

---

---

# One Day You Will Laugh

Matthew 28.1-10

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on March 23, 2008 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

---

---

Easter is either everything, or it's nothing. Today is either a doomed attempt to overcome suffering and death with lilies 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, I want to suggest this morning, something like ... laughter.

Have you ever noticed that animals don't laugh? Aristotle called humans the "laughing animal." Laughter opens up a joy that goes beyond words. There's something divine in laughter that humanity is invited to share in. Laughing is participating in what God is (infectiously, subversively non-coercively but irresistibly) doing. And laughter – joyous, physically consuming, whole-body laughter – is at the heart of God. That's what we discover on Easter Day.

There's a famous story in Britain about the night former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher took all 25 of her cabinet out for dinner. The table attendant said, "What would you like to order, madam?" Mrs. Thatcher said, "Steak, please." And the vegetables?" said the table attendant. "They'll have steak too," said Mrs. Thatcher. (I think you can tell a similar story about President Brodhead and the trustees, but I wouldn't do a thing like that.)

I wonder whether you've ever been so overcome with laughter that it almost hurt. If you think about the words we use for hilarity, they're very physical, almost uncomfortable words. We talk about laughing our heads off, being convulsed, having hysterics, splitting our sides, being creased up, doubling over, even *dying* laughing. There's no doubt laughing is a whole body experience like almost no other. Both of my children were born prematurely, and both of them, coming from a clergy home, began their bid for freedom on a Sunday morning. In each case the previous evening my wife and I had laughed so much that we cried. I'm convinced the laughter brought on the birth each time.

But there's more than one kind of laughter. One thing I discovered about myself as a pastor early on was that when I was worried, or sad, or embarrassed – particularly when I was embarrassed – my first resort would often be to try to be funny and make a joke of it. Needless to say a lot of the attempts at humor fell on stony ground. Then I got more embarrassed. Eventually I realized that if I was going to be much of a pastor, it was a habit I needed to let go of. After all, being a pastor means giving people the confidence that whether they're discovering despair or joy, the truth of God or the terror of emptiness, they can do it in the presence of someone who won't be out of his or her depth. I realized my jokes were a kind of graveyard humor. What they were really indicating was that I was out of my depth.

There's a lot of different ways to use laughter as a defense. Some people laugh involuntarily every time they say anything. Some people giggle nervously so that no one might ever see them as a threat. Other people have a stock of phrases that avoid a conversation getting too serious, like "May never 'appen" or "Worse things happen at sea." All of these are self-defense mechanisms, designed to prevent the conversation becoming threatening or getting too close to the bone.

Sometimes the defensive kind of laughter is all too necessary. It's amazing how much laughter you find in places of dire poverty or oppression. In these situations a sense of humor often means the ability to see irony and incongruity and paradox, and so realize that the world isn't a conspiracy against you. When you look back on the times you've split your sides laughing, I wonder how many of those occasions were in fact during difficult times in your life, when somehow the explosion of laughter was a gushing release of pent-up frustration or disappointment or hurt. Think of a group of fighter pilots the night before a World War Two air battle, so full of fear and anticipation, not bearing to think about danger, so convulsed with laughter about

stories from home. This kind of laughter is a defense – a kind of drug that prevents you having to think about reality. It's great. But it's not real.

Of course there's another kind of laughter. This second kind of laughter isn't about defense. It's about attack. There's lots of this kind of laughter in the account of Jesus' crucifixion. The soldiers mock Jesus by putting a crown of thorns on his head. The chief priests mock Jesus by saying "He saved others; he cannot save himself." The passers-by mock 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 mock and taunt him. It's all a big laugh.

Probably most humor is of this kind – laughing *at* other people. Whether it's the most basic slapstick banana-skin humor or more sophisticated satirical cartoons, the purpose is the same. We feel just that little bit better about ourselves and the world when we see the other guy is really pretty foolish, and the release of tension and sense of reversal makes us laugh. We feel bad about it when we shouldn't need the reassurance, when the person ridiculed is in a bad way, and we realize our laughter is a kind of gratuitous punishment willed by our small ego or our deep-seated cruelty. But when the other guy is famous, powerful or oppressive, humor is often the best, the most dynamic and the most successful way of getting one up or one back. The story about Mrs. Thatcher and the cabinet isn't just a comment on her leadership style; it's a ridiculing of politicians as a whole. This is the laughter of revenge or subversion. Sometimes it's the laughter of pent-up hatred and deep-seated loathing and long-contained fear. Remember the pictures of Saddam's statue being toppled in Baghdad after the invasion five years ago? For all the poignancy of the scene, what made it memorable was that it was just plain funny to watch this great dictator keel over like a child's toy.

