

Rancho Presbyterian

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Rio Rancho, NM

Rev. Frank Yates

AND JESUS LAUGHED

I Corinthians 15: 1-11

Paul reminds the Corinthian congregation of those who saw the resurrected Christ. He names people we know so well-Peter, James, the Twelve and Paul himself. All superstars of the early church. Almost as an aside, Paul reminds them of the five hundred or so folks who also witnessed the Risen Christ. We do not know who these folks were or where this resurrection appearance happened. Perhaps it occurred somewhere near Jerusalem-we just don't know.

So let's ask this question: how would five hundred folks react to the appearance of One who had been executed, buried and mourned? But who now was standing right before them? Would they applaud politely? Would they whisper in muffled tones, "Why he looks better than we've ever seen him?" Would they try to keep the children quiet so as not to distract from their neighbor's quiet devotion? I rather doubt it.

I suspect that five hundred plus folks who had been crushed by Jesus' crucifixion would've been simply elated to see him again. My

guess is that those assembled rose to their feet clapping their hands and shouting out for sheer delight. This of all events in history deserved a standing ovation. For sure!

Wouldn't you have jumped for joy? Wouldn't you have hugged your neighbor and broken into that song "up from the grave he arose"? I think all Rio of us would have. The Gospel of John, in a huge understatement, says that when the disciples saw the Risen Lord they "rejoiced". The resurrection of Jesus inaugurated the "laughing of the redeemed". A knee slapping exultation that proclaims, "I can hardly believe my eyes!" Those five hundred souls would've joined with the angels and archangels and all the host of heaven to celebrate God's sweet victory over sin and death. Can I get a Hallelujah, sisters and brothers!

So the serious gloom of Good Friday and the melancholy sadness of Holy Saturday gave way to the joyous delight of Easter day. Five hundred troubled souls converted into a glad community of hope. There is only good cheer, for Christ has indeed overcome the world. The old hymn captures the moment so well, "For gladness breaks like morning whenever Thy face appears!"

Now the title of this sermon is borrowed from Eugene O'Neil's 1926 play entitled, "Lazarus Laughed." O'Neil depicts Lazarus a few days

after Jesus had brought his friend back from the grave. Lazarus is in his home in Bethany which has been renamed, “The House of Laughter.” Why? Because a moment after Lazarus came up from the tomb, he looked into Jesus’ smiling eyes and as O’Neil writes, he “began to laugh like a man in love with God.”

When questioned by his friends and family, Lazarus laughs as he remembers the moment his burial mask was removed from his face. In that moment of light Lazarus exclaimed, “I heard the heart of Jesus laughing in my heart. And my heart, reborn to love of life, cried ‘Yes’ and I laughed the laughter of God.” Then O’Neil in his stage notes tells us that “Lazarus begins to laugh, softly at first, a laugh so full of complete acceptance of life, like a great bird triumphant in the skies, uplifted by love.”

And all around Bethany people begin to chant, “Lazarus laughs. Our hearts grow happy. The wind laughs. The sea laughs. Lazarus laughs.” Then Lazarus responds, “Laugh with me. Death is defeated. Fear no more. There is only life, only laughter!” My, what a scene!

Well, you do not have to be resuscitated from a sealed grave to laugh like Lazarus. But it helps to be reborn. Take for instance, Frederick Buechner, a Presbyterian minister and spiritual writer. In his lovely spiritual autobiography **The Sacred Journey** Buechner describes the joy

of his rebirth in Christ. In 1953 he was living in New York City. Things were not going well for this young, would-be writer whose novels were not selling. He had fallen in love with a woman who had not fallen in love with him.

So out of sheer desperation one Sunday morning Buechner attended a Presbyterian church for two very curious reasons. First, the church happened to be down the street from his apartment. Second, he had nothing much better to do on that lonely Sunday morning. Now Buechner's honesty should give us pause about judging the motive as to why anyone attends worship. On any given Sunday, God will take us for whatever reason we show up!

