

**“God’s laughter” a sermon preached by Kerry Enright in Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on Easter Sunday 1 April 2018.**

Over Easter in 2009, I was in Fiji for a meeting of Pacific Methodist Churches.

On the Thursday before Easter, the Fiji Court of Appeal ruled that the government was invalid.

The Government responded by sacking the judges, sending the Army into the streets and imposing severe restrictions on public meetings, media and other aspects of Fijian life.

The Monday edition of a Suva paper had large blank sections with words in the middle of the blank spaces “Removed by order of the censor”.

The government instructed papers not to identify which sections had been censored.

Later in the week, stories began appearing in the Suva paper along these lines:

“Man seen boarding bus. A man was seen walking along a Suva street, pausing, looking, standing, and waiting at a bus stop. When the bus arrived, he stepped off the footpath on to the bottom step of the bus, and then took each step in turn as he boarded. He spoke to the driver and paid for his ticket. He took his seat and was last seen looking out the window of the bus as it drove away.”

Mocking story after mocking story.

It was very funny, although it cost some of the people involved dearly. The censorship became more effective with practice and the Army ruled.

By contrast, in the resurrection, God laughs last.

The empire thought it had killed off the Jesus movement by nailing Jesus to a cross. It had worked for thousands, silencing them, shutting them down, warning off others.

But this Jesus was irrepressible. He refused to be intimidated, even when betrayed. He loved tenaciously, to the point of death.

The soldiers divided up his clothes, taunted him, ridiculed him, mocked him, laughed at him.

And over in his palace, Pilate laughed. And over in his palace, the Emperor laughed. And the religious leaders laughed. Nailed they said.

Three days later, Easter Sunday, God raised Jesus to life, letting loose the tenacious love that had led him to the cross.

God laughed last. Checkmate God said.

At resurrection, God laughed at an empire and a religious power structure.

At resurrection, despair and fear and death became objects of God's laughter. At resurrection, all that threatens to diminish our lives, freedoms and joy are found to be wanting.

Jürgen Moltmann witnessed the firebombing of his hometown of Hamburg in which 40,000 civilians were killed. He wrote: "Good Friday is the centre of the world."

But he also wrote: "Easter morning is the Sunrise of the coming of God and the morning of new life and the beginning of the future of the world. The laughter of the universe is God's delight. It is the universal Easter laughter in heaven and earth."

The Irish poet, Patrick Kavanagh, refers to the resurrection of Jesus as '...a laugh freed for ever and ever'.

Martin Luther – "When I was unable to chase away the devil with serious words of scripture, I often expelled him with pranks."

Voltaire predicted that Christianity would be dead before he was. After he died, his house became a Bible depot.

Today is April Fools' Day, the origin of which is uncertain.

Some say across the cultures and religions of the northern hemisphere a day for laughter was tied with the arrival of spring; marked by Greeks, Romans, and Hindi with feasts and trickery.

Spring brings newness; newness brings joy; laughter is the fruit of joy.

Some say it started in 1582 when Pope Gregory XIII ordered the use of a new calendar, the Gregorian calendar, which celebrated New Year's Day on January 1. According to legend, many people refused to recognize the new calendar and continued to celebrate New Year's Day on April 1.

However it began, that Easter and April Fools' are celebrated on the same day is an opportunity to think about Easter as a feast for laughter.

The last time the dates came together was in 1956; the next opportunity will be 2029; the next 2040; then not again this century.

Even the story today includes a joke.

Did you hear that Jesus was mistaken for a gardener? A joke about our capacity to not recognise Jesus.

Sam Wells ...

“Easter is either everything, or it’s nothing. Today is either a doomed attempt to overcome suffering and death with flowers and drums and cymbals and brass and a descant of the last verse, or it’s a peek through a keyhole into a world completely changed by Jesus. If it’s a peek through the keyhole, then the way God changes the world isn’t the conventional way, through guns and bombs and war and conquest. It’s through something more dynamic than coercion, but something even more irresistible, yet more subversive, and more infectious. Something like ... laughter.”

In Luke, Jesus promises, “Blessed are those who weep now, for you will laugh.”

Humour can remind us of our humanness, help us see ourselves and our place.

When Billy Connolly noted that age meant he rarely rises from a low chair without grunting, I recognised myself.

Laughter thrives in the gap between who we really are and who we imagine we are, the gap between what the world is and what it imagines itself to be, our earnest selves and our honest selves.

The imperial rulers imagined themselves as imperial rulers. God laughed.

Our laughing participates in what God is doing; laughter is at the heart of God.

But its Sunday laughter, not Friday laughter.

On Friday the soldiers mocked Jesus by putting a crown of thorns on his head.

The chief priests mocked Jesus by saying “He saved others; he cannot save himself.”

The passers-by mocked Jesus by saying “You talked about destroying the Temple but you can’t even get yourself down from the cross.”

Even the bandits crucified next to Jesus mocked him.

Jesus brought a different kind of laughter, an infectious laughter, resurrection laughter.

As Sam Wells says:

“Two days after the greatest catastrophe there has ever been or ever will be – the betrayal and execution of the Lord of glory – here we are, laughing, infectiously, uncontrollably, in a way that diminishes no one, denies nothing, leaves no one out and understands all things.

Imagine a laughter that can’t be contained, that’s so infectious and so irresistible it bursts out of the tomb and floods the whole world. It’s a laughter that shakes your

whole body, that splits your aching sides, that takes the head off your grief, that makes you rock deep down inside.

The worst that humanity can do in denial and destruction has been met with irresistible laughter, not mocking, not deflecting, but laughter that creates a bigger community, tells a greater story,

More profound than the groaning of creation is the laughter of creation when the stone is rolled away.”

In 347 St John Chrysostom wrote: “Wherefore, enter you all into the joy of your Lord; and receive your reward, both the first, and likewise the second. You rich and poor together, hold high festival. You sober and you heedless, honour the day. Rejoice today, both you who have fasted and you who have disregarded the fast. The table is full-laden; feast ye all sumptuously. The calf is fatted; let no one go hungry away.”

This church has rocked to the sound of laughter, a foretaste of Easter laughter. Christmas Eve two years ago. I was given a script of instructions to read. I had not practised. The words said – “Once the candles are lit, please remain seated for singing.” I said: “Once the candles are lit, please remain seated for sinning.” 700 people burst into laughter. Thereafter every time I hesitated, I could feel the expectation. The Assembly Moderator asked me to provide him with a paper on sinning while seated compared to sinning while standing, and the relevance of candles to the same.

Laughter arising from God’s laughter, resurrection laughter, Easter laughter.

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## **KNOX CHURCH, DUNEDIN**

***growing in courage to live the Jesus way***



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