

MADAME LAUGHTER
Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
Acts 2: 46-47 Ecclesiastes 3: 1-4
Rev. Gwin Pratt, February 12, 2017

It is truly a joy to be with you today! **I am** really enjoying the partnership that Oak Grove and Church of the Apostles are forming! Had a fantastic time last weekend at the Men's Retreat!! and I see some of them here today.

And I have a long running admiration for Oak Grove, having felt inspiration and community in living out the Gospel in the world especially in the area of following Jesus to stand alongside those excluded and marginalized. There have been many ways that this has happened but I remember particularly right now working with Kris Chadwick and others from Oak Grove on a task force seeking to organize churches to oppose the Marriage Amendment that sought to legislate who a person was allowed to love.

And it's also an honor to be here with you because of your pastor. Bill is one of the best friends I've ever had in my life. In the almost 10 years we've been friends he has supported me through some hard times during a health crisis my wife has had. **And I think** Bill is one of the finest pastors I have ever known. Hard to prioritize his skills: Compassionate pastor. Gifted preacher. Great leader. Wonderful teacher. Humble and skilled head of staff.

And there's one other thing: Bill Chadwick is one of the funniest people I have ever known!!! From his dead pan expressions to Gramps to his jokes, the guy is just funny.

Which brings me to this. How does a guest preacher decide what to preach?

I'm thinking Bill has told you this or maybe Mary or Jermaine: The preacher comes to the pulpit with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. For many, many of us these days are hard and frightening.

So I thought if we could laugh together right our loud it would be a good thing.

But not just to laugh. But to understand WHY we laugh. So will you join me?
Let' laugh and understand our laughing.

Scripture

From Ecclesiastes 3

3 For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:
a time to be born, and a time to die;
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;
a time to break down, and a time to build up;
a time to weep, and a time to laugh;
a time to mourn, and a time to dance;

Let us pray: O Mirthful One how gracious of You to give us laughter! Help us now not only to laugh out loud but to understand what it is and why it is so wonderful. Our Rock, Refuge and place. Amen.

So.....Are you ready?!!!

*Hey!.did you hear the one about the church newsletter? (Sometimes the darnest things can get in church newsletters!) This actually appeared in a church newsletter: “The morning sermon this week is ‘Jesus Walks on Water.’ The evening sermon is ‘**Searching for Jesus.**’”*

Ecclesiastes tells us there is a time for every matter under heaven. And it seems true enough.

-There is a time....you’re 2 yrs old...to be held and rocked by your mother as she prays over you.

AND there is a time for you to lean over your mother as she 80 yrs old lies in the surgery prep room and say a prayer over her.

There’s a time to bring a baby **HOME** from the maternity ward. **AND** there’s a time to take a child **AWAY** from home and leave them at the college.

There’s a time to mow the grass...AH!! Summer!! **AND** there’s a time to refrain from mowing the grass and do snow-blowing instead -- coming soon to a neighborhood near you.

And, Ecclesiastes says: There is a time to weep...and there is a time to laugh.

Now we know about the times to weep don't we?

We are sick, someone we love is sick, and can't get well. Politicians for congress and even the President deny that climate change is happening. In Citizens' United our Supreme Court enshrines the right for corporations to buy our democracy.

AND, Good on you, Oak Grove Presbyterian!! Your Session just sent to Presbytery a resolution asking the Presbytery to take a stand and oppose Citizen's United and ask that it be overturned. As a representative of Presbytery I would like to commend you and thank you. In the richest country in the world Children, sick, hungry in the streets, and our poverty programs being threatened because of tax breaks for the very rich and government subsidies for fossil fuel companies.

Friends of mine with whom I've worked on climate justice and Standing Rock are in danger of being deported -- a house in Apple Valley raided Friday and 9 human beings arrested for being immigrants.

Yeah, we know ALL about the times to weep BUT a time to laugh? Really?

