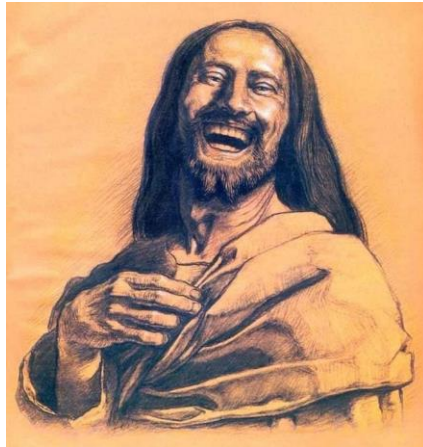


Sermon: The Laughing Christ April 22, 2018 Text: Genesis 18:1-15
 United Church, Ottawa ON Rev. Steve Clifton

Rideau Park



Jesus was walking through heaven one day, a little bored, when he passes the Pearly Gates and sees St. Peter talking with an elderly gentleman and decides to go over and hear the man's tale. "Where are you from, old man?" Jesus asks. "Well, I lived my life on the shores of the Mediterranean," the old man replies. "Hmmm. I spent some time there myself," says Jesus. "What did you do for a living?" "Well, I was a poor carpenter," says the old man. "Wow. So was I," says Jesus. "And I had a son," says the old man, "Well, he wasn't my son really, but a miraculous spirit came into him and he became famous, and people talk about him all over the world." Jesus is very excited, because he is sure he now knows who this man is, and can't hold back any longer. "Father!" he cries. The old man falls into Jesus' outstretched arms. "Pinocchio!"

I thought this would be a good day to begin with some levity because it's Holy Humour Sunday. For some the idea of Holy Humour Sunday may be new, although we have marked a Sunday after Easter as Holy Humour Sunday here at Rideau Park since at least 2012.

The idea of setting aside one Sunday each year to celebrate God's gift of laughter and joy is not a new idea; Laughter Sunday has got a long and rich history in many congregations and traditions around the world. *Holy Humour Sunday* (also known as *Laughter Sunday*, *Hilarity Sunday*, *God's Laughter Sunday*, *Bright Sunday* or *Holy Fools Sunday*) has its roots in a number of different Christian traditions.

In the Orthodox tradition, people would gather on Easter Monday to tell jokes and funny stories, and to dance and eat together. Christ is risen! Joy is an appropriate response.

Churches in 15th century Bavaria used to celebrate the Sunday after Easter - as it is described in Latin- as *Risus Paschalis*- ('God's Joke,' or 'The Easter laugh'). Priests would deliberately include

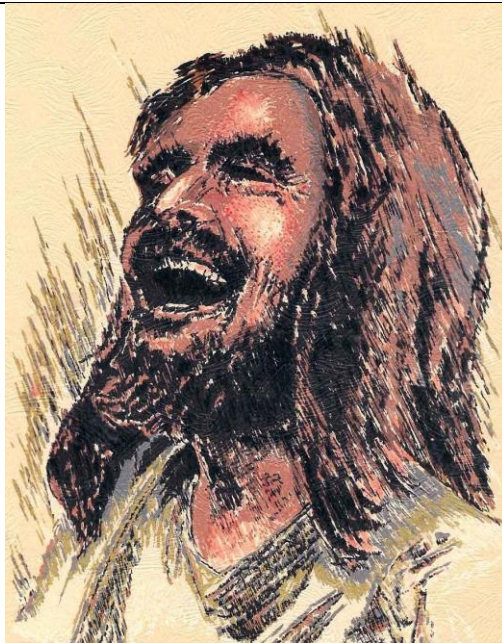
amusing stories and jokes in their sermons in an attempt to make the faithful laugh. After the service, people would gather together to play practical jokes on one another and tell funny stories and dance and sing. It was their way of celebrating the resurrection of Christ – an occasion of great and good surprise and overwhelming joy, a celebration of tears turned to laughter.

The ancient observance of *Risus Paschalis* was officially outlawed by Pope Clement X in the 17th century. Perhaps people were having too much fun. Perhaps Clement was a dour individual who rarely cracked a smile.

The idea that religion and humour are an inappropriate blend is not unique to 17th Century Popes. I once heard a televangelist say that Jesus: “didn’t smile very much ...” Where would he get that idea? No doubt when Jesus spoke of a camel passing through a needle’s eye or when he spoke of removing a log from your eye, he had a twinkle in his own eye... Jesus did go to weddings, tell stories, play with children, tie his questioners in knots and had to deal with those who were surprised by God’s love. I doubt that he could have done all this and while maintaining a dour expression.

Since Jesus knew how the story would end, surely Jesus smiled, and Jesus laughed.

