

Easter Sunday April 1, 2018

Resurrection Joy and Laughter

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Ray Bradbury's classic 1962 spine chilling novel *Something Wicked This Way Comes* may seem more appropriate to mention at Halloween than on this Easter morning, but hang in there with me. Because this scary story has a powerful resurrection moment. Although you have to read very nearly to end to find it. You have to read about two thirteen-year-old boys, Will Halloway and Jim Nightshade, who are best friends, both yearning to be older, but in different ways and how they see the adults in their sleepy small midwestern town. All the adults are yearning too: for what they once were, or what they think will make them happy, like money or beauty or long-lost youth and vitality.

Into this town of regretful, aging, yearning adults comes a midnight carnival that promises to give whatever a person yearns for, but at a terrible cost. The boys watch as person after person disappears into the nightmare of the carnival, later emerging as something not quite alive, at least in the way they knew them.

Near the end, Jim Nightshade, took a ride on an evil carousel that promised to make him an adult, but the price of admission was Jim's soul, and it cost him his life. Will, tried unsuccessfully to save his best friend, and cried as only someone who has lost their best friend can, with deep, bitter tears. Will's father was there, after facing down his own temptation in the nightmare carnival, had learned the secret about all the carnival's evil and horrors and knew how to defeat them.

Only Will's father knew Jim Nightshade wasn't really lost, only Will's father knew how to stop the smoke and mirror nightmares. "Laugh," Will's father yelled at his sobbing son, "Whoop and holler and dance about."

Instead of stopping his tears, Will looked at his father with unbelief and did what most of us would say was the mature, appropriate response to his father's advice: he questioned his sanity. "Are you crazy?" Will asked. Couldn't his father see what was happening? Couldn't he see his best friend was gone and he had failed to save him? Will's father didn't give up, "laugh", he commanded his son, "sing, sing out, any old silly song, for no evil thing can stand the joy."

Reluctantly at first, then with more heart and soul, he found himself getting caught up in the laughter and singing, the boy's tears dried on his rosy cheeks and he heard another voice join them: that of his friend Jim Nightshade. The real Jim, all flesh and blood and mischief happy to join in.

And, sure enough, just as he had predicted, their joyful expression exposed the nightmare for what it was: despite being bloated with all the human regrets and yearnings, it was all illusion, a thing not real, though so easy to believe. And the illusions evaporated in a scene only the master Bradbury could describe, as the evil carnival's lies could not stand up to joy. A new day dawned, and the boys and Will's father felt more alive than they ever had, and ran to their homes with feet that felt free.

Did you catch the resurrection moment? It was when Will's father commanded him to laugh in the face of the nightmare. As Will's father was trying to convince his son to laugh, he said the evil feeds on tears, so Will had to stop crying and feeding the nightmare. But when that didn't work Will's father called on the name of Jesus. I don't believe he was taking Jesus' name in vain, I believe he was naming the basis for how anyone could dare risk laughing when faced with all the stuff of fear.

That was the turning point. Jesus. Who rose from the dead.

There were plenty of tears in our Gospel this morning too, those of Mary Magdalene who we heard was up early, in the darkness of not only her nightmare, but that of all those who had followed Jesus. We heard how after she found the tomb empty, she was afraid the nightmare had gotten worse. She was afraid someone had taken Jesus' body and maybe done something even worse with it. While Peter and the other disciple called beloved had an early morning foot race to check into her fears, neither seemed comfortable to stay at the empty tomb and talk to her about what they thought. Whether or not they believed their eyes, they left her alone. And that abandonment brought her to tears.

But we heard Mary was not alone at the tomb; two angels appeared and asked her why she was crying. Is it a reasonable question? I mean, she is at a tomb, and we generally accept crying as an appropriate behavior at gravesides. Poor Mary just had time to answer the angels when Jesus himself showed up, somehow unrecognizable to her and asked her the exact same question: "Why are you crying?" At times like this, even in the scriptures, I find I either have to laugh or roll my eyes in frustration. I mean, come on, didn't anyone get it? She was sad. She was frightened. She was alone. Talk about being in the middle of a nightmare. Are Jesus and the angels playing dumb? Why can't they get it?

But maybe, like Will's father, they were up to something else. Maybe they were trying to get Mary's attention, to show her there is something else going on, the nightmare was not the reality. The reality is Jesus is risen, which puts everything else in a completely different light.

