

but the cross doesn't work too well as a sign. Paul calls the cross a “stumbling block” for those who cannot juxtapose the notion of a Messiah who dies on a tree and rises again a triumphant Savior. So, Paul raises the question, "Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?" Sometimes, he says, it is better just to be a fool for God than to try to be wise, for God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom.

People today are still seeking wisdom and signs. Our post-Enlightenment mentality forces us to search for the truth about the “historical Jesus” and to discard the things we cannot rationally explain. We seek a theology of Jesus that fits *us* instead of being "fitted" or transformed by the Christ's Gospel. I suggest that instead of trying to find a faith or a church that fits our lifestyle, we would be better served to seek out signs that we are living according to Christ's Gospel in the power of the Spirit to realize God's Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

One sign might be the meals prepared to feed the hungry in this community. Another sign might be the shelter given to the homeless or the funds offered to those in dire straits. Another sign might be the compassionate assistance provided to people in poor health. Signs of a living faith, a resurrection faith, abound when a congregation reaches out to its neighbors in the name of Jesus. If we are going to be looking for signs in churches, then these are the ones for which to look.

Another great sign of a Christ-filled church is the sign of laughter. A church that laughs is a church that truly understands the triumph of the resurrection and the enormous power of our God. A church that laughs at itself is a church which does not think too highly of itself or its accomplishments: it is a church with a servant's heart. A church that laughs is a church which understands that the smartest of humans and the most stunning accomplishments of humanity are but foolish child's play to God. A church that laughs is a church that remains open to the working of the Spirit in innovative and sometimes foolish ways to achieve God's preferred and promised future for the world.

When we remember the great things God did and does for us, and when we consider the reason we celebrate Easter, laughter and shouts of joy should burst up and out of us. God left us an empty tomb as a punch line to the greatest prank ever played: Jesus rose from the dead to offer us new and eternal life. The resurrection of Jesus is not a joke, but

we might well imagine God's pleasure, even laughter, when humankind thought death would overcome divine power and love.

Our God is a playful God who delights in creation. And, although we sometimes forget, the Word of God is filled with funny stories. When God promises a son to Abraham and Sarah, they both laugh thinking they are too old to conceive. But God is faithful, and Isaac is born (his name means “laughter”) and Sarah says, “God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me!” (Genesis 21:6).

In the Book of Numbers, Balaam is charged by the king of Moab to speak a curse against God's people, Israel. God sends an angel to block his path, but Balaam does not see the angel. Balaam's donkey sees the angel and stops. Balaam whips the donkey, who is given the power to speak, pointing out the angel to Balaam (Numbers 22-24). Speaking of donkeys, Samson uses the jawbone of a donkey to kill his Philistine enemies (Judges 15).

How about the story of Elijah and the prophets of Baal? Elijah challenges them to a contest, pitting their god against the One, True God. Both teams build altars and pray for their god/God to set it ablaze. Baal's team fails miserably, and Elijah mocks them by wondering if Baal is asleep or taking a bathroom break. Then, just to add insult to injury, Elijah douses his altar with water before God sets it on fire.

In another funny story, some children tease the prophet Elisha because he is bald, and in a surprising twist of fate, the children are eaten by bears! (2 Kings 2:23-25).

The entire book of Jonah is satire on the pettiness of human beings and of our resistance to God and God's ways.

Even Jesus had a sense of humor. When Jesus casts the demon out of a man who lived among the tombs, he playfully casts them into a herd of swine. When brothers James and John act rashly, Jesus gives them the sardonic nickname, “Sons of Thunder.” When he is twelve years old, he is found in the Temple teaching Scripture to the Elders.

On Easter morning, the Gospel writer John uses a little poetic license to paint himself in a good light. When Mary Magdalene told the disciples of Jesus' resurrection, Peter and

“the disciple whom Jesus loved” ran to the tomb. Now, John is the disciple whom Jesus loved, and he makes sure that we know he outran Peter and arrived at the tomb first!

On Easter evening, the disciples locked themselves in a room, afraid someone would find them and turn them in to the authorities. They’re hunkered down, scared, holding their breath, hiding their heads and suddenly there is someone else in the room! Jesus appears among them, probably scaring the living daylights out of them. He says, “Peace be with you” because peace is exactly what the disciples need as they’re peeling themselves off the ceiling.

The apostles found themselves in humorous situations, too. When Paul and Barnabas heal a crippled man, the crowd begins to worship them, believing they are the gods Zeus and Hermes (Acts 14:8-15).

We read everywhere in the Bible that we are to make a joyful noise to the Lord. What could be more joyful than a good knee-slapping, hearty belly laugh? Studies show that a good laugh is good for your health. Laughter enhances the blood flow to the body's extremities and improves cardiovascular function. Laughter releases endorphins and other natural mood-elevating and pain-killing chemicals. Laughter improves the transfer of oxygen and nutrients to internal organs. Laughter boosts the immune system and helps the body fight off disease, cancer cells, and other infections. Laughter may yet be the best cure for everyday living!

Being a Christian and following Jesus is serious business, and making a commitment to God should not be taken lightly. At the same time, we are called to *rejoice* in the Lord always. If rejoicing means to be filled with joy, then rejoicing means being able to laugh at things, just as God laughed when everyone looked for Jesus in the empty tomb. God's greatest joke is that Jesus is not dead; he is alive again and forevermore! Our Lord is risen. Be glad and rejoice and let out a good laugh. If God can make the wise look foolish and turn the fools into sages, then let us be fools for God every day.

Prayer: Grant us, God, joy-filled hearts and the grace to see ourselves as creatures of your making: wholly loved. Help us to delight in one another and to enjoy your good creation. In the busyness of this week, awaken us to your presence in the smiles of those we meet, and to laugh with them. Shape our hearts to delight in the gifts of each new day. Amen.

Risus Paschalis

April 8, 2018

1 Corinthians 1:17-25

Sunday, Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

In Latin, *risus* translates into the English word "laughter" and *Paschalis* is "Easter." Side by side, the words mean "Easter laugh." With all the activities and the busyness of Holy Week, and with the seriousness born out of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, and with the preparations for Easter there's often little room for joy leading up to Easter.

That solemnity, however, is transformed into rejoicing on Easter morning with the news that "Christ is risen!" And I'm sure that celebration did not cease on Sunday evening, but carried over into Monday. The first Easter Monday must have been a day of rejoicing, laughter and merriment for the disciples. Delirious with joy, I bet the disciples told everyone they met the good news of Jesus' resurrection.

Early Christians celebrated *Risus Paschalis* by telling jokes and uplifting, lighthearted stories to remind us that our God *does* have a sense of humor, and it was God who had the last laugh when people went to the tomb that Easter morning. Surprise! Jesus is not dead! He is risen! The tomb is empty!

The point of all this tomfoolery is to remind us that Christ is risen and that sin, death and the devil are vanquished forever! We celebrate. We laugh, sing and dance. Next Sunday we can go back to being God's frozen chosen, but this Sunday we rejoice!

A little bit of foolishness is nothing new in the church. Paul wrote to the Corinthians about the foolishness of the cross. The Romans used the cross to strike terror in the public mind and as a deterrent to crime. As such, the notion that the cross is a symbol of God's love seems like pure foolishness to Greeks and Jews alike.

Paul admits that the problem in trying to proclaim God's wisdom of the cross is that it seems foolish to so many people. The Greeks worshipped God through wisdom, but the cross defies conventional wisdom and seems like utter lunacy. The Jews sought signs,