

EASTER SUNDAY -- April 12, 2009
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First, I certainly want to wish all of you and all your loved ones a very happy and blessed Easter day and season--may the risen Christ fill your hearts with joy and renewed hope and gladness. An old legend tells of the apostles gathered together right after Jesus' resurrection from the dead, but St. Peter was not with them. He later joined the others and was told "Hey, Peter, we've got some good news and some bad news." "What's the good news?", Peter asked. "The Lord is risen; we saw him, and he actually ate a piece of fish to prove it was really he!" With joy in his heart, Peter asked "so what's the bad news?" "He wants to talk to you about last Friday..."

I have a question for you, one that I have asked before: what is your image of God? Do you see him as a solemn, fearsome judge, way far away from us on his heavenly throne? During Lent I watched "The Ten Commandments" once again, where Cecil B. DeMille portrays God in majesty at the fiery top of Mt. Sinai and speaking to Charlton Heston as Moses in that very deep, bass voice ("I AM THE LORD THY GOD..."). Those images of power, majesty and glory are certainly true, and must never deny God the glory and worship that are his due.

But those images do not exhaust the infinite God, nor do they give us the full, comprehensive and complete picture of who and what God is. May I make a suggestion--among many other things, how about God having a sense of humor? I trust it's not scandalous or blasphemous to suggest that God in some way has the capacity to smile and even perhaps to laugh. How else could he possibly react, for example, when a parish was giving a farewell party for its priest who was going to another assignment. One dear older lady wept continuously as she shook hands with him, saying through her tears: "I'm just so sorry to see you go!" Father tried to console her: "Now, now, don't cry--the bishop will send you a good pastor in my place; in fact, I'm sure he will send a much better one." At that, the woman sobbed all the louder: "That's what they told me the last time!" That's like the story of the officer who has handed a priest a ticket for a traffic violation. "But officer", pleaded the priest, "I'm only a poor preacher." "I know", said the policeman, "I've heard you."

The reason I suggest this divine sense of humor: as great saints like Augustine and John Chrysostom have said, God played the biggest practical joke of all time on the devil when Jesus rose from the dead. One minister has said: "Easter is the morning when the Lord laughs out loud...at all the things that snuff out joy...like cruelty, madness, despair, evil, and most especially death." No wonder St. Francis of Assisi could say "Leave sadness to the devil. The devil has reason to be sad." Think about it: throughout the life of Jesus, the devil was constantly trying to do him in. Those three rather pathetic temptations in the desert sure didn't work, but opposition to Jesus gradually grew until God allowed his Son to be ridiculed, to suffer and die on that Cross. Satan and evil were being strung along, thinking they were finally winning--who can imagine the horrible, mocking laughter in hell when Jesus breathed his last? But then...that evil mockery turned into shrieks of horror and despair because Jesus rose from the dead, just like he promised he would. God tricked the evil one; Jesus wins the victory after all, and the ultimate, lasting power of sin, evil and death is destroyed once and for all. The joy, the sheer delight, I dare say the laughter in heaven must have known no bounds--perhaps even the risen Jesus himself had a good chuckle about the whole thing...

After instructing her first graders for several weeks about Easter, the teacher asked them: "What does Easter mean to you?" One little guy yelled out "the Easter bunny!"; another said "Easter baskets and candy!" The teacher was getting a little frustrated; after all her hard work, they seemed to have missed the point of Easter completely. Finally another little hand went up--"I know, I know! Easter means Jesus died for our sins and was put in the tomb, and on the third day he came out.....and if he saw his

shadow we would have six more weeks of winter!” Pity the poor teacher; that little guy must have been around here last Sunday when we had four inches of snow!

Anyone who knows me at all knows that I love music, but sometimes I think the most musical sound in the world is that of laughter. I love the sound of laughter, to make others laugh, and to laugh myself (and laugh at myself--believe me, I get plenty of chances to do that). That’s why I still have my favorite comedy movies (Pink Panther, Young Frankenstein, other essentials); my scrapbooks of good jokes and cartoons that I’ve collected over the years, and yes--even my Warner Brothers cartoons. So long as our laughter is not directed against the respect and dignity we owe to God and neighbor, it is the sound of joy, and joy is the emotion we most experience in celebrating Jesus’ resurrection--the trick he pulled over on death and on the devil.

We Christians are to be a people of joy; as Jesus told disciples at Last Supper, “All this I tell you that my joy may be yours and your joy may be complete.” It’s good for us to challenge ourselves every once in a while: when others look at us, see us and how we conduct ourselves, do they see that joy in us? Or do we get caught up in the epidemic of morbid, deadly seriousness that seems to infect our world more and more? Sometimes I’ve seen people who I’m sure are decent, God-fearing folks, but who for all the world look like they’ve just bitten into a big slice of the sourest lemon on earth...or at least look or act like they’ve forgotten what joy is and what it means to smile and yes, even laugh.

Granted--we can’t always be happy or laughing; sometimes the Cross of Good Friday can cast a long shadow over our lives at times of crisis or tragedy--tears and sadness are indeed part of this earthly life of ours. And sometimes the world presents some distinctly non-laughable situations--e.g. today’s financial crisis, ongoing war and terrorism, and yes, our own state supreme court’s attempt to redefine marriage. I’ll be speaking about that two weeks from today. And at other times, our own choices and sins, our own estrangement and distance from God can leave us feeling less than joyful. Thankfully, that’s something we can change through repentance and turning back to God. But in the end, joy has to be the last word and it is the last word--precisely because Jesus Christ is risen from the dead. A few years ago at a Lenten retreat at the Vatican, one of the speakers made the very important point that God is not an enemy of joy: “The resurrection of Christ is the supreme affirmation that at the end of life there is not suffering and renunciation, but joy and enjoyment. Joy has the last word, not suffering.”

Maybe we can do better at this if we allow ourselves to be surprised by joy, which often comes from the unexpected. One grandmother tells the story of her three-year-old grandson who gave her a big kiss one day and said “Oh, Grandma, I love you!” She melted, of course, and then said “Now go tell Grandpa that; he like to hear it too.” So he ran over to his grandfather, put his arms around him and said, “Oh, Grandpa, I love your wife!” Can’t you just imagine both Grandpa and Grandma speechless with surprise for a moment, then breaking out into a big belly laugh? And isn’t that where we are with Easter? How stunned those apostles must have been to see J fully and gloriously alive after his death on the Cross--and then how filled with joy and yes, even with laughter?! One writer put it this way: “As they stare at the pile of wrappings, Peter and John begin slowly to understand the significance of the empty tomb. Heartache becomes hope, despair becomes faith, tears turn into laughter. In the ecstasy of Easter, tragedy becomes comedy and God’s laughter shakes the cosmos.”

Isn’t that a marvelous line?--“God’s laughter shakes the cosmos.” It echoes through Jesus’ empty tomb, it has sounded throughout the world for nearly 2000 years now, and it brightens the heart and soul of everyone who knows and lives for the risen Christ. The next time you think or someone tries to tell you that the world is hopeless or that life is meaningless, just remember: the tomb was empty. Jesus is risen, and eternal, unimaginable joy is made possible for us once again--and we can begin to know that joy even in this earthly life. If that doesn’t bring a smile to your face and the lilt of laughter to your heart,

then nothing else can, nothing else will.