Hey! Did you hear the one about the church newsletter? This actually appeared in a church newsletter: "Ladies, don't forget the rummage sale. It's a chance to get rid of those things not worth keeping lying around the house. **Don't forget to bring your husbands and wives.**"

Look at us! We just listed all the reasons to WEEP so what **is** this laughing?

In our scripture from Acts, it is not long after Jesus has left them and the disciples and followers of Jesus were gathered round a camp fire. And it was grim.

No moon. The light of the fire swallowed up by the night. It was cold, the fire crackling. They would stand front ways to warm, then turn to warm their backs.

But....it was grim because what Jesus had told them before he was gone had come true. That Jesus whose divinity shows through in his unconditional love his selfless giving of himself to the poor and outcast. That Jesus whose razor sharp voice positioned him over against the empire of his day. That Jesus would suffer for this, would be arrested, abused, tortured, And crucified, And so Empire believed silenced forever.

And not just that, but that **IF** they were truly to be followers in this way of peace and justice, standing over against the empire of the American Military Industria, er oh, excuse me the Empire of Rome. **If** they followed in this way **THAT** they would suffer and sacrifice too. It was grim. We do know historically of the persecution in the early church. The only humor here is gallows. Their lives a bad joke. And the punch line is? **FEAR** and **DESPAIR**. Can you feel the heaviness? Surely this is the time to weep.

When Peter catches Mary Magdalene's eye in the flickering flame and they start to chuckle. **And then** John joins in and then Matthew and then Stephen is the first one to laugh out loud **And then** Mark starts howling holding his sides.

And before you know it, the whole lot of them are slapping each other on the back, elbowing each other in the ribs and hollering out, "Pass the potato chips and the onion dip, please!"

Here's the way Luke puts it in Acts 2: "They knew each other and celebrated with gladness in their hearts."

How?....Why?

How could they do that with all that was happening in that early church? **WHAT IS GOING ON?**

"...with glad and generous hearts"?.....

I want some of that! Don't you? Endless wars, greedy politicians. Our dear planet home sick. People we love get sick. I want a glad and generous heart, don't you?

Here's what I think:

These folks knew another punch line to the sad joke that was their life. And that punch line transformed their life and enabled them to laugh.

And that punch line of **course** was the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

There is no Empire there is no power or principality that is able to kill the Holy, the Divine in each of us. They couldn't kill Jesus' spirit which lives on in our hearts and in our midst and they can't kill ours, either. And **THAT'S** pretty funny. Something, something always sings **LIFE**. **LIFE** always rings. Death is not ultimate but pen-ultimate.

Ask the caterpillar that curls up to die to explain the butterfly.

Ask the sunset whose fading light says only “darkness, darkness” to explain the sunrise.

Ask the bombs whose power promises to deaden all it touches to explain the flowers that grow in the bomb crater.

Ask the political and religious control freaks of Empire who got rid of the human Jesus to explain the Oak Grove Presbyterian Church!

SEE! A time to laugh!!

Do you know what our laughter is?

Writer Fred Buechner says our laughter **is** “**FAITH** coming out into the open Rattling our rib cages and setting our faces to the future.”

FAITH has a sound, Faith has a sound!

Want to know what faith **sounds like?**:

Hey! did you hear the one about the church newsletter?!

This actually appeared in a church newsletter: “The Presbyterian Men have cast off clothing of every kind **AND** they may be seen in the church basement Friday afternoon.”

When we laugh, we defiantly proclaim our faith no matter what.

I want to tell you about the person who taught me about this faith called LAUGHTER.

Her name was Hazel. She was a church school teacher and taught us Sunday School in 8th and then 9th grade. And then when we graduated to high school, all of us went to the Church School superintendent and threatened a church school boycott unless she graduated too.

She was just one of those adults who had a way with kids. At first we didn’t know what it was. It was just that when we were around her SHE had a good time and WE had a good time even if sometimes it was a little naughty.