How does a mystic order a hot dog? He says “make me one with everything”
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If you’re my age or older you may remember the controversy that erupted in the United Church in 70’s with the publication of a drawing called “Jesus Christ Liberator” that became better known as the Laughing Christ. Created by a United Church member it was an artist’s drawing of a mirthful Saviour and for reasons I have long forgotten some people were offended by an image of a joyful Christ. A laughing Jesus was just not right. Religion is serious and so should

Jesus be...We are okay with a sorrowful Jesus, a white Jesus who looks like a surfer or a Swede rather than a 1st C Galilean Jew, but a mirthful, joyful Jesus is a scandal!

And if Jesus is the image of God, the One in whom we see God, then how we see Jesus is how we picture God. Is God angry, brooding, harsh, judgmental? Is God not the source of joy and wonder?

Holy Humour Sunday is situated in the season of Easter in a time when we might appreciate that Jesus and faith and joy, and mirth and laughter, are all appropriate companions. Easter itself is a divine joke. For the first 1000 year years of Christian thought, before other atonement theories became prominent, the Christian Church understood the Resurrection to be the final act in a divine prank. Easter is God's jest, a Holy Joke.

The devil held the souls of humanity. God offered his Son, Jesus, in exchange. The Devil accepted the deal. But it's all sleight of hand, because death cannot hold Jesus. Jesus is resurrected. The devil ends up with nothing. God ends up with everything. It's quite a joke. If he who laughs last laughs best, God's laughter is best of all. And why wouldn't we join in? Heaven is overflowing with laughter, why shouldn't we laugh along?

Q What kind of lighting did Noah install on the ark?

A. Flood lights.

Q. Where was Solomon's temple located?

A. On the side of his head.

Q. How does Moses make his coffee?

A. Hebrews it.

Q. What kind of man was Boaz before he married?

A. He was...Ruthless.



In Ecclesiastes it reads that “there is a time to weep and a time to laugh.”

The 4th C Preacher John Chrysostom, a serious advocate of social justice, said that “laughter has been implanted in our souls.”

The philosopher monk Thomas Aquinas, one of the great minds of history, wrote that there is a time for “playful deeds and jokes.”

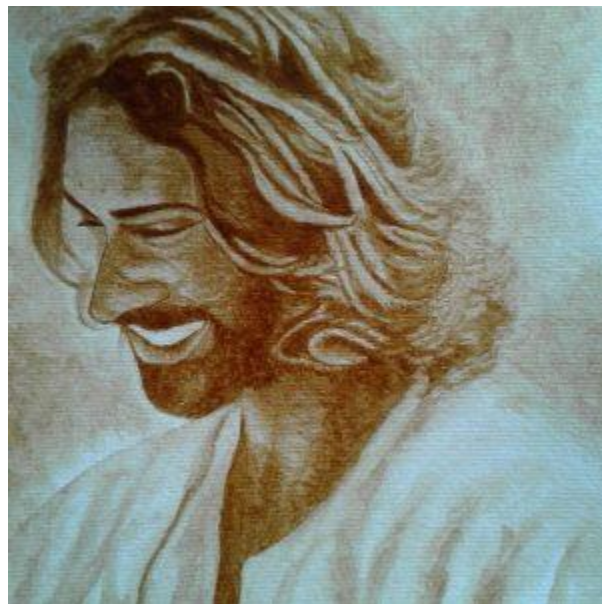
Reformer Martin Luther wrote “You have as much laughter as you have faith.”

John Calvin: “We are nowhere forbidden to laugh.”

John Wesley: “A sour religion is the devil’s religion.”

Soren Kierkegaard: “Humor is intrinsic to Christianity.”

Novelist Flannery O’Conner wrote that “Christianity is a strangely cheery religion.”



A new barber set up in town. On the first day he gets a visit from the local Catholic priest. After his haircut the priest goes to pay and the barber says: No thank you Father. Clergy get their haircuts for free. The priest thanked him for the gift and when the barber came to his shop the next morning he found a bottle of sacramental wine on his doorstep, a thank you gift from the priest.

Later that day an Anglican minister came to get a haircut. When he went to pay the barber declined again explaining that he gave his services to clergy for free. The next morning when he went to his shop he found a package of baked goods from an ACW sale, left as a gift of thanks from the Anglican rector.

Later that day the local United Church minister came to the shop. After the haircut the barber again declined compensation. Clergy haircuts are for free. The United Church minister gave his thanks. The next morning when he went to shop, he found 5 United Church ministers waiting on his door step.

In the season of Easter we celebrate Holy Humour. It's not just here at RPUC. The celebration of this day is growing and spreading and being reclaimed. Maybe we live in a time when we all really need a good dose of joy. Maybe in the midst of a serious age, we need to lighten up now and again.

In this Easter season we celebrate the great joy of Christ's resurrection. Love wins. Life reigns. Hallelujah! You can hear Holy laughter in Easter. We should definitely laugh along.