

EASTER MESSAGE for 2011
Matthew 28:1-10
The Rev. Dr. R. K. Miller

Today we join millions of people all around the world to celebrate Easter. He is risen. He is risen indeed! Alleluia. That means death, sin, and the devil have all been defeated. As my children have learned to say about something great (*making a fist and pulling your elbow in to your side*) – Yes!

This remarkable and radical event called Easter is celebrated in so many different ways around the world. In our culture we celebrate with coloring hardboiled eggs, egg hunts, chocolate bunnies, and marshmallow peeps, ham/turkey dinners and family get-togethers.

Around the world Easter is celebrated in many other ways too.

In Bermuda they fly homemade kites on Easter. This tradition started years ago when a teacher wanted to explain Jesus' resurrection and ascension, and so the class made a kite, shaped like a cross, and they flew it together.

In parts of Europe they light a massive bonfire and communities gather around to celebrate the Light of World coming back to life.

In Haiti, they have parades with people dressing in colorful costumes and play homemade instruments celebrating the new life we have in Christ.

In the Greek Orthodox Church they tell jokes. Of course, Easter is no laughing matter, so why would they do this? They see Easter as God's big practical joke on Satan by raising Jesus from the dead.

So... I have 7 Jokes to share with you this morning:

Attending a wedding for the first time, a little girl whispered to her mother, "Why is the bride dressed in white?" Her mother said, "Because white is the color of happiness, and today is the happiest day of her life." The child thought about it for a moment, then said, "So why is the groom wearing black?"

Three boys are in the school yard bragging about their fathers. The first boy says, "My dad scribbles a few words on a piece of paper, he calls it a poem, they give him \$50." The second boy says, "That's nothing. My dad scribbles a few words on a piece of paper, he calls it a song, they give him \$100." The third boy says, "I got you both beat. My dad scribbles a few words on a piece of paper, he calls it a sermon. And it takes four people to collect all the money!"

An elderly woman died but never married. Her final request was to have no male pallbearers. In her handwritten note for her memorial service, she wrote, "They wouldn't take me out while I was alive, so I don't want them to take me out when I'm dead."

A police recruit was asked during an exam, "What would you do if you had to arrest your own mother?" He said, "I'd call for backup."

A Sunday school teacher asked her class why Joseph and Mary took Jesus with them to Jerusalem. A small child replied: "They couldn't get a baby sitter."

A Sunday school teacher was discussing the Ten Commandments with her five and six year olds. After explaining the commandment to 'honor your father and your mother, the teacher asked "Is there a commandment that teaches us how to treat our brothers and sisters?" Without missing a beat one little boy answered, "Thou shall not kill."

A young child was kneeling by his bed saying his prayers asking God to make him a good boy. The boy's father overheard his son praying: "And make me a good boy if You can; but if You can't, that's okay, 'cause I'm having fun the way I am."

The jokes can get pretty wild in the Greek Orthodox Church at Easter time! Years ago congregations would play a joke on their pastor. I do not recommend this one... They would chase their pastor through town with buckets of water trying to drench him and then have a big community party afterwards -- like a football team after winning the super bowl and dumping the Gatorade on the coach. By the way... I removed all the buckets from the church building...

Point is – if we stop and think about it – God certainly did pull one over on Satan that first Easter morning. Satan thought he had won the cosmic battle with Jesus dying on the cross and being stuffed in a tomb. Satan smiled to himself thinking he had the last word. Jesus was dead in the tomb forever – case closed. And in hell the party started but it didn't last very long.

Three days later God raised Jesus from the dead, and Jesus crashed the party in hell breaking the gates of hell and the chains of death forever. Party over. And a new party started in heaven and it's been going on ever since. There is no party in hell and never will be again. Jesus has won the ultimate victory, showing the whole world that life and love wins every time.

It was no joke that first Easter morning. There was no victory at first. Fear, grief, loss, defeat, sadness – yes. Victory? No! They watched as Jesus was crucified. Their hopes and dreams died on the cross with him. The women went to the tomb with heavy hearts to honor Jesus lifeless body. There was nothing else to do. No joy - no laughter. The disciples hid behind locked doors with heavy hearts, there was nothing else to do. No joy - no laughter. There was nothing funny at first on that first Easter morning.

Until they experienced the punch line, the ultimate punch line! The tomb was empty. Jesus was not dead but alive. Nothing would be the same. Life in this world was forever changed. Life replaced death. Hope replaced despair. Victory replaced defeat. He is risen. He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

And yet... like the disciples on that first Easter morning, we, too might describe our life with words like fear, grief, loss, defeat and sadness. Disease, unemployment, broken relationships, injustice, war, intolerance and natural disasters these are just a few of the realities we live with every day in this world. These things could easily convince us that evil and death are winning the day. But say it isn't so. It isn't so.

Nearly two months ago, a violent earthquake sent a 30 foot wall of water – a tsunami that devastated the coastline of Japan. Thousands of homes and businesses were washed away. The nuclear power plant continues to cause problems on land and in the sea. Tens of thousands of lives were lost. It was the greatest crisis faced by the Japanese since World War II. And some people might be convinced that evil and death are winning the day. But the Christian community in Japan doesn't see it that way.

They immediately gathered for worship and prayer, bringing help and hope to those in need. Many of them had been profoundly impacted by the tsunami. Why did they do it? Because of Jesus and his empty tomb... The resurrection is God's response to evil and death. The Christians in Japan were convinced that life and love are God's final word. That's the power of Easter.

Maybe you're here today and, truth be told, behind your Sunday best and your Easter smile you are struggling under a tsunami of trouble, pressed down by the circumstances of life – tempted to believe that evil and death are winning the day.

Maybe you've lost a loved one or you're in relationship that's fallen apart. Maybe you're struggling with an addiction, or financial hardship, or news from the doctor that has you or a loved one concerned about the future. Maybe fear, grief, loss, defeat or sadness describes your world right now.

The Easter message is this – don't give up! The empty tomb is God's punch line, God's final word, God's way of saying that life and love will win the day. Easter reminds us that God is at work, right here and right now, in your life, redeeming all things, bringing light and life and hope and help. So don't give up!

During a children's message in worship one Sunday the pastor asked the children, "If I sold my house and my car, had a big garage sale, and gave all my money to the church, would that get me into heaven?"

"NO!" the children answered.

"If I cleaned the church building every week, mowed the yard, and kept everything neat and tidy, would that get me into heaven?"

"NO!" The children answered again.

"Well, what if I was kind to animals and loved my wife and children and did

something nice for my neighbor everyday, would that get me into heaven?"

"NO!" The children answered yet again.

"Well," said the pastor, "Then how do I get into heaven?"

A five year old boy shouted out, "YOU GOTTA BE DEAD!"

Some day we will be, so live before you die. Live life to the fullest every day because the joke of Easter is this. After you die – you'll live. So live and believe in Jesus and you will never die.

He is risen. He is risen indeed. Alleluia! YES! Amen!