

“Holy Humor?”

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John 20:19-31

¹⁹ It was still the first day of the week. That evening, while the disciples were behind closed doors because they were afraid of the Jewish authorities, Jesus came and stood among them. He said, “Peace be with you.” ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. When the disciples saw the Lord, they were filled with joy. ²¹ Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so I am sending you.” ²² Then he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive anyone’s sins, they are forgiven; if you don’t forgive them, they aren’t forgiven.”

²⁴ Thomas, the one called Didymus, one of the Twelve, wasn’t with the disciples when Jesus came. ²⁵ The other disciples told him, “We’ve seen the Lord!” But he replied, “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands, put my finger in the wounds left by the nails, and put my hand into his side, I won’t believe.”

²⁶ After eight days his disciples were again in a house and Thomas was with them. Even though the doors were locked, Jesus entered and stood among them. He said, “Peace be with you.” ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here. Look at my hands. Put your hand into my side. No more disbelief. Believe!”

²⁸ Thomas responded to Jesus, “My Lord and my God!”

²⁹ Jesus replied, “Do you believe because you see me? Happy are those who don’t see and yet believe.”

³⁰ Then Jesus did many other miraculous signs in his disciples’ presence, signs that aren’t recorded in this scroll. ³¹ But these things are written so that you will believe that Jesus is the Christ, God’s Son, and that believing, you will have life in his name.

In the early centuries of Christianity, faithful people celebrated the week following Easter as “days of joy and laughter” with parties and picnics to celebrate Jesus’ resurrection. Parishioners and pastors played practical jokes on each other, sang, and danced. It was a time to rejoice in God’s tremendous joke in the resurrection – a joke on death, on evil, and on all those powers that tried, unsuccessfully, to do away with Jesus.

We are good at doing Easter Day, with great flowers and music. We are full of hopes and commitments. Then, Monday comes. We lose that sense of the holy, and don’t even realize that it’s gone. Holy Humor Sunday is one way to remind ourselves that Easter is a 50-day long season. Holy Humor reminds us to continue to celebrate God’s best joke.

Speaking of jokes, have you ever wondered, why don't sheep shrink in the rain?

How was it possible for early Christians to laugh, tell stories and play jokes on one another? ... And we... so much... don't?

About a thousand years ago, the Christian Church split – like a forked tree with two stout trunks – the Eastern (Orthodox) branch and the Western (Roman Catholic) branch. It was only after this that the theory of substitutionary atonement was proposed. More than 1000 years after Jesus’ life, death and resurrection, the Western Church took on the idea that Jesus had to suffer and die in our place for our sins. Once this happened, God came to be viewed as a stern “obey or else” kind of God, handing out passes to heaven and hell. Church became more solemn, and so did

people's lives. People would come to church, and reflect on what they'd done wrong, what they ought to have done better... you get the idea. One did not work or play on Sunday. People were expected to be somber, remembering Jesus' sacrifice for us. This happened, and happens, because we have been taught to believe that God's justice demanded a sacrifice for our many and varied sins, and that Jesus was that sacrifice.

All of this is so different from the creative, compassionate, gracious God about whom the psalmist wrote: "Happy are those... whose hope is in God... who made heaven and earth... who keeps faith forever... who executes justice... gives food... sets prisoners free... opens the eyes of the blind... watches over the strangers... upholds the orphan..." (146:5-9). There is nothing here of condemnation. Rather, we read, "Happy are those whose help is God"

The Eastern Church believes quite differently. They adopted a doctrine called *Théōsis*, which teaches that sin is a disease which contaminates each of us – body, soul and spirit. *Théōsis* is the process of healing us, our whole being. It is the process for our becoming free of having "missing the mark", and of being united with God – beginning in this life and continuing in the life to come. For these Easter Christians, *Théōsis* is salvation.

Some people believe Jesus served as our substitute by going to the cross. But there are other understandings about atonement, sin and salvation. What I would highlight is that how we understand this – as God's justice or as God's gift – colors how we perceive God, how we understand Easter and what Christ means for us. You understand in a way that's right for you, while your neighbor understands differently and that is okay. No matter what we believe, we can learn from those who believe differently.

Speaking of people seeing things differently...

A pastor was speaking to a group of second-graders about the resurrection when one student asked, "What did Jesus say right after he came out of the tomb?"

The pastor explained that the gospel writers do not tell us what he said. One little girl's hand shot up. "I know what he said. He said, 'Tah-dah!'"

Laughter has been called God's holy medicine – the ancients thought of laughter as exercise for the soul. And, there is a tremendous body of evidence to support the idea – for laughter actually strengthens our physical and mental wellbeing. It exercises our lungs and stimulates our circulation. It improves muscle tone – researchers calculate that 100 laughs equal about 10 minutes on a rowing machine. So today, we laugh...

Three friends died in an accident and went to heaven. During their orientation interview, the angel asked them, "When your friends and family are looking down in your coffin, what would you like to hear them say?"

"Well," said the first man, "I'd like to hear them say that he was a good teacher, and a good husband."

