

God's Biggest Joke
By Bishop Paul V. Marshall
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[585 words]

I found a fight.

A woman was warning her friends about false advertising. She went to church looking for practical help. "We are all debt free in Jesus," the church's advertising proclaimed. She was carrying a balance of \$23,000 on various credit cards.

"I was prepared to cut debt out of my life," she said, "but all the preacher wanted to talk about was Jesus."

The preacher said later that the woman came to church on the wrong Sunday. "On all the other Sundays, we try to give people practical advice for living. She showed up on Easter, the one day we set the relevant stuff aside."

There was my fight: "relevant stuff" versus once-a-year Easter talk about Jesus. Was I going to write a sermon now! And, perhaps, a column.

Before an artery burst in my neck, I saw the blog's name: *horn+swoggled*, devoted to creating spurious religious news articles that make fun of the world, flesh and devil.

I remembered that Eastern Orthodox Christians have a centuries-old tradition of telling jokes on Easter. That is because Easter is God's biggest joke.

When all the things in you and me and humanity that conspire against holiness, goodness, integrity and equity had done their very worst and Jesus lay in tomb, God raised his Son to a life beyond our imagining or understanding, to a life we are offered to enter in the here-and-now in the most practical of ways. Evil, taking itself so seriously, is mocked in the empty tomb.

The first joke of Easter 2008 was on me. I had been approaching our celebration with a seriousness that was limiting my ability to laugh, keeping me from understanding that I was in the presence of something refreshing and stimulating. I was looking for a fight when the writer was hoping I would be tickled. I also had to confront, big-time, my defensiveness about representing religion in an anti-religious culture.

If the celebration of the resurrection can't get me to lighten up, I may be hopeless, tomb-bound.

I'm not alone. An equally serious colleague tried last Easter to help children understand that Jesus' resurrection said all it needed to say just by happening – no words were necessary.

"What did Jesus say when he emerged from the tomb?" he asked, waiting smugly for the silence to engulf them, but a girl in second grade held her hands out and answered "TA-DAH!"

Not what he wanted to hear, but what he needed to hear.

TA-DAH moments need to be savored.

When the great agony of World War II had been brought to a victorious conclusion, there was nation-wide revelry, dancing in the streets, people kissing strangers in Times Square, and the entirely justified beginning of the Baby Boom, for which I am grateful.

None of the hoopla erased Pearl Harbor and years of sacrifice that followed, and losses that could not be undone. The unrestrained celebration, however, trumped the pain.

Easter is our invitation to join a cosmic party that does not erase the cross but validates it and knows there is still work to do. Good Friday and Easter combine to demonstrate how God operates to contain us at our worst and to allow us to re-appropriate ourselves in a new way of being.

Christ's resurrection is the turning point in human history. The question for me, Prufrock that I remain, is do I dare to say ... TA-DAH? I leave the question with you for these great 50 days of Easter.

[The Rt. Rev. Paul V. Marshall is bishop of the Diocese of Bethlehem, 14 counties of eastern and northeastern Pennsylvania. The recently published book, Messages in the Mall: Looking at Life in 600 Words or Less (Seabury), is a collection of ten years of his monthly columns for newspapers. Additional columns and sermons by Bishop Marshall are available at www.diobeth.org.]