

Second Sunday of Easter: Traditional "Joke or Holy Humor Sunday" from the early Greek Church:  
Year B, April 19, 2009: Ps. 133, Acts 4:32-35, 1 John 1:1-2:2, John 20:19-31  
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So, the joke is on Satan. The joke is on death.

Jesus the victim became the resurrected Christ. Jesus the Scapegoat became Christ the "winner". Christ the King.

What had caused the **Crucifixion**? **Human beings and evil.**

**God** caused the **Resurrection.**

God caused Christ to be victorious.

At Easter and always.

We know the story, the history. The Jewish religious establishment was threatened by him because he saw-through their pretense and turf-guarding.

The Jewish nation and culture was upset because they wanted him to take political power and become their charismatic king and lead them out of Rome's oppression.

The Romans were threatened by him because he was, at the very least, a bother, and at the very most, a **threat** to their authority.

He "upset the whole apple cart". He turned the order of power upside down.

"The first shall be last, and the last shall be first."

You know the things he said, and you remember what it led to...

...to the arrest, the trial, the whipping, the spitting, the beating, the nailing to the Cross. The retreat of His disciples. The lonely, humiliating, and agonizing death.

All of that is of what's called Satan. All of that is the worst of human nature. When personified, this is called the Devil.

Don't make the mistake of focusing on that. Don't let the joke be on **you**.

Mel Gibson's movie *The Passion of Christ* **made** that mistake. The "big WOW" about **that** movie was the violence, evil, and suffering it depicted very well.

Certainly we dare not diminish in any way Christ's suffering nor our gratitude to him for dying for us.

He suffered, was rejected, and died for our sake, out of love for us.

He continues to bear the pain of the world.

**But** he offers us the **connection** to transform all evil and hopelessness into **hope**.

Yes, instead of the very real suffering and evil, the so-called "biggest WOW" of the Crucifixion and Easter is identified **accurately** in today's collect.

It is that at Easter God "**established a new covenant of reconciliation**".

The most important thing about the Crucifixion is the revelation of what Jesus did for us. He gave his life for us because he loves us, and he forgives us. In response, we are drawn to love and forgive one-another as he did.

There is hope only in that. Love **is** more powerful than anything else.

For example, imagine, for a moment, that **you** were arrested and taken to court on false, trumped-up, charges. **You** are deserted by your friends, tortured, and murdered.

If you could come back to life, what might you feel like saying to your friends when you first see them?

Might you say, "Why did you **desert** me?"

How do you think that made me feel? You weak, yellow-bellied cowards!"

I think **I'd** be more angry and less quaint than that.

And I daresay **some** of you would let fly with some real resentful **blasphemy!**

What *did* Jesus say to his disciples when he saw them the first time after his death...when he entered the locked room in which they were gathered?

We heard it in today's gospel.

" 'Peace be with you' ", he said. Yes, that's it: "*Peace be with you!*"

And furthermore, he continued, " 'As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' "

When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If **you** forgive the sins of any, they are **forgiven** them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.' " (John 20:19-23)

In other words, he said to them “I forgive you and everyone. And **you’ve got** to continue loving and forgiving...or no-one will. No-one will learn to. “

Peter carried-through with this.

Peter was talking with the crowds in Jerusalem, with the very people who had provoked and cheered-on the Crucifixion. It was later...after Christ’s Ascension, and after the day of Pentecost.

He said to them, “Now, I know, brothers, that neither you nor your leaders had any idea what you were really doing.” (*The Scapegoat*, Rene Girard, p. 111)

“I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers.” (Acts 3:17, NRSV)

But the words which **really** echo through history are **Christ’s** first words from the **Cross**.

Do you remember? He spoke about his persecutors and murders, about his deserting disciples.

Did he say “You vile sinners! You’ll rot in hell for this!”?

No, or course not. He said, praying,

“Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.” (Luke 23:34)

*Know not what they do?*

*Forgive them?!*

Even from the Cross, Jesus loved. Amazingly, he understood that his murderers and his deserters couldn't help what they were doing.

He recognized that they didn't understand how they had been caught-up in their own desires, their own egos, in jealousy, in fear, and in what became an appetite for violence.

It feels dangerously like the fear and violence which are escalating in **our** world today. In response to terrorism, and threats of terrorism, wars, and economic disaster... come bank robberies and increased shootings.

Even a recent rise in child-abuse has been noted and identified as a reaction to national economic fear. The contagion of fear and violence again; and, again, innocent people are victimized.

But, don't let the joke be on you: don't get taken-in by evil.

Don't get caught in the panic.

Don't lose hope.

Don't throw-away Christ's love.

Don't say to yourself, "Oh, well, Christ was different. He could forgive because he was divine. But it's different for us. We'd be walked all over if we acted like that. We'd be a "door mat".

Then the joke **would** be on you.

I mustn't let the joke be on **me** either.

I know the part of myself that can get caught-up with the crowd...the part of me which is aware of others' opinions about me.

I know the strange feeling I get when I take part in the Passion reading on Palm Sunday, when we all, as instructed, **shout** "Crucify him!"

I can feel a strange, unwanted, but faintly welcomed, feeling...a frightening thrill deep down inside me ...as some primordial part of me shouts that. I become part of the crowd at Jerusalem. It's alluring. Disturbing because I know it's forbidden and dangerous.

That's because that part of me **is** always there. It's part of being human.

Some people call it Satan.

And its contagion is always present around us.

Christ came to help us recognize that primordial part of ourself, and he came loving us into life **outside** it...a life to forgive one another when that primordial part takes hold of us or of someone else.

When that part takes hold, we tend to react with "knee-jerk" reactions.

That's when we operate out of our "reptilian brain". .. the part of our brain which is basically an animal-like reaction.

Christ shows us how to operate out of a calm, hopeful brain which knows we are loved and can look with love and forgiveness at life and other people.

Some people call this “being centered”, being held in a place of peace even amidst chaos around them. It is a place of transcendence.

Forgiveness can come from this place.

Reconciliation can come from this place.

We can die to old ways and be drawn by God’s love to a new, transformed life.

From this place can come work such as the GIFTS Shelter program for Janesville’s homeless men (which several of you are leading and many of you have helped)...or the CROP Walk helping the world’s and Janesville’s hungry. Or ECHO and Salvation Army helping the needy. Or Lazarus House. I think also of the international peace group to which I belong, the Fellowship of Reconciliation, and how we work for reconciliation. I think of Adams’ School Breakfast Club. I think of Tony End’s Churches’ Center for Land and People...and Mark Karrel’s free Healthnet dental clinic...and Paula DeRubeis’s local leadership with “Pennies for Peace”, to build public schools in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The work of groups and people like these is what will continue to change the world...part of what will continue to tame the selfish and desirous part of human nature.

Groups and people like these are a continuing part of the joke on Satan, which Christ started.

It’s being “Easter people”. It’s bringing Christ to the world.

So, which side of the joke are **you** on?

Sometimes one side, sometimes the other?

I guess that's all of us, if we're aware and honest with ourself.

Yes, we all have "sinned and fallen short of the glory of God",

but we "are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus". (Romans 3:23, 24)

However, **we** really **do** know "that (our) ...redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth". (Job 19:25)

So we **do** know we are taken by Christ to be on **his** side of the victory...if we will give ourself to him.

In closing, let us pray:

"May the God of hope fill us with all joy and peace in believing so that we may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."

(2 Cor. 13:14)

Amen.