LAZARUS LAUGHED   A SERMON FOR LENT V
                                       SUNDAY, APRIL 6, 2014
                                       FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
                                       MARIANNA, FLORIDA
JOHN 11:1-44   TED W. LAND, INTERIM PASTOR

Years ago, I read about Eugene O'Neill's play from which I borrowed the title to this morning's sermon, *Lazarus Laughed.*

It tells the story, fictional of course, of what happened to Lazarus and those around him after Jesus raised him from the dead.

Until three years ago, I had never found the script for the entire play, and I could not understand why it had seldom been produced, and not for more than half a century.

Well, having read the play, I understand. It is a dark and troubling play, as are many of O'Neill's works. It features a cast of over a hundred people. It is written in the classic Greek chorus style. It is a play filled with death. Everybody dies. And in the face of every death, Lazarus laughed.

Jesus was crucified dead and buried. And Lazarus laughed.
The parents of Lazarus died, and he laughed. His sisters Mary and Martha died. And he laughed. His children died and he laughed. His followers, who believed in him and his message died and he laughed. His beloved wife Miriam died and he laughed. And in the end, as he died at the hand of the cruel solider who would become the Roman Emperor Caligula, he laughed.

There is a refrain that runs throughout the play, words spoken by Lazarus and echoed by the chorus:

It changes from act to act, from scene to scene, but it begins like this:

"Laugh! Laugh with me!
Death is dead.
Fear is no more!
There is only life.
There is only laughter!"

And then the refrain is transformed and says,

"Laugh!
Laugh!
There is only God!
Life is His Laughter.
We are His Laughter.
Fear is no more!
Death is dead!"

My friend, Jon Nyberg, who died three years ago this week, was a thanatologist. He was one who had made a study of death. I spent some time with Jon, working together as hospice chaplains, but we never had a discussion of death itself, and of the strange view of death that Eugene O'Neill portrayed *in Lazarus Laughed.*
That discussion will take place in another place, after I have enjoyed my last laugh on this earth.

I lost two young ladies that I loved three years ago this week. One, Dee Connor, I had seen most recently when she was hospitalized. Dee was looking for a miracle, for a heart/lung transplant. Instead, she was called home leaving a loving family and a host of friends to mourn her.

I had not seen Theresa Cain McGill in years. I married her and her husband, Tom, and right after that they moved to the mountains of North Georgia. Therese's mother was once on a heart transplant list, and died just a year before her daughter did.
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Therese was taken from us so suddenly there was no time for any anticipation or preparation.

When I remember those two young ladies, one 42 the other 46, I remember times of laughter. I weep for them, I weep for those who mourn their loss, for those who loved them most and best, but I laugh when I recall good times with them.

Robert Fulghum, who wrote *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten,* once expressed what he believed in this way:

I believe that imagination is stronger than knowledge.
That myth is more potent than history.
I believe that dreams are more powerful than facts—
That hope always triumphs over experience—
That laughter is the only cure for grief.
And I believe that love is stronger than death.

I don't know about the first parts of that, but with Fulghum, I believe with all my heart that laughter cures grief and that love is stronger than death.

Lazarus laughed because he knew there was no death. Only God's eternal love. We Presbyterians belief that in life and in death, we belong to God. We believe we can laugh in the face of death.

Let us pray:

God give us not the courage but the wisdom to laugh at death.
Call to our memories the times that we laughed with those we mourn.
Cure our grief with laughter, and fill our hearts with love.
In Jesus name we pray. Amen.