

Mocked in the empty tomb
Easter Sermon – 2008
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I am the victim of a conspiracy. Lent has been unusually hard this year, and Holy Week has been full of disappointments and challenges. That wasn't the conspiracy, however. The conspiracy arose because, approaching Easter, I found myself wanting to write a sermon that explained that Good Friday and Easter combine to demonstrate how God operates to contain us at our worst and allow us to re-appropriate ourselves in a new way of being.

To give you an idea how serious it was, its working title was Melanie Klein, Margaret Mahler, and Otto Kernberg go to church.

While gearing up for this heavy task of a sermon with footnotes, I stumbled on a news story on the web. It was dated April 26, 2007:

A self-described *shopaholic seeker* from Orange County, California, is warning her friends about a nearby Lutheran church's *false advertising*. And her case has already prompted an apology from the church's pastor. Rita Messenger, 47, attended Messiah Lutheran Church on Easter Sunday, after the church took out an ad in the newspaper claiming that *we are all debt-free in Jesus*. Messenger, who carries a balance of \$23,000 on various credit cards, said that claim is misleading.

"I took a pair of scissors into church that day," said Messenger. "I was prepared to cut debt out of my life once and for all, with a little practical help from the pastor. But all he wanted to talk about was Jesus."

Pastor Jim Russell said he's sorry for the mix-up, but Messenger simply came to church on the wrong Sunday. "51 Sundays out of the year, we try to give people solid, practical advice for living," said Russell. "Ms. Messenger just happened to show up on Easter, the one day when we've traditionally set the relevant stuff aside."

The article goes on at some length, but I was reacting to the concept that on the one hand there is "relevant stuff," and on the other hand there is once-a-year Easter talk about Jesus. Boy was I going to write a sermon now!

Then, just before an artery burst in my neck, I looked at the blogsite's name. It is *horn+swoggled.com*, devoted to creating spurious religious news articles that make fun of the world, flesh, and devil. As my diastolic pressure settled down, I saw on the blog's masthead a quotation from Martin Luther, who said, "The best

way to drive out the devil, if he will not yield to text of scripture, is to jeer and flout him, for he cannot bear scorn.” Oh.

I then remembered that Eastern Orthodox Christians have a centuries-old tradition of telling jokes in church on Easter. That is because Easter is, of course, God’s biggest joke. That is, when all the things in you and me, all the things in humanity that conspire against holiness, goodness, integrity and equity had done their very worst and Jesus lay in tomb, God raised his Son to a life beyond our imagining or understanding, to a life that we are offered to enter in the here-and-now in the most practical of ways. Evil takes itself so seriously, and in the empty tomb it is mocked.

So the first joke of Easter 2008 was on me. I was stopped from pouncing on this alleged news story in full dudgeon of outraged seriousness only by a lucky catching of the witty fine print.

What I saw, after all my embarrassment subsided, was that I had been approaching our celebration of this liturgy with far too much seriousness. Some of that seriousness is arguably appropriate—we are celebrating the key moment in human history. Some of that seriousness is wildly inappropriate: it is not for me, after all, to fix other people or to will them into changing, especially when they are 3,000 miles away.

My seriousness was limiting my ability to laugh; for twenty minutes of staring dumbfounded at a computer screen, it kept me from understanding that I was in the presence of something refreshing and stimulating. I was, in short, looking for a fight when what the writer was hoping I would do was be tickled. I also had to confront, big-time, my defensiveness about representing religion in an anti-religious culture.

It occurred to me that if the celebration of the resurrection can’t get me to lighten up, I guess that, to the degree that that is true of me, I’m hopeless, tomb-bound.

Well, I’m not alone. An equally serious colleague was working with children last Easter, and reported that he was trying to get them to understand that no words were necessary—Jesus’ resurrection said all it needed to say just by happening.

So he said to the kids, “What did Jesus say when he emerged from the tomb?” He waited smugly for the silence to engulf them, but a girl in second grade

held her hands out and answered “TA-DAH.” Not what the preacher wanted to hear, but what he needed to hear.

I am by no means trivializing this celebration of Christ’s resurrection; it is, after all, the turning point in human history. However, I am trying to make a point. Those of you who can remember the end of WWII (or saw the movie) remember the nation-wide revelry, the dancing in the streets, people kissing strangers in Times Square, and the entirely justified beginning of the Baby Boom, for which I thank you. A great agony had been brought to a victorious conclusion.

None of that VE and VJ hoopla erased Pearl Harbor and the years of sacrifice that followed it, and many would continue to grieve losses that could not be undone. What the unrestrained celebration did was trump the pain, simultaneously transcending and validating the blood, sweat, and tears that had flowed since 1939 and 1941. There was still the reconstruction of Europe to accomplish, to be sure, but the moment of triumph, the TA-DAH moment, needed and deserved to be savored. In the same way, Easter is our invitation to join a cosmic party that does not erase the cross but validates it and knows there is still work to do. We join that party with Alleluia on our lips and in our hearts, and let Jesus spring alive into our hearts, serious as they may be, surprising us with the most important TA-DAH we will ever hear.

There is a TA-DAH moment in the story of Mary Magdalene that we tell this morning, the third piece in the conspiracy against my seriousness. You know the story, and we just heard it read by the deacon. Imagine though if Mary lived out her life as the legends report, with Joseph of Arimathea in England’s green and pleasant land, and towards life’s end sent a love letter to. I’ve based my imagining on one shared by Frank Fisher with a twisted nod to Dan Brown. This could be the conclusion of such a note from the Magdalene to Joseph:

You’ve heard it before, Joe. I wanted to ignore the gardener and not let him intrude on my grief. But maybe he knew where the Lord’s body had been put. So I sobbed, “Sir, if you’ve carried him away, please, please tell me where you’ve put him. I’ll go there and take his body someplace where it’ll be safe.”

Then I heard...my name. The gardener called me by name. Only it wasn't the gardener. When I heard the word “Mary,” I knew it was the Lord. “Teacher,” I cried, “Oh my beloved Teacher.” I was going to embrace him but he stopped me. “Go. Tell my sisters and brothers.”

And I went. I danced and twirled through the streets of Jerusalem, with my feet hardly touching the cobbles as I sang the news to everyone I met. “I have seen the Lord! I have seen the Lord! I have seen the Lord!”

They still don’t understand Joe. They don’t understand why I come to a tomb on the first

day of the week and dance there while the sun rises in the east. But what else am I to do on the day when our Lord arose? I have to dance. I have to dance as the song I heard on the day when the Lord arose rings in my ears and heart.

Dancing is harder now, Joe, than it was on that resurrection morning especially with the dampness of this island hurting my bones. I'm getting old and we've been through a lot together. Soon, I know I will be brought to a tomb by others and my body will not return with them. But Joseph, when that day comes, don't let them walk to the tomb. Tell them to pick up my body and dance and sing, and laugh as they carry me there.

And I will be dancing too. For I know I'll have heard the Lord call me again by my name. And as I dance after the Lord, I'll hear the song I remember so well.

You remember the words don't you dear Joseph? Somehow I knew what they were after I saw Jesus in the garden. Tell them to sing those words as they dance me to my tomb. They are our Holy Grail. Sing it with me, Joe — Christ is risen! Christ is risen! Christ is risen! Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!

So back here in the present, any way I can put it, then, God's message to me in my explorations this Easter has been, lighten up and live. This is, after all, the Feast of Victory for our God, as we so wonderfully sang. The question for me, Prufrock that I remain, is do I dare to say "TA-DAH?"

Do you?

It's a question I leave with you for these great fifty days.