Like I remember one summer what fun she had telling people how to find her house. Her house backed up to a Shell gas station right beside an interstate.

Now the Shell station had one of those signs that went up -- WAY UP a couple of hundred feet. It was a huge sign so that the people on the interstate could tell there was a Shell Station at that exit. **This worked well** in the daytime. **AND** at night too because it was lit. IN FACT, each letter had its own box and EACH box, its own light. SO, at night there it was each lit up "s" "h" "e" "l" "l" which worked fine EXCEPT that this summer **One of the lights went out.**

In the daytime it still said "shell" BUT at night I guess it was hard climbing up there to fix it because it stayed that way the whole summer. There it was against the dark Florida night -- "H E L L." And Hazel had so much fun that summer, especially with prim and proper folk who needed to loosen up a bit, telling them if they wanted to find her house WHERE THEY COULD GO!

Hazel was the queen of laughter. Her laugh came from way down deep. The kind that vibrates window panes and wakes sleeping babies. She laughed often -- the kind of laugh that made YOU laugh -- never AT anyone but always along with.

All of which may not sound ALL that unusual except for this:

Hazel had no business laughing. She had plenty of reasons to weep, but no business laughing -- abused as a child before she was adopted. **Then**, later, an early abusive marriage. **Then**, both of her beloved adoptive parents one after the other got cancer and died.

AND THEN, unbelievably a few years before I knew her she was diagnosed with cancer, too. You see she had no business laughing, BUT LAUGH SHE DID..... When she wasn't weeping.

How could she laugh? She would tell us astonished 8th and 9th graders "It is because of my faith in Jesus Christ. I know where my parents are. I know where I'll be!!" And then she would LAUGH and we would LAUGH. And there we would be **8th graders** LAUGHING AT CANCER, right in the face of death, because of Hazel.

And her laughter... no doubt about it was her faith sounding out her belief in the One whose Spirit is alive still.

I'm telling you Hazel taught me that this resurrection, oh man, oh woman, it's a great punch line.

IT WAS A HOT, BREEZY APRIL MORNING the spring of my 10th grade year. We got out of school for her funeral. Hazel would have loved that. I can hear her now: “Yeah, I planned it so you’d miss your algebra test.”

I was a pall bearer holding the front of her casket. Looking down into that hole.

The minister was saying something but I wasn’t listening. The funeral tent was flapping in the wind but I didn’t hear it. I was listening to something else. It was Hazel. And I could hear her still she was laughing.

Now this story I tell you to close didn’t really happen to Hazel -- at least not that I know of. BUT it’s Hazel, it has Hazel written all over it. She would love for me to tell it on her she DOES love for me to tell it.

HEY! Did you hear the one about when Hazel was on her death bed?

She calls Roger her second and beloved husband of 30 years to her side. “Roger?”

“Yes Hazel.....what is it?”

“Roger...do you remember when my momma died and you were by my side?”

“Yes...Hazel.”

“Roger...do you remember when my daddy died and you were by my side?”

“Yes...Hazel.”

“Roger...do you remember when I got cancer the first time and you were by my side?”

“Yes.....Hazel.”

“Roger....do you remember when the cancer came back and I had the mastectomy and you were by my side?”

“YES.....Hazel.”

“Roger...do you remember when the cancer came back and got in my lungs and here you are right by my side?”

“OH YES. Hazel!”

“Roger.....there’s something I’ve been wanting to tell you Honey”

“Yes Hazel..... What is it?”

“Roger, I think you must be a jinx!”

And they fell into each other’s arms. And they laughed...and they laughed.....and they laughed...until they cried.

Hey!!! *Did you hear the one about the church newsletter?!*

This actually appeared in a church newsletter.

Jesus, the Holy One of God was arrested by the powers was abused, tortured, killed ...dead and buried. BUT NOW, HE’S ALIVE. Jesus is alive!!!!!!

Sooooooo....

Wecan laugh.