

From the Meetinghouse
April 2018

This year Easter coincides with April Fool's Day, which is rare. It will only happen three times this century.

One wouldn't want to make too much of this coincidence.

On the other hand, why not?

April Fool's Day began, it seems, from a foolish mistake. Lots of cultures the world over have a traditional day for playing pranks on friends and neighbors, many going back centuries. The earliest trace of this, though, (which I conclude from the most cursory research) is English, is indeed tied to April 1st, but might be so only by error.

Chaucer's 14th century *Canterbury Tales* includes in the Nun's Priest's Tale a fox who tricks a vain cock, which is said to have happened "Syn March bigan thritty dayes and two." Modern scholars suspect this was to say thirty-two days after March, which would be May 2nd, the anniversary of the engagement of King Richard II to Anne of Bohemia. Readers, however, took the phrase to mean March 32nd, as in a silly way to say April 1st.

Well.

Given that Chaucer could have been clearer, I don't blame those readers. But, by this folly, we have April Fool's Day, April 1st, forever after.

As it happens, Christian tradition has its own take on the sort of pranks you might play on your chosen April fool. John Chrysostom, in a 4th century Easter Vigil sermon, spoke of the resurrection of Jesus as God's playing the ultimate prank on the devil. Recounting an image that had come to him, he described Christ confronting the devil and laughing at him. Others joined in that spirit—Augustine, Gregory of Nyssa. This "Big Joke" came to be drawn in the early church as a mousetrap, in which Jesus was the bait and the devil was the one to become trapped.

It developed into a practice. On the Monday after Easter, people would gather in sanctuaries to tell jokes and funny stories, to revel in the absurdities of life, to share a laugh. And so it continues. In some places, congregations use the Sunday after Easter to celebrate Holy Hilarity—though we don't here in Monterey because it often involves pastors telling jokes instead of preaching sermons, and that just sounds painful, whether I imagine myself in the pulpit giving

stand-up comedy a try or as someone in a pew being told, “Today, we laugh.” One of the joys of actual hilarity, in my experience, is that it doesn’t come on schedule but as a surprise.

This year, though, might be a good time to give it a try. (Nope, not gonna happen.) After all, we’re living amidst a global politics that is becoming increasingly humorless. All these strong men striving after authoritarian power: one of the marks of all these guys is their heavy, horrible self-seriousness.

Winnie the Pooh has been banned in China because of a picture taken of Xi Jinping with Barack Obama back when Obama was president. Xi looked like Pooh to Obama’s Tigger. Tigger, of course, is the bigger fool in world of Pooh, but the one thought to be Pooh-like is the one who can’t take the meme.

Bassem Youseff is an Egyptian in exile, now living in Los Angeles. What forced him to flee his homeland was the satirical news program he wrote, produced, and performed for Egyptian television, and for which he faced charges of “insulting the state.” When the military took over, things got scary for him and his young family.

Closer to home, it appears that one of Donald Trump’s primary motivators is the thought that “everyone’s laughing at us.” This fear of being laughed at drives foreign policy, economic policy, trade agreements, nuclear agreements. It’s said his seeming inability to be the butt of a joke might even be the reason he ran for president in the first place.

Comic writer Armando Iannucci, the creative force behind *Veep* and more recently *The Death of Stalin*, and a student of Charlie Chaplin’s brilliant satire, *The Great Dictator*, claims in a recent interview in *The Atlantic*, “Humorless politicians are the most dangerous.”

Maybe our next election cycle should feature a debate at a comedy club, or while the candidates take in an episode of *Saturday Night Live*.

Meanwhile, however, our humor must be more than palliative. Our laughter, especially in difficult times, must do more than keep our spirits light while everything else goes dark. Holy hilarity isn’t nihilism—for it’s true as Youseff claims: “Satire is great, but it doesn’t do anything by itself.” So, of course, holy hilarity is other than mere satire or some spoonful of sugar as might make a cyanide pill taste sweet. Spirited hilarity is hope against hope, a resistance to that which would hold our spirits captive to apathy, cynicism, or despair. Laughter, as a force of wind that fills you up and knocks you breathless, is recognition that the absurdities of life aren’t necessarily our

destruction, might even be the circumstances in which delight and wisdom can take us by happy surprise.

Regular readers of this column will suspect I have a strange fixation on the two most recent *Star Wars* films because, here I go, writing about them again. Not everyone liked these films, though, as is to be expected. One argument people had with them is that were too “jokey.” But that’s what appealed to me. The people in the “resistance,” Poe and Rey and Finn, even Leia and Luke: they all seemed to be having fun.

Poe prank-called the imperial general, Higgs, even calling him “Hugs.” (Unsurprisingly, “Hugs” never got the joke, never even got that it *was* a joke.)

Luke, who’s expected to be so very serious, got in a few good lines—about Leia’s hair, about Rey’s place of birth. (“No one’s from nowhere,” he claimed philosophically, though, on learning she was from Jakuu, he had to admit, “Yeah, that’s pretty much nowhere.”)

That their mission to resist the oppressive rule of a heavy hand and iron fist came with a healthy dose of humor: I understood then why they would fight that fight, not only for freedom, but moreover for the freedom to share a laugh with a friend. It should be said no one siding with the empire could so much as smile. They’re as humorless as the Soviets in Milan Kundera’s novel, *The Joke*, wherein a joke ruins a young man’s life. The joke? Something he wrote on a postcard and sent to a classmate over their summer break. “Optimism is the opium of mankind! A healthy spirit stinks of stupidity!” For this, he would be punished among dissidents, taken as he was to be one.

Absurdity upon absurdity! That it’s disallowed even to call out the absurdity as an absurdity: this makes everything all the more absurd!

You’re likely reading this after both Easter and April Fool’s Day have passed, so unless you were at the Meetinghouse that morning you probably don’t know whether you missed some good jokes delivered from the pulpit. (You didn’t.) But what you did miss is something we’ve always got going on, if not quite so explicitly, this Easter sentiment expressed in an old German hymn, whose translation to English is just partial: “The whole bright world rejoices now! Hilariter! Hilariter!”

We’ll have sung it, the act of singing resembling laughter in its use of breath and its expression. And we’ll conclude with what we’ve had to refrain from saying all six weeks of Lent, “Alleluia! Alleluia!” So, joke’s on you, death. You had us all serious and afraid. But now we see beyond you. And we’re free.

Alive!

Ha-ha!