

## Sermon Archive 385

Sunday 24 April, 2022

Knox Church, Ōtautahi, Christchurch

Lessons: Psalm 118: 19-24  
John 20: 19-28

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



A couple of weeks ago, a friend told me about the "taking up" since 1988 by Western Protestant churches (many in the United States) of something called "Holy Humour Sunday". It's a reduced form, a one day version, of the "Bright Week" festival that churches in the Orthodox and Slavic traditions had observed since the early centuries of the faith. The idea was that the resurrection deserved celebrating - and celebrating in a way that kind of overflowed from just a single day. So for the six days following Easter Day, the church would hold parties, picnics, parades - any kind of festivity that expressed joy. Traditions sort of grew crazily. One lovely one found a home on Monday of Bright Week. While in the olden days, Monday would have involved the local priest sprinkling the congregation with holy water (something all about being baptised into Christ, so as to share in his resurrection), boys of the parish decided it was great to poke fun at the priest by dousing the girls of the parish with bucket loads of secular water. A second tradition almost immediately grew up of the girls doing the same to the boys. A holy rite of purification became a water fight, and it made the people laugh.

Laughter indeed became something encouraged during Bright Week. Traditions formed around the telling of jokes, playing practical jokes, and the wearing of silly clothes. The story is that human laughter echoed the laughter of God - as God played the great practical joke against the devil of raising Jesus from the dead. The lofty sounding expression "risus paschalis" appeared - loosely meaning "Easter laugh" or "God's joke". And since every lofty liturgical expression needs attributing to a serious classical theologian, the word went out that it had its origins in St John Chrysostom's midnight Easter sermon. St John himself, they said, gave sermonic encouragement to the people to have a good old Easter laugh. I tracked down Chrysostom's Easter sermon. It's short - and contains no mention of laughter at all. It does talk about joy and feasting. It talks about banquets and the mocking of Hell. But there's not a mention of God laughing at the devil. In fact, Chrysostom's

assessment of laughter was that it was seriously unbecoming of a true Christian. Something of that same spirit may have motivated Pope Clement X in the Seventeenth Century, when he outlawed joke telling in sermons. Apparently the priests of Barvaria, in particular, had just got silly.

So anyway, the origin story of the risus paschalis is pretty patchy. If the risus caught on, then it was probably simply because the people enjoyed it. Catharsis? Gratitude? The need to smile after all the seriousness? Not sure, but if the joy of resurrection was too big for just a single day, then maybe it was always just a matter of time before it flowed into a whole week of days that were "bright". Life after Easter. Looking for some happy, lived expression of what comes next. Of such a season, might we dare to say "this is the day that the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it"?

-ooOoo-

I heard recently also, from another friend, about another day close to Easter, observed by other Christians. On the Sunday before Easter, which we observe as Palm Sunday, or Passion Sunday, Orthodox Christians observe "Forgiveness Sunday". The evening liturgy involves the people asking the priest for forgiveness, and the priest asking the people for forgiveness. It involves the people declaring forgiveness to one another. It's just as well that Orthodox places of worship tend, generally, to be fairly clear of pews, since lots of floorspace is required for everybody to lie prostrate on the floor. Not something that would work very well at Knox, I think. So we can relax. It's not something I think we should adopt.

Since it's an Orthodox practice, and since Orthodoxy is the common expression of Christian faith in Russia, it might have been used there recently. As the government narrative, echoed by the established church in Russia, is that the war is about Western decadence and Nazism in Ukraine, about old wrongs and current cultural competitiveness, do you think that a litany of forgiveness - where Russia forgave, rather than invaded, and where it is modelled that it is OK to confess and seek forgiveness, might have had some relevance or power? I note that the Patriarch of Moscow did not observe Forgiveness Sunday this year. Speaking of offering forgiveness, of seeking forgiveness, of presenting a "broken and contrite spirit" to God, in the hope of peace and restored relationships, seemed just too hard this year for the leadership of the Russian church.

Just around Easter, around this festival of resurrection life, we look for risen life to bleed out of the single day, into more days - for the sake of peace in the world. Life after Easter. Looking for some peace-giving, lived expression of what comes next. Looking for what lies in Easter's heart to become part of the life of the

world. Might we dare to say of that "becoming", "this is the day that the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it"?

-ooOoo-

A third day to be mentioned. Tomorrow is ANZAC Day. I guess, at a push, it could be described as our national forgiveness day. Forgive us, O God, for the wars that have killed our people. Forgive us, so that henceforth (how does the expression go?) we might, insofar as within us the power lies, live forever now in peace. Again, might I suggest that observing a single day might not greatly bless the world, unless the observance of that day flows into a committed life beyond the day itself. It is important to remember and to grieve. It is, however, equally important to find a new life beyond the single day. Otherwise, we will never be able to say of any of our days, really, that this is a day which God has made - let us rejoice and be glad in it.

-ooOoo-

It's taken me a while, hasn't it, to come to the Bible reading from the gospel? It records a couple of events, small human gatherings, following the drama of Easter. And both occasions are occasions where the doors are firmly shut - out of fear of who might come through the doors with their violence and persecution - to add another crucifixion to the world's already awful tally. Life after Easter is hard. The mystery that's touched the day still hasn't been comprehended. Easter is just this weird, unprocessed thing in their past.

But Easter proves to be more than just "a day last week". Easter proves to be "today". For as they gather, they discern that Jesus is present with them, among them, wishing them peace. "Peace be with you", he says. And we're told "Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord".

A bright day. A day of joy. A quiet risus paschalis, perhaps. He tells them, "if you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." The risus paschalis is also the day of forgiveness. We look for Easter to bleed out of the single day, into more days. Life after Easter. And it turns out that what is flowing out of Easter are days of joy and forgiveness. "This is the day that the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it".

Not present, of course, on this day of joy and forgiveness, is Thomas. Famously, he sets his requirements for believing that Easter is bigger than a day - well, actually he sets requirements for believing that Easter is anything at all. He doubts the day.

By the patience of Jesus, by the empathy of Jesus, Thomas is enabled to learn, with the others, that Easter is not trapped in the past. Easter is now part of his life. It's a living, present gift to the life of the world. It is with us, wishing us peace, calling us to forgive, giving us a quiet upper room sense of joy. This day, as people find peace, as people give themselves to the work of forgiving others (and maybe forgiving themselves), it is a day that God has made. Each day, let us rejoice and be glad in it.

On Easter Day, I finished the sermon with an Easter Ode. Here's Part 2: the **Ode for Afterwards**:

"Rouse me, risen Christ, from my human slumber",  
we said.

"That with our eyes, our ears and our souls,  
we might be witnesses of your being alive."

Then we locked our doors  
and stayed at home,  
as if it all still were just too hard.

You come now not as the strong man.

You come neither as the one who dances with the wind-blown leaves and feathers.

You come as the peace-bringer,  
who forever now is the life of the world.

The truth within which you stand  
*is* the ground upon which we stand.

The life that fills you  
*is* the hope that we hold.

This is the day that you have made;  
we will rejoice and be glad in it.

For, forever, you are risen.

You are risen indeed.

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