

RISEN RISUS

Sermon, April 23, 2017

Texts: John 20:19-31; Acts 2:22-32. I Peter 1:3-9

The choir's anthem this morning, "Lord of the Dance," was written by Sydney Carter in 1963 to a tune used by that American religious "subsect" of the Quaker sect called the Shakers, "'Tis a Gift to be Simple.' It was a dance tune, for the Shakers liked to use dance in worship. (First stanza, for those not present: "I danced in the morning when the world was begun, I danced in the moon and the stars and the sun. I came down from heaven and I danced on the earth; At Bethlehem I had My birth." Chorus: "Dance, dance wherever you may be; 'I am the Lord of the Dance,' said He, 'and I'll lead you all, wherever you may be, and I'll lead you all in the Dance, said He.'" Or, as I learned it while in Young Life in high school, "... I'll lead you all in a dance *that's free!*")

C.S. Lewis would have liked this anthem. In his writings he liked to use the imagery of the "dance," especially in his fictional Space Trilogy (*Out of the Silent Planet*, *Perelandra*, and *That Hideous Strength* ... he also used it in his most well known work, *Mere Christianity*); he pointed out that we tend to think of the universe as a grand mechanism, but in medieval literature the picture of the universe was much more festive. Lewis noted that in the medieval mindset the orderly movements of the universe were conceived not so much as those of a machine, but rather as a dance, a festival. A machine is cold, mechanical, not living, no emotion. But a dance is festive, fun, exuberant, alive; people laugh at a dance. Yesterday we had the funeral for the late Mr Bragger; I learned from his obituary that he and his late wife were very fond of square dancing; for nearly two decades they square danced every Saturday night (*I've always enjoyed square dancing, too, though I haven't had opportunity to do so much of late*). A square dance is most enjoyable when everyone is trained in following the caller's instructions and steps in time accordingly; one learns the steps and obeys the calls and the dance is festive, enjoyable, even exhilarating for all. The enjoyment of the dance loses its luster, though, when some clod insists on doing his own thing, or doesn't follow the rules, or is otherwise out of step with the rest of the square. In the square dance (*and in ballroom dancing, for that matter*) the order is part of the fun; following the rules, obeying the calls, and staying in step with the "Lord" or the "Caller" or the "Leader" of the Dance serves to greatly enhance the pleasure and enjoyment of the dance. Somewhere in my unfortunate generation, the "rules" for dancing went out the window; the preeminent form of "dancing" since, oh, the sixties became this do-your-own-thing freestyle jiggling and flailing and gyrating and "footloosing" (*and in a later devolvement called "break dancing"*) that's been the bane of many a self conscious teenager and has really detracted from the beauty and harmony and coordination which once characterized the dance floor ... there just is no grace of order, harmony, and coordination in "fast dancing" with a partner or partners as in a square or ballroom dance.

C.S. Lewis: "*The Dance is, in short, obedience itself; one attains freedom by submitting his or her own will to the design of the universe, moving in harmony and concord within it.*" True freedom and full enjoyment of life is found from keeping in step with the godly design of how things are created to be. Jesus is the Lord of the Grand Dance. Human like us, divine like God... He dances the dance of the Universe, He's the grand Caller ... and He invites us to join Him on the dance floor, He invites us to learn how to stay in step with the divine order that was meant to give us abundant life and exhilarating joy. As mentioned earlier, I learned the last phrases of the chorus when singing "Lord of the Dance" in my young adult years (*and as I taught it here with my guitar in Vacation Bible School and one or two Easter Sunrise services, accompanied by a much younger version of our Director of Music; I think John was 8 or 9 at the time!*) as "... I'll lead you all in a dance *that's free.*" (*or, to paraphrase John 8:32, "You shall know the Dance, and the Dance will set you free!"*). Again, a dance is festive, fun; people laugh at a dance. Joy is the serious business of the universe as created by a joyful and loving God! Remember that quote from Voltaire a few weeks ago: "*God is a comedian, playing to an audience too afraid to laugh.*" And Martin Luther – "*If you are not allowed to laugh in heaven, I don't want to go there.*"

Speaking of laughter ... during the 15th century in southern Germany (Bavaria), a delightful custom sprung up in many of the churches. At the end of the Sunday after Easter church service, the priest would leave the altar and come down among the people and lead the congregation in what was called the "Risus Paschalis", which roughly translates as "the Easter laughter." ("*Osterlachen*" in German). The priest would tell funny stories and sing comical songs all illustrating some moral and spiritual point, and the congregation would resound with laughter (*Bavarians are stereotypically the funny and more social Germans; unlike their serious and somber northern counterparts*). Eventually this evolved into a regular annual practice, and the Sunday after Easter became known as Risus Paschalis Sunday. Priests would include jokes and funny stories in their sermons, and would often play practical jokes on their parishioners throughout the week (*some of which, I'm told, could be pretty ribald!*). The congregation would join in the fun as well.

Why do this at Eastertime? Because it was a time to celebrate the big **JOKE** God pulled on the powers of darkness by the resurrection of Jesus. The powers of darkness thought they had won; after all, the Lord of the Dance was "... *whipped and stripped and they hung Me high and left Me there on a cross to die.*" The Son of God was now dead and in the tomb ... it's over. But, to use the quote highlighted last Sunday, "*It ain't over 'till it's over!*" God won the ultimate triumph through the resurrection of His Son.