Think about these two kinds of laughter for a moment. One is the laughter of defense, of denial, of distraction, of wishing reality were not so demanding and dangerous. The other is the laughter of attack, of the determination to have the last word, make the other guy look small, win the verbal war, humiliate anyone who threatens your territory, cut the world down to less than your size. The first kind says, life is too much for me, I want to hide or pretend. The other says, life is a war and if I don't lash out I'll get crushed.

This is the world we live in. A world where half the time we're in denial, and the other half of the time we're at war. Half the time it's flight, half the time it's fight. This is the world of work, this is the world of home, this is the world of leisure, this is the world of nature.

This is the world that Jesus came into. And what Jesus brought was a different kind of laughter. It's an infectious laughter. A laughter of a tiny baby in a manger going gurgle gurgle hic. A laughter of a woman finding a lost coin. A laughter of a blind man who begins to see for the first time and starts to separate the people from the trees. A laughter of Lazarus coming out of the tomb, trying to get all the death bandages off in one long peel, as if he were unraveling a tangerine. A playful laughter that doesn't humiliate or dominate, a laughter that doesn't deflect or deny. A laughter that's more infectious than a disease, more irresistible than an army, more subversive than a guerilla movement. A laughter that looks into the heart of God and smiles uncontrollably. 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.

The Easter mystery contains some of the most baffling words in the whole of Christian tradition. The ancient Catholic mass of the day includes the words, "Oh, happy fault! Oh, necessary sin of Adam! That won for us so great a salvation!" "Oh, happy fault!" It seems an insult to laugh in the face of the world's history of sin and suffering. It seems inappropriate in some ways to celebrate Jesus' resurrection today when so much of God's world lies on the cross or in the tomb. But see how gripped we are by those two rival versions of laughter, laughter on the one hand as denial of reality and laughter on the other hand as mockery and revenge.

Imagine a very different kind of laughter. 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. And it's not just you it's everybody, it's everything; the whole earth is overcome by joy, rocking and convulsing and aching with joy. 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,

imagines a bigger world, laughs in tune with the laughter of God. St Paul talked in Romans about the groaning of creation, waiting with eager longing to be set free. Even more profound than groaning is the laughter of creation, laughter deep down inside the core of all things, let loose when the stone rolls from the tomb this Easter morning. Back in the 1970s in Britain there was a glam rock group called Status Quo, so famous they were known as The Quo. Those of us who wore black leather jackets had The Quo written on the back of them. (Not me you understand.) Those of us who wore backpacks to school had black ink over the back of those rucksacks with The Quo written on them. (Not me you understand.) But I have to confess I was one of those who sang with them, both in the 70s and then at the Live Aid concert when they began it in 1985. "But I like it, I like it, I like it, I like it, I like, here we go... Rocking all over the world". That was The Quo – Status Quo. Now on Easter Day there is a new status quo. The status quo really has changed. The whole world is rocking, rocking all over, rocking all over with laughter, the irresistible, subversive, infectious laughter of God.

Way back at the start of the Bible Sarah laughed when she was told she would have a baby. Her laughter was part defensive and part mocking. But Abraham and Sarah *did* have a son, and that son stands at the head of all God's people. Abraham took that son to Mount Moriah, making defensive answers when his son asked why, and finally in aggressive fashion picking up a knife to slay his son. And God intervened and said, "Enough", and Abraham's son lived, and became the source of life to God's people. If that son had not lived, there would have been no Bible, no people of God. And Christians since earliest days have seen the story of Abraham and his son as the story of Good Friday and Easter. Because God's son, in his new life after sacrifice, becomes God's source of life to all people. And the *name*, the name of Abraham's son, the name of Abraham's son was Isaac. And Isaac means, "Laughter."

Jesus said, "Blest are you who weep and mourn, for one day you will laugh." When I hear laughter I think of my father. As a child I used to creep along the upstairs landing and peer through the banisters. I used to hear voices from the sitting room. My father would be chairing another smoke-filled meeting. And then, sure enough, after all had gone silent, every time there would be a peal of side-splitting laughter, my father bursting forth like a fountain of joy, infectious, irresistible, thrilling. But in the last 20 years of his life that coruscating laughter would always be abruptly curtailed by body-wrenching coughs, coughs of the chest pains and asthma that would eventually kill him. So for me I almost always half expect laughter to be interrupted by the cough of death; I find myself looking around for the shadow of Good Friday.

But not today. Today I can hear my father laughing again, and the laughing never stops. Today it's so infectious that the whole world joins in – laughing with God and with one another, laughing with the creation come alive again – one great tidal wave of joy.

Two days ago we wept and mourned. One day, we are told, we will laugh. Today that day for laughing has come. It's Easter Day.