

Series: The Journey to the Cross

#7: The Glory of the Cross

1 Cor. 15:1,3-4,12-26 (NLT)

A MAN WAS DRIVING ALONG THE HIGHWAY

when saw the Easter Bunny hopping across the road.

He swerved to avoid hitting him,

but unfortunately the bunny jumped in front of the car
and was struck.

The basket of eggs and candy the Easter Bunny was carrying
went flying all over the place.

THE DRIVER,

being a sensitive man, as well as an animal lover,
pulled over to the side of the road,

and got out to see what had become of the rabbit.

Much to his dismay,

the Easter Bunny was dead.

The driver felt so awful, he began to cry.

A WOMAN DRIVING DOWN THE HIGHWAY

saw the man crying on the side of the road and pulled over.

She stepped out of her car

and asked the man what was wrong.

"I FEEL TERRIBLE," HE EXPLAINED.

"I accidentally hit the Easter Bunny and killed it.

Children will be so disappointed.

What should I do?"

THE WOMAN TOLD THE MAN NOT TO WORRY.

She knew exactly what to do!

She went to her car trunk and pulled out a spray can.

She walked over to the dead, limp rabbit,
and sprayed the contents of the can onto the bunny.

MIRACULOUSLY THE RABBIT CAME TO LIFE,

jumped up,

picked up the spilled eggs and candy,

waved his paw at the two humans and hopped on down the road.

He went some distance away, stopped, turned around, waved,

and then hopped farther down the road.
Even farther down the road,
the Bunny turned again, waved, and hopped away.
He did this over and over, until he was out of sight.

THE MAN WAS ASTONISHED.

He couldn't figure out what substance
could possibly be in the woman's spray can.
He ran over to the woman and asked,
"What did you spray on the Easter rabbit?"
The woman turned the can around so that the man could read the label.

IT SAID:

"Hair spray. Restores life to dead hair. Adds permanent wave."

THREE PEOPLE

were standing before St. Peter at the Pearly Gates.
Before they would be allowed into heaven,
they would have to answer one question.
If they got the answer wrong,
they would go directly to "the other place" for eternity.

THE QUESTION TO THE FIRST PERSON WAS BASIC:

St. Peter asked, *"What happens at Christmas?"*
The man thought for a moment, and said,
*"Christmas is a holiday where a jolly man in a red suit
flies in sleigh around the world bringing gifts to all the children."*
And Peter said,
"I'm sorry, you have left out the birth of Jesus,"
and he pulled on a great lever.
The cloud below them opened to reveal a trap door to netherworld.
And the person dropped away and was gone.

THE SECOND PERSON WAS ASKED,

"What happens on Maundy Thursday?"
He responded,
*"On Maundy Thursday folks gather for a great supper -
- of turkey and sweet potatoes and pumpkin pie.
Then the men watch football,
and the women go shopping for Christmas."*
St. Peter reached for the lever and said,

*"You've got your Thursdays confused
- and you've forgotten Jesus."*

He pulled, and number two was gone.

BY NOW, THE FINAL CANDIDATE NERVOUSLY STEPPED FORWARD

and was asked, *"Can you tell me about Easter?"*

And she replied,

"Easter is the holiday that remembers a righteous man."

And St. Peter said "yes!"

"This man traveled far and wide,

and taught and healed amidst a group of supporters and friends."

Peter smiled and nodded.

*"But this man was scorned and executed - and thrown in a cave,
yet on the third day the cave was opened."*

And Peter said, "yes, yes!"

"AND THE MAN STEPPED OUT INTO THE LIGHT,

and - if he sees his shadow,

there will be six more weeks of winter."

DOES ALL THIS SEEM ODD TO YOU - TELLING JOKES ON EASTER?

Not when you stop to consider what Easter is really all about.

PEOPLE ASSOCIATE EASTER WITH A LOT OF THINGS

- bunnies, eggs, chicks, candy, new clothes - even an empty tomb!

But laughter?

IN FACT,

for millions of Christians down through the centuries,

Easter and laughter have gone hand in hand!

Far from being a strange new idea,

this is actually a long-standing tradition

rooted in good Christian theology.

IT BEGAN HUNDREDS OF YEARS AGO.

A monk, whose name has been lost in history,

was pondering the meaning of the events of Holy Week,

- with its solemn observances of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday,
and the astonishing, earth-shaking events of Easter.

"WHAT A SURPRISE ENDING," HE THOUGHT.

Then suddenly, like a bolt of lightning, he had a new insight.
His hearty laugh startled his fellow monks,
breaking the silence of their contemplation.