The Presbyterian minister's name at that church was George Buttrick, a truly great preacher. Buechner was enchanted with this pulpit master whose one particular phrase in one particular sermon changed the course of his life. A phrase, by the way, that was adlibbed, not in the printed sermon. Buttrick said that Jesus is crowned king in the hearts of all his followers and that coronation takes place among "confession and tears and great laughter." That phrase did it for Buechner.

After the sermon Buechner had a huge lump in his throat as he walked down the street to meet his grandmother for lunch. All that had

been secretly fermenting all those years of his journey came to focus on that one phrase: “confession and tears and great laughter.” All his hopes to believe were touched by that one throw away line. In all his subsequent writing Buechner remained a witness to the power of that one phrase.

In his book **Telling the Truth-The Gospels as Comedy, Tragedy and Fairy Tale** Buechner says that “the tragic is inevitable. The comic is the unforeseeable.” How could a bored and lonely young writer in New York City foresee that an ad libbed preacher’s phrase “confession and tears and great laughter” would change the course of his life? The crucifixion was the inevitable. The Good News of Jesus’ unexpected resurrection from the dead is the comic. The Divine Comedy that elicits “glad tears at last, not sad tears, but tears at the hilarious unexpectedness of things rather than at their tragic expectedness.”

Many have discovered that God’s antics often take us by surprise. Take Carl Samra who in his book **The Joyful Christ** describes how his tears were turned into great laughter. In the early eighties Samra at the age of fifty was in the very depths of depression, a severe mid-life crisis. His marriage, his job and his health were all in shambles. So he took off from Michigan for Phoenix, hoping that the warm sunshine would cheer him up. But he only got worse. He wrote, “I was full of bitterness and

anger and self-hatred, fear and doubt. An urge to be finished with my pain overwhelmed me one day.”

So Samra went to a hardware store and bought some rope. Totally despondent he drove all over Phoenix looking for a tree from which to hang himself. Have you ever looked for a good hanging tree in Phoenix? He found that the palm trees were much too tall to climb and all the other trees were little more than bushes. So he drove out into the desert and saw hundreds of saguaros, those giant cactus plants. Staring at them for hours he tried to figure out how to hang himself. Just how do you hang yourself from a giant cactus plant?

Finally, it became ridiculously apparent to him why he couldn’t. He simply could not figure out how to climb its trunk without getting his fingers pricked with thorns. At that point he knew he was not that serious about hanging himself.

So this discouraged, self-destructive middle-aged man got into his car and drove around Phoenix looking for a more pain-free way to end his life. Being from Michigan he looked for a river to jump into. Have you ever looked for a river in Phoenix? So with neither a hanging tree nor a river in which to end it all, Samra simply gave up. Driving along a random street he stopped in front of the Franciscan Renewal Center, a retreat house. He went into the chapel and got on his knees and began

to pray. He prayed for the strength to endure his terrible pain for another day.

While he was praying a Franciscan priest by the name of Gavin Griffth came into the chapel. Griffth was a warm-hearted Irish wit who grew up wanting to be a stand-up comedian. He saw Samra in distress and invited him for a meal in the dining room. Samra reluctantly accepted. Following the priest into the kitchen, Samra saw it hanging on the wall, his first ever exposure to this famous painting. It was a picture of the laughing Christ. ‘

That picture did it. That was all he needed to see, a picture of Christ making merry. And he began to cry and cry, but then he began to laugh. He could hardly contain himself. Tears of joy, laughter that lifted his spirits. Laughter that surged up in him a deep desire to live again, to love again, to be well again. So out of his tears came great laughter. Out of Samra’s great sorrow has come great laughter ever since.

Sisters and brothers, I believe that Christ wants to stand in the midst of his people, whether with his old friend Lazarus, or with someone just wandering into a Presbyterian church, or with someone who is looking for a pain free way to end their life. Christ wants to stand in the midst of us today. To gather with all those who need some merriment in their lives, who need to learn to laugh again. Our Risen

Lord wants to stand in the midst of us this glorious Easter morning to inspire the laughing of the redeemed. Through “tears and great laughter” we would hear the laughter of Jesus arising even in our own hearts. So be of good cheer, my friends! He is risen! He is risen, indeed! Thanks be to God. Amen.