples what He was going to do ... but apparently they didn't understand and/comprehend. Also, in a good prank surprise is complete and total. Well, put yourselves in the place of any of those present. Imagine their surprise, imagine their shock, imagine their relief, imagine their amazement, imagine their joy! And imagine the consternation of Jesus' enemies! Third, the more solemn the target, the more satisfaction the prank brings. What more solemn target than death itself? You know, when the Bible says, "*O Death, where is your victory? Where is your sting?*" that is best understood as a *taunt!* God convincingly demonstrated His ultimate power over the forces of darkness. He is in control. The forces of darkness have done their worst, and God uses even that to affect His greatest act. Fourth, a good prank gives great satisfaction to the "perpetrator." And is God ever satisfied! We certainly share a vested and joyful share in that immense satisfaction.

There was a little known play written by Nobel prize winning playwright Eugene O'Neill in 1927 entitled "Lazarus Laughed". It didn't play often, perhaps only three or four times, and it never made Broadway as did many of O'Neill's other plays (such as critically acclaimed "*Beyond the Horizon*," "*Anna Christie*," "*The Iceman Cometh*") but it was one of his own favorites. The play begins almost immediately after Lazarus has been raised. The community has gathered to see the spectacle of the living/dead man. Lazarus' father raises a toast celebrating his son's return from death, but Lazarus stops him and cries out: "*No! There is no death! Only change!*" The inquisitive crowd wants to know what Lazarus has experienced. Lazarus explains: "*I heard the heart of Jesus laughing in my heart: And I laughed in the laughter of God!*" And then, Lazarus begins to laugh, infecting all around him with unexpected joy and warmth, and causing everyone to laugh along with him, roughly similar to that kind of contagious hilarity you've all experienced when someone in the group gets a fit of the giggles and just can't stop.

Scene Two is a few months later at the home of Lazarus, which is now known as the House of Laughter. Within the house, Lazarus continues to laugh surrounded by a variety of people who have come to live and laugh with him. Outside, though, two groups have formed: one of Orthodox Jews and one of followers of Jesus called Nazarenes. To make a long story short, both groups are upset with Lazarus and his laughter, and they join forces to try to shut Lazarus up, and he calls out to them: "*You forget! You forget the God in you! You wish to forget! Remembrance would imply the high duty to live as a son of God - generously! - with love! - with pride! - with laughter! Why are your eyes always either fixed on the ground in weariness of thought, or watching one another with suspicion? Throw your gaze upward! To Eternal Life! To the fearless and the deathless! The everlasting!*" and Lazarus then just unnerves and infects all of them with his life-altering laughter. All become one as the laughter of Lazarus overwhelms the scene.

There's so much more to this unique and fascinating play, but time won't allow a full synopsis. (it's in the public domain, if interested, see <http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks04/0400131h.html> for a full text and for an excellent synopsis and commentary on the play, see http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_7174/is_200801/ai_n32270677/.) Eugene O'Neill, at the time a lapsed Catholic, later explained to a prospective producer the play's underlying idea: Fear is really the root of all evil, particularly the fear of death; it is the cause of all man's blundering unhappiness. And Lazarus is reborn from that tomb without that fear. *Lazarus knows there is no death, there is only change.* From O'Neill's perspective, Lazarus is the first and only man who is able to really laugh, to laugh affirmatively, fearlessly, "the joyous laughter of God." O'Neill presents a clear choice with the play: we can choose the way of laughter, or the way of fear. He wants to offer a hopeful alternative to a world overcome by pain and suffering: There is a way out, the play unequivocally states, and it remains there for the taking. And that way out is to embrace life and the Source of life, embrace change (*no death, only change!*), let go of fear, and you will laugh the laughter of God.

There is no death! Only change. Risus Paschalis! Laughter is a wonderful gift of God, and those Bavarian Christians were certainly on to something good when they gave space for mirth and laughter in the joyful celebration of our Easter hope.