

Holy and Hilarious
John 20: 1 – 18

(preached on March 31, 2024 - Easter Sunday)

When you got up this morning, did you find an Easter basket waiting for you? I'm not sure where the custom of Easter baskets comes from, but it's one of our Easter traditions that, at any other time of year, would seem odd to say the least. We have other traditions that might also seem odd: like coloring eggs and hiding them and inviting children to hunt for them. Or hanging colorful eggs from a tree outside the house. Here in New England, we celebrate Easter with a variety of traditions that are familiar to us. In another part of the world, though, people add a different tradition to their celebration of Easter. The tradition might seem strange to us, but I think it's strangely appropriate.

The tradition comes from the Eastern Orthodox Church. In that church, traditionally, the day after Easter is set aside as a day of laughter and hilarity. On that day, people gather in the sanctuary for a worship service that includes the priest telling jokes. The jokes don't have to be of a religious nature; they just have to tickle parishioners' funny bones. It must be quite a scene: the priest in his dignified vestments, standing up front, where he always stands to lead the congregation in reverent worship. But on this day there's a twinkle in his eye, as he cracks one joke after another. What an odd way to celebrate Easter, the highest, holiest day of the Christian year: with giggles and guffaws and chuckles and chortles!

Of course that may be fine for those Eastern Orthodox folks, but we New England Congregationalists would never do something like that. We take church very seriously. We're always dignified and solemn. Giggles and guffaws might be OK for other people, but that's simply not who we are. So you won't see me up here cracking any jokes... well, OK, maybe just one: How many Congregationalists does it take to change a light bulb? Change?! My grandmother donated that light bulb!

Well, maybe just one more: Why are Congregationalists such bad singers? Because we're always reading ahead in the hymnal to see if we agree with the words.

Oh, maybe one for the young people. A teenage boy is heading out for the evening and asks his father, “Dad, I’m going to a party. Would you do my homework for me?”

“I’m sorry, son,” says Dad, “but it just wouldn’t be right.”

The son says, “Well, maybe not. But give it a try anyway.”

Does this seem like a strange way to celebrate Easter? Maybe it is, or maybe it’s not so strange after all. Of course nobody was cracking jokes early on that first Easter morning. Mary was overcome with sadness as she made her way to the tomb on the third day after Jesus was crucified. Even when she saw he wasn’t there, she was shocked and confused. Laughter was the furthest thing from her mind.

But some time later, when she had joined the disciples, she shared the good news that Jesus was risen! Then the amazing reality began to dawn on them that Jesus was alive! Then I imagine there was a lot of laughter. It was the laughter of people surprised by joy. You could hear it that night, when Jesus came to the room where his friends had gathered. Make no mistake, the chuckles and chortles and giggles and guffaws resounded to the rafters when they realized that God really had raised him from death, and he was with them again. And, later on, they surely laughed loud and long around the table in Emmaus when he broke bread and suddenly they recognized him; when it hit them that he had risen from the dead, just like he said he would. They laughed and laughed to realize that this time God had had the last word, and the last laugh.

For a long time, philosophers, psychologists, and literary scholars have tried to define what makes something funny. From Aristotle to Freud, a lot of people have tried to figure out what makes us laugh, but they haven’t come up with a solid theory of humor. One theme, though, seems to occur over and over again. A lot of humor is based on surprise, on the reversal of expectations.

One of the reasons the priests in the Eastern Orthodox church crack jokes has to do with surprise. It’s because of what they would call the great joke God played on Satan in the resurrection; as if God said, “Ha! You thought you had won! But the joke’s on you!” But even if you don’t think about God and Satan that way, from the Bible you can see that God likes

surprises. The gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, is full of expectations reversed, turned upside down.

From the beginning of the gospels, in a huge reversal of expectations, our all-powerful God chooses to come to dwell among us, not as a high and mighty king, but as a peasant from a town nobody had heard of. When Jesus grew up and recruited people to help him, he chose other peasants, fishermen, and rejects. They were not polished professionals. They were not full of knowledge or wise words. In some ways they were like what you might call “the gang that couldn’t shoot straight.”

And the way Jesus talked about God’s Kingdom continually turned expectations upside down. He said that in God’s Kingdom children would be sitting at the head table, along with people who had worked as prostitutes and tax collectors. He said it was easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom.

The people in power were determined to stop him. They had no interest in reversing expectations. They were on top and determined to stay there, so when they couldn’t find any other way to stop him, they put him to death. They thought they would have the last word. But – surprise! Good Friday wasn’t the end of the story.

The German theologian Jurgen Moltmann writes that the change from Good Friday to Easter is a summary of human history, past, present, and future. He writes: "On Good Friday, God weeps with us so that we may someday laugh with him." If the gospel story ended with Good Friday, it would be a tragedy, drenched in tears and loss. On Good Friday, God weeps with us. But – surprise! Good Friday isn’t the end of the story.

Surprise! Today, on Easter morning, we laugh with God. We laugh to see a hale and hearty and healthy Jesus, breathing deeply in the early morning light. We laugh in joy that God has pulled the greatest joke of all, on death. On Easter morning, God has the last word and - guess what? - it’s a holy and hilarious word of laughter, the punch line of the story: turning the world upside down with the biggest surprise of all!

So today is a day for singing, and praising God, for chocolate bunnies and colorful eggs, and it’s also a day for laughter! This morning, we can

laugh at God's great surprise. We can laugh with glee at God's great victory over the powers of death.

Does that mean the resurrection is a joke? Of course not. Does it mean we take it lightly? Well, yes and no. If taking it lightly means taking it as something to make fun of or ridicule, of course we don't take it lightly. But, in another sense, the resurrection is something to take lightly, something that lightens our hearts. The resurrection lightens our hearts because it turns loose in us a joy that the world cannot give or take away. In the resurrection, Jesus lifts us up and sets us free from the fear of death.

So, however you choose to celebrate Easter: with a festive brunch, or a visit to Grandma's, take a moment to share a joke, knowing that in your laughter God is laughing too. God is laughing with the amazing news that death does not have the last word; that in Jesus' resurrection death is swallowed up in victory! God is laughing in joy that the kingdom of this world is become the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ. And he shall reign forever and ever! Alleluia! Amen.

Rev. Elva Merry
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Easter Sunday