

The Third Sunday of Easter  
April 15, 2018  
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Acts 3:12-19  
Psalm 4  
1 John 3:1-7  
Luke 24:36b-48

We celebrate Easter as a season. And we celebrate these 50 days as a time of joy and even laughter. Which is why there was once a time, as I mentioned here on Easter Sunday, when clergy were required to begin their sermons with a joke all through the whole season.

Pope Benedict XVI, hardly my poster child for fun and frivolity, knew of the tradition. He wrote once that this joke-telling tradition from many centuries before was a good thing, that it was appropriate for clergy to encourage to fill the church with joyful laughter.

Ok, then. It's still Easter for us. So I'll open with a joke. This is one I first heard on *A Prairie Home Companion*:

After a church service one Sunday morning, a young girl suddenly announced to her mother, "Mom, I've decided I'm going to be a minister when I grow up."

"That's okay with us," the mother said, "but what made you decide to be a minister?"

"Well," she replied, "I'll have to go to church on Sunday anyway, and I figure it will be more fun to stand up and yell than to sit down and listen."

I begin with that story not just for the humor. I begin with it because it touches on a couple of concerns raised for us in our readings this morning.

In the first place, who says only clergy should have fun in church? More importantly, of course, who says that the fun thing about church is when someone gets to stand up and yell?

In our first reading this morning, we hear part of a sermon Peter delivered to a crowd one day. It's a pretty good sermon, actually.

The thing is, if we're not careful we may hear it as nothing more than a story about a day when Peter stood up and started yelling. But I don't think that's what he's doing here at all.

The first challenge for us, I think, is that if we're not careful, it very easily sounds like Peter is blaming those Jews for killing Jesus. We are obliged to reject the storyline – what I will reframe as the "story-LIE" – that the Jewish people were "Christ-killers." Down through the centuries, too much blood has been spilled based on that lie. And too much hate and violence is still justified by the same.

When Peter opens his sermon, saying “You Israelites,” it can certainly sound like he’s keeping his distance, pointing fingers at “them.” But we always do well to remind ourselves that Peter was himself a Jew – as, of course, was Jesus and the other disciples, as well. And he didn’t think of himself as different from them in that respect. In fact, one alternative translation of the sermon opens with Peter saying, “Fellow Israelites ...” Before he’s done, he calls them friends.

And if we put the scene in its own context, it’s pretty clear that Peter didn’t set out that day looking for a chance to stand up and yell at some Jews. This whole episode begins with Peter and John on their way to join with other Jews heading up to the temple at the appointed hour for afternoon prayers. As they were on their way in through what’s called the “Beautiful Gate,” a man asks them for alms – something he did daily, we’re told. And Peter tells him to get up and walk, which he does. And then this man enters the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God. Others are on their way in for prayers, and they’re filled with wonder and amazement. Meanwhile, the man clings to Peter and John – and won’t let go. And people come running and corral them in “the portico called Solomon’s Portico” (Acts 3:11). And it’s only then that Peter, noticing he’s held captive – and that he has a captive audience – begins preaching.

That preaching is pointed. There’s no mistaking that.

*The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our ancestors has glorified [God’s] servant Jesus, whom you handed over and rejected in the presence of Pilate, though he had decided to release him. But you rejected the Holy and Righteous One and asked to have a murderer given to you, and you killed the Author of life ...*

Peter’s not going to let them off the hook.

The thing is I don’t think he really intends to let anyone off the hook. Peter says Pilate had decided to release Jesus, but of course he knows how it really played out. Pilate condemned Jesus to die on a cross. A Roman soldier did the actual killing. Jewish leaders conspired to convict Jesus and Roman rulers obliged. Ordinary Jews rejected Jesus and ordinary Romans pounded the nails. Peter lets none of them off the hook.

And Peter wasn’t able to let himself off the hook either. Maybe he didn’t hammer in the nails. Maybe he didn’t call out with the crowd, saying, “Crucify him!” Maybe he didn’t betray Jesus with a kiss. But he did fail Jesus all the same.

Just to be sure we remember what Peter could not have forgotten, he had repeatedly failed Jesus. First, as a disciple, he persistently rejected the hard teaching Jesus offered in life. On the night of Jesus’ betrayal and arrest, Peter had promised to stay beside him come what may, but he fled. When a servant girl recognized him as one of Jesus’ companions, Peter denied even knowing him. And he did so again ... and again that night. And on Friday, as Jesus was nailed to a cross, Peter was nowhere to be seen.

You see, here's the real point. Peter wasn't able to let himself off the hook. But Jesus did. That's the significance of our gospel this morning. We hear things all out of order. Peter's sermon was a long time after that first Easter Sunday, but this morning's gospel is an Easter story. And the point is that after all that Peter had done and failed to do, after fleeing, after denying, after hiding, when the risen Jesus comes to him, the first thing he says is this: "Peace be with you."

And earlier that same the day, that first Easter Sunday, the women returned from the empty tomb to tell the men what they discovered there and the men dismissed them and their words: "... these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them." Nevertheless, Jesus comes and says to them all: "Peace be with you."

And the rest of what Jesus says to them boils down to this, I think: let go of your fears and regrets and misgivings and doubts. Let it all go and live again. Turn around and move on. Go forth, Jesus says, "beginning from Jerusalem," which is to say, "starting here, starting now ...". Go forth and let everyone else know the same: "You are witnesses of these things."

And that's Peter's sermon. "Beginning from Jerusalem" that afternoon, he's a witness for the grace, love, mercy, forgiveness of God. You all did some horrible things, he says:

*... you rejected the Holy and Righteous One and asked to have a murderer given to you, and you killed the Author of life ...*

But with God that's never the last word. "... you killed the Author of life," Peter says, "the Author of Life *whom God raised*." And that's the last word on the subject for Peter. And that's the last word for his fellow Israelites. You can't kill Life! "To this we are witnesses."

And Peter says the same for us, as well. That's why I think his sermon is pretty good still.

It would be a horrible sermon if he were only taking advantage of a chance to stand up and yell at other folk, blasting them as horrible people for having done some horrible things. But that's not his sermon. Peter says that there's nothing that puts us beyond the pale. If killing God does not land them on God's eternal "naughty list," if they are (to use the phrase from our second reading this morning) to be "children of God," then there is nothing in all creation that can separate any of us from the love of God in Christ Jesus (c.f., Romans 8). That's Peter's sermon.

And it still works for us if allow it both to challenge us and to console us. We too easily cover up or try to figure out how to let ourselves off the hook for the wrongs we've done – to others and to ourselves. But Peter would have us admit that we've all done some rotten things, that we are all inescapably complicit with what's wrong in the world. But that's never the last word.

Peter challenges us to see the truth about ourselves in the hopes of getting us to see more. For Peter knows that Jesus comes again and always, saying to us, "Peace be with you." In the Resurrection, Jesus comes again full of God's promise that we can begin again, that we can live again, that we can love again. For Christ is risen. The Lord is risen indeed.