"DON'T YOU SEE," HE CRIED,

*"It was a joke! A great joke! The best joke in all history!
On Good Friday, when Jesus was crucified,
the devil thought he had won.
But God had the last laugh on Easter
when he raised Jesus from the dead."*

THE MONKS CALLED IT "THE EASTER LAUGH."

The idea spread rapidly, until the day after Easter
became known as a "Day of Joy and Laughter"
in Orthodox, Catholic, and some Protestant countries.

IN HOMES AND CHURCHES,

it became common to celebrate "God's great joke on the devil"
with joke-telling sessions,
and for the entire week following Easter,
there was an atmosphere of mirth and merry-making
as people rejoiced in the good news of Jesus' resurrection.

IN RESEARCHING THIS SERMON,

I discovered a little poem
about the power laughter brings to the celebration of Easter.
It seems there was a minister,
who's name was name was Pastor Wayne,
who asked the children's Sunday School class,
"What did Jesus say right after He came out of the grave?"

"I KNOW!" EXCLAIMED ONE LITTLE GIRL.

"He said: 'Tah-dah!'"

The pastor was so impressed by her answer
that he dubbed the class "The Tah-dah Class."

ONE OF BOYS IN THE CLASS WROTE THIS POEM:

Along came Wayne who made it plain
we should boldly show our awe,
Because Christ, who died and rose
for us, showed us a great "Tah-dah!"

This great "Tah-dah!" we're called to share
with laughter and some play.
As joyful children of our Lord,
let's make Him smile today!

CHRISTIANITY IS A JOY-FILLED FAITH -

- what better day could there possibly be
for rejoicing and merry-making - than on Easter?

YOU KNOW, THE WHOLE DRAMA OF THE BIBLICAL STORY

can be described as "one big contest between God and Satan."
Think about it...
from the very beginning (the Fall of Adam and Eve),
Satan is God's adversary, playing the part of the "spoiler."

IN FACT, THE WORD "SATAN" IS A HEBREW WORD, "SATAN"

that literally translates as
"the adversary," or, "The one who accuses."

THROUGHOUT BIBLICAL HISTORY,

this adversarial contest is replayed over and over again,
as if God and Satan were locked in a divine poker game...

Sometimes God seemed to be winning,
but more often,

Satan appears to have the upper hand.

In the Old Testament,

you could almost call it a "draw."

BUT THEN,

God decides to "up the ante" by sending His own Son into the world...

The competition intensifies...

and the stakes get MUCH higher.

THROUGHOUT THE GOSPELS,

we see Satan sparring with Jesus

trying to thwart his mission at every turn:

- **when Satan works through Herod**

to slaughter the babies of Bethlehem (and God helps Jesus escape);

- **in the 40 days of temptation in the wilderness**

(when Jesus refuses to play by Satan's rules,

the scriptures tell us that Satan "waited for another opportunity.");
- **when Peter tries to dissuade Jesus from going to Jerusalem,**
Jesus says to Peter, "Get behind me, SATAN;"
- **and when Judas conspires to betray Jesus,**
the Bible tells us he was acting as an agent of Satan.
Finally, Satan causes
the whole world to turn against Jesus.

ON THE FRIDAY OF HOLY WEEK,
Satan APPEARS to have won.
Jesus is slandered, rejected, denied,
betrayed, mocked, executed, and buried.
You can almost hear the diabolical laughter of Satan
as the stone is rolled in front of the tomb...
and I'm sure there was great rejoicing in Hell.

AFTER SO MANY CENTURIES,
Satan had finally WON!
God has been discredited.
Evil has triumphed over good,
and the Son of God - IS DEAD!

IT'S JUST THE WAY
Satan would have ended the Gospel story
if HE had been writing it!

BUT, IN FACT, THE TRUTH IS
that Satan's version has already been written.
Throughout the history of the church
there have always been those
who cast doubt
on the resurrection of Jesus,
from the earliest centuries of church history
all the way up to
books, movies and TV documentaries popular today.

THERE HAVE ALWAYS BEEN THOSE
who challenged the claim of believers
that Jesus rose from the dead.

EVEN ONE OF AMERICA'S REVERED FOUNDING FATHERS

had trouble accepting the claims
the Gospels make about Jesus.
Most of the founders of our nation were believers,
men of strong Christian faith -
- most, not all.

THOMAS JEFFERSON HAD SO MUCH DIFFICULTY

believing in the miraculous
that he produced his own "edited" version of the Bible
that omitted every reference to anything miraculous.
His version of the gospel ended with these words:
*"There laid they Jesus
and rolled a great stone at the mouth of the sepulcher and departed."*
PERIOD - THE END.
According to Jefferson, Satan wins the day!

WELL, SATAN'S CELEBRATION WAS A BIT TOO PREMATURE!

That is NOT how the story ends, is it?

