

+ In the Name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. Amen+

Did you hear about the about the Protestant minister who was in the habit of sneaking to the race track to bet on the horses? One day he was losing badly when he saw a priest step onto the track, walk up to line-up and bless one of the horses on the forehead. The horse was a long shot, but the pastor thought, "With the priest's blessing, surely this horse will win." He placed a small bet and, sure enough, the horse came in first. At the next race, the priest stepped onto the track and blessed another horse's forehead. Even though this horse was also a long shot, the pastor was a little bolder this time and placed a larger bet on that horse. Again, it won. A third time, the priest stepped onto the track and blessed a horse on the forehead. Like the others, this horse was also a long shot. The pastor placed an even larger bet this time and, sure enough the horse won.

This pattern continued throughout the day with the priest blessing the forehead of a long shot horse, the minister placing larger and larger bets and the horse always winning. At the last race of the day, the pastor thought, "I have got to go for broke here." With great anticipation, he watched as the priest stepped onto the field one more time, walked up to the line-up and blessed the forehead, eyes, ears and hooves of one of the horses. The minister ran to the ticket counter and bet all he had on that horse. **The horse came in dead last! And fell over!**

As he was walking out, he saw the priest. Walking up to him, he demanded, "What happened? All day long you blessed horses and they won, even though they were long shots. Then at the last race you blessed a horse, I bet everything and the horse lost." "That's the problem with you Protestants," said the priest. "You can't tell the difference between a simple blessing and the Last Rites."

Why do we laugh at such jokes? Is it because we love a good story that surprises us with its ending and allows us the relief of laughter at the foibles of others and ourselves? Some comedies are to be taken lightly and then forgotten—they are surface humor. But others are serious and reveal a level of truth to us that remains fresh and continues to give us a new way of seeing and approaching life—those comedies contain both humor and fear. I want to suggest to you that today, Easter—The Great Pascha is THE ultimate divine comedy for the ending was unexpected, almost beyond belief, and the punch line is the joke God plays on death. We get a brief inkling of this in Luke's account when the women are asked, "Why do you seek the living among the dead?" Or to put in vernacular, "who do you expect to find in the cemetery?" All truly well written comedies not only give us amusing and enjoyable plots, but they also contain questions and mysteries. This morning we encounter both.

Today's Gospel account is from St. Mark, the shortest and most concise of all, and in some ways the most enigmatic. It is only 8 verses long and it ends in a most curious manner; with a conjunction—**for**, (gar) and then it stops. Either something is missing, (four centuries later a longer ending was added) or the writer is saying that in the face of death there is more to come and the future it will create is nearly inexpressible. You and I must simply live into it, and become a part of the story.

First comes the bad news, or the great mystery of our existence. It is the impenetrable reality of death. The women come to the tomb early to do the appropriate rituals associated with anointing the dead, and they ask one another a question—"Who will roll away the stone from the door...?" The question is asked in all 4 Gospels. It is unlikely all of them would have failed to

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consider the dilemma. It is far more likely a statement about death, and our inability to see through it. There are few, if any, other experiences for us as humans which are so rattling and devastating, and which alter our worlds so severely. There is no other event which so clearly and unbendingly takes control away from us, and at the same time there is no other more universally shared experience among all people.

There is a story from the Middle East of a servant who was sent by his master to the market place to purchase goods for their stock. The servant did as he was instructed, but while there looking through the crowd spotted a figure he thought was a woman, but upon closer inspection recognized as death. The figure turned and held up a hand to him. In fear he fled back home and told his master he needed to borrow his horse in order to ride immediately to Samsarra in order to avoid the frightful figure he had encountered. After leaving, his master went to the market and found the figure and confronted it asking why she had accosted his servant. Death responded that there had been no intention to frighten the servant, but the wave was merely a gesture of recognition. "You see, death said, I have an appointment with him tonight in the city of Samsarra, and I did not want to arrive unrecognized." We, too, face that mystery. Like Holy Week, which we have just walked with Jesus, there is a shadow that hangs in the background of each day and step. When we have lost those closest to our own hearts; people who occupy a place literally within us; we ask in the empty places left behind, what does this mean now? That steely shadow seems always to lurk back of so much of what we do. We speak of only going round once in life and grabbing for all we can get, as death has us in its grip already, and we have to decide how to proceed in light of it. The Gospel says the women were afraid, perhaps both of what they had heard and seen and of death. Mysteries and questions abound, do they not?

This is why today is such a beautiful and welcomed guest. Straightway and without explanation the Gospel simply acclaims the one and only response God has to our situation. Christi Anistimi-Christ is Risen! There is no attempt to unfold a rational description, because that is not possible. Mysteries are not undone by explanations; they are lived through by authentic love. No where does the early Church try to unfold "what" happened, only that God is greater than all things including the mystery of death, and He has put his seal on His people in Christ. He uses death to achieve its defeat, and in a very real sense simply laughs at the beauty of the outcome. Easter is THE DIVINE COMEDY because it has the most remarkable punch line. It is a joyful melody that sings of life!

The Church has for centuries used this day as a time to administer Baptism. The candidates would move through Lent in their preparation and come to Easter morning for the Sacraments. The reasons are clear: in Baptism we are linked to the death of Christ, BUT we are also linked to his resurrection. We are literally wrapped up in the words, Christ is Risen, and so you will be as well!! We are enclosed in a great symphony, whose music plays in our hearts when fear might be present.

I am no great lover of opera; I just don't quite get it and what little I do know I learned from Saturday morning cartoons like Bugs Bunny, when he plays the Barber of Seville, Rossini's great work. Rossini was apparently a gracious and self-giving man. Even though well established as a leading composer in Italy, every year he would go to some small village which had no opera hall or symphony and take musicians with him so that town could have a performance. He would write a short opera just for that town and then audition the residents so

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they could perform. One year the time came for his annual work and he arrived to begin his work, but trouble soon came to him. The singers were of poor quality and the lead role was to be played and sung by a lady whose skills were “limited”. In fact the only note she could hit effectively and consistently was an E flat. Working day and night Rossini constructed a musical built around that terribly limited note and scale. His work was of such genius that it made the lead singer sound like an angel. (Give me an E flat. OK, now do something with it) Your life and mine are like that E flat when it comes to facing death. And God has surrounded us with a symphony beyond our wildest dreams. We are wrapped up in the Resurrection. Christ is Risen!

There is much in this life to mystify and frighten us, and death is not the least of those. My father used to say that death is the eerie music you hear in the background just when you think you have it made. I propose to you that Easter is the haunting laughter of God in the background just when death thinks it has us made. It is the note God has placed in life. Amen+