"That's very good," said the angel. He turned to the next one and asked, "What would you like to hear people say?"

She thought a minute, then said, "I'd like them to say, she was a good mother, and a great doctor."

"That's good too." Turning to the third, the angel said, "And what would you like to hear your loved ones say as they're looking into your coffin?"

Without hesitation, he said, "I'd like to hear them say, 'Look, he's still breathing!'"

As I was preparing this message, I thought about the things we tell ourselves... often, the *lies* we tell ourselves. Like Thomas saying, “Unless I see it, I won’t believe it.” Really?! Thomas who, when Jesus headed back to Bethany after Lazarus died, back toward the men who wanted to kill him, said, “Come on, we might as well die with him.” I guess I don’t accept that Thomas would never have believed. But he told himself he wouldn’t. And I wonder, what if Jesus had not come back the next week?

We tell ourselves stories, all the time. Things like, I’ll be happy when... *fill in the blank*. This is a big one. But the idea that happiness is a destination, or something we can buy, is a myth. Relationships, careers, money and toys can help, but they only account for a small part of the picture. Lasting happiness has more to do with how we live and think and believe than anything else. We tell ourselves many things that are not strictly true. We think, “If I pretend it’s not so maybe it will go away...” Pretending is handy sometimes, but that’s all it is – a convenience that lets us keep on doing things as we are, while our health problems compound or the laundry piles up or species go extinct.

Then, there’s “I’m too young,” or “I’m too old.” Shinichi Suzuki, founder of the Suzuki method for learning to play instruments, once wrote that you are “never too old and rarely too young.” Mozart was not the only person to do amazing things at the age of four. And Nola Ochs graduated from college at 95. “But,” you say. “I’ll be 50 ... or 75 ... or 90 in three years!” Well, how old will you be in three years if you don’t do it?

Maybe some of the worst things we tell ourselves are the ones that go, Nobody cares, I don’t matter, or I’m not good enough. This last one kept me down for decades. Even now, the doubt can creep in. We can, get locked into our fears. We can let the news and our negative self-talk lead us in unhealthy directions. When we look at the disciples’ experience that first Easter evening, we are reminded that people have long faced such challenges.

Fear is what kept the disciples locked behind closed doors that night. Fear, not just of what the authorities might do if they found them, but also doubt about who they were now that Jesus was gone. Then, Jesus appears, bringing peace, and breathing a new Spirit, new life, into them. Their fear and uncertainty turn to joy. But Thomas who missed that moment is still locked in fear – until Jesus comes again. These disciples experience a release from fear that is not about the seeing. Not really. It is about surrendering to Jesus, and in that surrender, finding that there is no longer room for fear.

Fear often comes knocking on our doors, too. When it does, we tell ourselves stories that are not strictly true – to protect ourselves, to boost our morale, to help us to go on when we are not sure we want to. You might be telling yourself stories this month as we continue to self-distance. You might think that stories can help you face a health crisis, fear or loneliness. But maybe instead you could work for honesty, delivered gently. Live in the moment and practice facing what you’d rather not face, even if only in small doses. You are, after all, a beloved child of God.

God wants for each of us to grow. This is what is happening when Jesus shows up that night. He is preparing his disciples for what is ahead. He is helping them to let go of the past and live into a future that only God knows.

This is also what we need to do. We do not know what is ahead. We have been told things will not be the same. That in itself can add to our anxiety. And yet, God still has a vision for this work, and for us. As Easter people, we believe this. How we will be resurrected after COVID-19

is a mystery, yet we trust that God works all things to the good. God is active through our lives. We pray our BTP in confidence because we know that resurrection happens all the time.

Weeping may linger for the night,
but joy comes with the morning. *Psalm 30:5a*

Someone once said, "The proof that God raised Jesus from the dead is not the empty tomb, but the full hearts of his transformed disciples. The crowning evidence that he lives is not a vacant grave, but a spirit-filled fellowship. Not a rolled-away stone, but a carried-away church."¹ We are Easter people, and as such, we have reason to celebrate and rejoice. May we find the joy of this Easter season; and let ourselves be a carried-away church.

Bear with me as I try one more joke, and laugh loudly at the end.

A Staff-Parish Relations Committee was interviewing its first ever woman pastor. They were impressed with her credentials, her confidence, and her experience but just didn't know if they were ready to have a woman in their pulpit.

"Well," said one of the old-timers. "Best way I know how to get to know somebody is to take 'em fishin'. So, let's take her fishin'." The committee agreed so two of the men invited the candidate to go fishing.

The next morning they got in a boat, motored along the shore and began casting. Suddenly, one of the men snagged his hook on a branch overhanging several yards out over the lake.

"Don't worry," said the woman, "I'll get it." And with that she stepped out of the boat, walked across the water to the tree and unsnagged the hook. As she turned to walk back to the boat one of the men looked at the other and said, "Ain't that just like a woman, can't even swim."

Amen.

¹ Clarence Jordan, instrumental in founding Habitat for Humanity.