There is a lot of speculation from Biblical scholars and commentators about why Mary can't recognize Jesus when she saw him, and mistook him for the gardener. Some claim this is the author of John's Gospel being theologically clever, bringing images from Creation into the resurrection. I wonder if Mary didn't recognize Jesus because she was still seeing the world as it was, before Jesus rose from the dead, a world that was only hard and only unfair and only unjust. A world where God is absent when life is hard. But the resurrection changed all that. The resurrection of Jesus is evidence God isn't about punishing and life isn't just a nightmare of our own creation, bloated with our fears and regrets and longings.

When Jesus called Mary by name, it seems she did more than recognize him, she saw him, perhaps realized it had been him all along, and she would never see anything the same way again.

I don't know if Mary laughed, even a little, or if Jesus laughed, even a little, in that moment. But it sure seems like a moment of joy to me. And joy often calls for laughter. I like to imagine Mary could even laugh at herself in that moment, for the pure relief of being released from the nightmare she thought was real only a second before.

There have been lots of warnings issued to us preachers this particular Easter Sunday, because this year Easter happens to fall on April Fools' Day, a day associated with pranks and jokes, a day when we are reminded about the dark side of laughter, that it can be used to shame or make someone feel small. We preachers were warned not to preach with humor, no telling jokes, for the resurrection is serious, and we don't want anyone to think the resurrection was a practical joke. Jesus was not "playing dead", Jesus did not jump out of the tomb three days later to say, "gottcha!".

No. Indeed. Whatever you may personally believe about it, the resurrection of Jesus is no joke.

And because the resurrection isn't a joke, which could mean all that other stuff, the stuff that makes up our nightmares is. Please hear me out, I realize what I just said might sound shocking, or disrespectful. I do not intend any disrespect. I only want to point us into moment of awakening that Mary Magdalene had, the moment she realized Jesus is risen, and what that means, not just for her, not just two thousand years ago, but for you and me in the here and now.

It does not mean life will be easy from here on out. It does not mean there are no longer going to be tragedies, losses, acts of brutality and violence. There are still many acts of injustice carried out daily. And there are plenty of people hurting. Suffering has not ended.

The wonderful reality of the resurrection does not deny any of this. Resurrection does not promise a fantasy or escape from these things, instead it exposes them for their ungodliness. Resurrection shows us these things aren't all there is. Despite all the hardness of life, resurrection is courageous enough to face all these things and do what we can to challenge, resist, and even change them. Because the resurrection of Jesus gives us joy.

I'll put it another way. Last semester I was invited by an International student at OU to be part of a project she was doing for a photography class. She had chosen four religious people to photograph and interview. Since I believe this is an important opportunity for our ministry to students, I accepted her invitation. It was a long interview, she photographed me and asked me questions for over two hours. She also let me ask her questions. So I asked her why she intentionally chose religious people for her project. She answered because she is from a country where most people are atheists, including her and her parents. She said the only reason she is an atheist is because she was raised that way. Her answer only made me more curious about why she wanted to spend so much time with religious people, not just people of faith, but the more hard core.

Her response is something I will never forget. She told me is impressed and envious of how people of faith deal with difficulties and tragedies and hard times. She told me we seem to face our problems in a way she thinks is healthy. When I asked her how she handles adversity, she simply answered: "Not well." She said she tends to just work more which only gives her more stress and ends up adding to her anxiety, but she doesn't know any other way. That is why she wanted to spend time with religious persons. To see another way.

This young woman's response was a resurrection moment for me; I saw her reality and saw her deep yearning for something she intuitively is real. Her time with me, she said later, was filled with light and joy. We laughed a lot, too. And she reminded me about something I believe about religion: too often we religious people can take our religion too seriously, so much so that we can push the joy right out of it. We need to remember genuine religion is joyful. Even in the hard times. Especially in the hard times. That is what the resurrection of Jesus is: it isn't just an event, it is how we are to live, it is how we are to listen, it is how we are to talk, it is how we are to be. Joyful.

The Resurrection of Jesus exposes all the stuff we take too seriously, including ourselves, for what they really are. The Resurrection of Jesus can reach beyond tears and make them healing. The Resurrection of Jesus can help us find reasons to be grateful and discover the ability to forgive. The Resurrection of Jesus can help us laugh, laugh at the powers of evil, which exposes them for the illusion they really are, illusions we don't have believe in or follow.

This Easter morning, the Resurrection of Jesus can be again for us the source of joy, joy that can carry us through the ups and downs of life by connecting us to the Risen Jesus we follow, and give all of us, no matter our age or race or gender, or orientation, that fleet footed feeling of freedom found in the joy of being alive.