YOU KNOW,

Easter tends to fall just before or after April 1st - April Fool's Day
- and I think that is kind of appropriate.
When you stop to think about it,
on Easter, God played the ultimate practical joke on Satan,
and Satan was proven the "Fool."

ON EASTER MORNING,

God had a little surprise in store for Satan.
Satan thought he held an unbeatable Poker hand
and that he was going to take the whole pot of winnings.
But God laid down his trump card, - and "thumbed his nose" at Satan.

JESUS IS NO LONGER DEAD... HE IS ALIVE!

And all the angels in heaven sing... "Hallelujah!"

ON TV,

there has been a show that's called "The Biggest Loser"
- maybe you've seen it.
Well, on Easter morning,
Satan was the biggest loser of all time.
Satan has lost Poker hands before.

But this time he lost more than he bargained for.
This time was different - for two very important reasons:

FIRST, ON EASTER HE LOST CONTROL OVER YOU AND ME.

BECAUSE OF JESUS' SACRIFICE ON THE CROSS,
now EVERYONE can be freed from Satan's grip.
Listen carefully to what Paul says in Romans (6:4-10,14):

⁵ IF WE HAVE BEEN UNITED WITH (JESUS)
like this in his death,
we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection.
⁶ For we know that our old self was crucified with him
so that the body of sin might be done away with,
that we should no longer be slaves to sin-- ⁷
because anyone who has died has been freed from sin.

⁸ NOW, IF WE DIED WITH CHRIST,
we believe that we will also live with him.
⁹ For we know that
since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again;
death no longer has mastery over him.
¹⁰ The death he died, he died to sin, once for all;
but the life he lives, he lives to God...
¹⁴ For sin shall not be your master,
because you are not under law, but under grace."

OR, AS JESUS HIMSELF SAID (JOHN 8:36):
"If the Son sets you free, you will be free, indeed."
On Easter,
Jesus set us free from Satan's grip.

OR CONSIDER STILL ANOTHER EXAMPLE FROM SCRIPTURE:
The Bible describes Satan as being
like a lion prowling around looking for someone to destroy.

WELL - I WAS READING RECENTLY ABOUT LION-PRIDES.
It seems that,
when lions get old and can no longer do harm,
all they are good for
is to roar and scare game, flushing them out into a waiting ambush.

These old lions are
all bark and no bite.

WELL, AFTER THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS,
Satan became like that old lion
- prowling around and roaring, but impotent to do us any permanent harm.

BECAUSE OF EASTER,
we don't have to fear Satan any more.
In fact, through the power of Jesus,
now YOU and I have been empowered,
- not only to resist Satan, but to confront and defeat him -
"in Jesus' name!"
Yes, we are "free, indeed!"

SO, THE FIRST THING SATAN LOST
was his control over you and me.
But more than that,

BECAUSE OF JESUS' SACRIFICE ON THE CROSS
AND THE EMPTY TOMB,
WE KNOW THAT IN THE END,
SATAN WILL ULTIMATELY BE COMPLETELY-DEFEATED!

YOU SEE,
this wasn't just one more skirmish
in the conflict between Satan and God.
On Easter morning,
Satan didn't just lose the BATTLE,
he lost the WAR!
It's only a matter of time
- and God promises that Satan will get his due.

LISTEN TO WHAT GOD PROMISES WILL HAPPEN TO SATAN,
as recorded in the Book of Revelation (20:1-3,7-10):

"AND I SAW AN ANGEL COMING DOWN OUT OF HEAVEN,
having the key to the Abyss
and holding in his hand a great chain.
He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan,
and bound him for a thousand years.

*He threw him into the Abyss,
and locked and sealed it over him,
to keep him from deceiving the nations anymore
until the thousand years were ended.
After that, he must be set free for a short time...*

THE DEVIL, WHO DECEIVED THEM,
*was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur,
where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown.
They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever."*

FRIENDS - THAT'S HOW THE STORY ENDS!

In other words,
ever since that first Easter morning,
God has Satan on the run...
and now Satan has no place to hide.
He is living on borrowed time.
His days are numbered
- and it's only a matter of time
until he gets his due.

THAT'S WHY EASTER IS "A DAY OF JOY AND LAUGHTER."

God has defeated the Enemy!
When you think about it,
telling jokes is a perfect tradition for Easter.
Satan **THOUGHT** he had defeated God...
But the JOKE was on HIM!

THAT, MY FRIENDS, IS THE GLORY OF THE CROSS!

AS THE OLD ADAGE GOES...

"He who laughs last... laughs best."

IN THE VICTORY OF THE CROSS OF GOOD FRIDAY,

and the Empty Tomb of Easter morning,
GOD had the last laugh!

AND, SO CAN YOU!