Unfortunately, the custom didn't last; Pope Clement X outlawed Risus Paschalis sometime in the 17th century ... I guess folks were having too much of a good time in church, and that shouldn't be! In recent times, though, some churches are resurrecting the observance (*pun intended*) of Risus Paschalis; in fact, eight years ago I went to one such service at a Presbyterian church in my home town. While I thought the idea a good one, the service itself was a wee bit over the top ... the sermon, for example, was just one joke after another, every one of which I had already heard before (*in fact, several times*) in my 30+ years of ministry ... except for one, and that was *Q: "How many choir directors does it take to change a light bulb? A: No one knows, because nobody ever watches the choir director."* But, I digress.

(The following was edited on due to time constraints; I include it here FYI –slc) To be sure, we commemorate Risus Paschalis, not Risus Sardonicus. Risus Sardonicus is an actual medical condition that manifests itself in a semi-permanent grinning expression produced by prolonged spasm of the facial muscles; it is most often seen in tetanus victims and victims of strychnine poisoning. Risus Sardonicus is also a punk rock band out of Scranton, PA, but that's not important right now. Those afflicted by Risus Sardonicus have permanently raised eyebrows and a set open "grin" which appears almost malevolent. Think of the Joker in the Batman comic book; in fact, in one of those Batman movies, Jack Nicholson's Joker character used a toxic gas on his victims that induced this condition before it killed. Risus – Latin for laughter. Sardonicus ... the same root word from which we get "sardonic", which means scornfully or cynically mocking. We celebrate Risus Paschalis, we are not afflicted by Risus Sardonicus ... when one knows and understands Easter, when you "get it", the smile is not forced; it wells up from within!

Three times in the years of my ordained ministry, 1988 and 1994 and 2011, the quirks of the liturgical calendar meant Good Friday was observed April 1st... April Fools' Day. In a 2001 Fisherman's News article and a 2011 sermon I told of a classic April Fools prank I pulled on our former Christian Ed director Brent Richards. I asked then-secretary Sue Desmond to leave a message for Brent that a Mr. Fox had called, and wanted Brent to return his call. When Brent returned from lunch, he called the number on the memo to return Mr. Fox's call; the person on the other end answered, "Good afternoon; Roger Williams Zoo!" Brent was just about to ask for Mr. Fox, and then he got it ... he hung up the phone, came out into the hallway, and hollered, "Aaaaarrghh!"

In preparing for one April 1 Good Friday worship service years ago, I was struck by the thought that perhaps the greatest, most elaborate, and most memorable prank in history took place that first Holy Week (*this was before I knew of the Risus Paschalis custom, but it is basically the same line of thinking that led to that tradition.*) Think of it ... everyone was convinced Jesus was gone, dead, done away with for good. The Roman authorities thought so; they wouldn't have to worry now about any insurrection. The crowds that cried for Jesus' crucifixion thought so, in their minds this so-called Messiah was a charlatan and got what he deserved. The religious leaders thought so; they were convinced they had rid themselves of a perceived threat to their authority and a blasphemer. On a grander scale, the Bible intimates the unseen powers of darkness thought they had pulled off a grand triumph, for they believed they had frustrated the plans and purposes of God. Everyone ... the Romans, the crowds, the priests, and all the powers of darkness were convinced Jesus was gone. Even His family, friends and followers were convinced it was the end. And make no mistake about it, it seemed a very convincing end! Then, the women come to the tomb the following Sunday morning, find this angel sitting on the rock, and the angel announces, "He is not here! He is risen!" Personally, I am convinced the angel was grinning from ear to ear, and I can almost imagine him adding, "Gotcha!"

No, I do not think of the death and resurrection of Jesus as some sort of joke. I don't make light of the fact that the crucifixion was indeed a terrible event. Jesus paid a harsh price for our salvation, and it was most difficult for those who loved Him to witness the horror of Him being humiliated, tortured and killed. All their hopes and joys seem buried in His grave, their cause seemed lost, they were frightened for their lives, they were trying to figure out what they were going to do now, and in today's Gospel reading they're hiding and huddling together behind locked doors ... then came the startling, surprising, shocking visit from Jesus appearing right there in their midst! He says, "Shalom", which is the typical Jewish greeting of the day, and I'm sure He had a broad grin on His face ... and we are told the disciples who were there were just overjoyed, delighted! Can God really do this? Can the whole course and pattern of the universe, life to death, be overturned so that now it reads, life, death ... life? Ha, ha, YES! The surprise was complete! They got it! In all our lectionary readings this morning the disciples' joy just bursts out of the pages; as Peter puts it, they are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy. Can't you just see the "Risus Paschalis" welling up and exploding out of the mouths of these disciples, engulfing the room with joy?

All of the elements of a classic prank are on display here. A good prank always takes long and careful planning. Who would've guessed what God was up to? But this had been the divine plan for a loo-ong time, really, ever since our first parents ignored the directives of the divine Caller and got out of step with the Grand Dance. The prophets spoke of it, and Jesus even told His disciples what He was going to do ... but apparently they just did not understand. Also, in a good prank surprise is complete and total. Well, put yourselves in the place of any of those present. Imagine their surprise, imagine their shock, imagine their relief, imagine their amazement, imagine their joy ... and imagine the consternation of Jesus' enemies! You know, when the Bible says, "O Death, where is your victory? Where is your sting?" that is best understood as a *taunt!* God convincingly demonstrated His ultimate power over the forces of darkness. He is in control. The forces of darkness have done their worst, and God uses even that to effect His greatest act ... in order to get His people back on the dance floor and in step with His grand design ... so they may enjoy the Dance and have the gift of life that is full, free, abundant and eternal.