

Laughing at Easter
Luke 24:1-12
April 21, 2019

William J. Ingersoll
First Presbyterian Church
Lake Forest, Illinois

One group of Christians celebrates the Easter season in an unusual way. Among all the different ways various branches of the Christian Church celebrate this holy time; perhaps none is so strange – and yet, in its own way – so strangely fitting – as one tradition in the Eastern Orthodox Church.

In that part of the Christian Church, the day after Easter is set aside as a day of laughter and hilarity. On the day after Easter, in these solemn and tradition-bound Orthodox churches, the people will gather in the sanctuary for worship, and to hear the priest tell jokes – not particularly religious jokes, mind you, but jokes that tease laughter out of the worshipers. It's fun to imagine. Try to imagine the heavily bearded priest, all vested in full Orthodox regalia, and the twinkle in his eyes as he looks out over his congregation on such an occasion. Imagine the laughter of the congregation cutting through the heavy aroma of incense and ricocheting off the ancient stone walls of the church. "What a strange tradition!" points out Dean Martin Copenhaver of Yale Divinity School. "And yet, in its own way, so strangely fitting."

I served as an Interim in a Wisconsin congregation where the tradition on the Sunday *after* Easter was to observe Holy Hilarity Sunday. There was worship but the Pastor and worship leaders primarily told jokes, one right after another. Or, I know of other churches, some of them dignified New England churches, when on Easter itself the Pastor would use the children's sermon to tell silly jokes, elephant jokes and knock-knock jokes and the like, whatever

got the kids laughing. At those congregations the people gathered for worship on Easter and here is the preacher telling jokes. I, of course would never do that. Surely I'm above all that.

Well, okay, twist my arm and I'll share just a few.

1. A notice in a farmer's field read: This farmer allows runners to cross the field for free but the bull charges.
2. An announcement on a church sign: Don't let worry kill you off – let the Church help.
3. A church bulletin read: The sermon this morning: "Jesus Walks on the Water." The sermon tonight: "Searching for Jesus."

Am I right that it seems like a strange way to celebrate Easter? No doubt about that. But let me tell you why it is also strangely fitting.

Consider for a moment what prompts us to laugh. A number of philosophers and sociologists have all taken a stab at defining what makes something funny. Some have produced elaborate theories. Chip cited some of these in a sermon just last month. But among all of these great thinkers, there is no tried and true consensus on what makes something funny. But there is at least one recurring theme: much humor is based on surprise, on the reversal of expectations. Let's try one more story to test the theory.

Did you hear the one about the Presbyterian clergy couple who decided to get a new dog?

Ever mindful of the congregation, they knew the dog must also be a Presbyterian. They visited kennel after kennel and explained their needs. Finally, they found a kennel whose owner assured them he had just the dog

they wanted. The owner brought the dog to meet the pastors. “Fido, Fetch the Bible,” he commanded.

The dog bounded to the bookshelf, scrutinized the books, located the Bible, and brought it to the owner. --“Now find Psalm 23,” he commanded. The dog dropped the Bible to the floor, and showing marvelous dexterity with his paws, leafed through and finding the correct passage, pointed to it with his paw. The pastors were very impressed and purchased the dog.

That evening, a group of church members came to visit. The pastors began to show off the dog, having him locate several Bible verses. The visitors were very impressed.

One person asked, “Can he do regular dog tricks, too?” “We haven’t tried yet,” the husband replied. He pointed his finger at the dog. “Fido – HEEL!”

The dog immediately jumped on the chair, placed one paw on the husband’s forehead and began to howl.

The pastors looked at each other in shock and said, “Good heavens . . . this dog is a-- Pentecostal!”

Surprise, you see, is a reversal of expectations, a sudden upending of the usual order of things. That’s one of the essential elements of humor. Martin Copenhaver points out that it’s an important biblical theme as well. It’s so important you’ve had three sermons on this theme, including this one, within the last year. In fact, it was no accident that my first sermon to you last September was from Genesis about God visiting Sarah and Abraham, and telling Abraham that he and Sarah will give birth to a son. Which is all well and good, but they are having a hard time getting pregnant. Sarah is 90 when

the divine visitor came to their home. As she stands at the kitchen door she overhears this conversation and Sarah *laughs*. And who can blame her? She laughs at this surprising turn of events, not a little laugh, but a full-bellied laugh. She laughs at the thought of “her baby being born in the geriatric ward with Medicare picking up the tab” (Frederick Buechner). When the baby is born they name him Isaac, which means “laughter.”

Just last month, using a parallel passage, Chip preached on a similar theme about Abraham and Sarah and the baby Isaac. Yes, our God, a God of surprises, is always taking our expectations and upending them.

Friends, nowhere is that more true than in the life of Jesus. Says one theologian, “For God to appear in human form is surprising enough. But consider what kind of human life God chose. God did not come as a mighty king or as a learned priest, but as an untutored peasant from a backwater town, speaking in a country dialect. When Jesus recruited followers, he didn’t seek out the best and the brightest. Instead, he brought together a rag-tag group, each one chosen as one might choose a grab-bag gift.” Yet Jesus told them that they were to spread his gospel throughout the world. He said that in his realm, children will be sitting at the head table, along with the poor and those who are outcasts—while the powerful and influential will be busying the tables. Jesus was always reversing expectations, upending the usual order of things.

“The people in charge, the folks who didn’t want things upended because they were sitting on top, determined to stop Jesus. When they couldn’t find any other way to stop him, they killed him.” (Copenhaver) It’s called Good Friday, the final answer. Only God in Christ was not through reversing

expectations, upending the usual order of things. “Easter is the ultimate surprise, the punch line of God’s story,” turning the world on its head with the most surprising reversal of all.

Now please don’t misunderstand me. Please don’t tell your friends our interim pastor believes the resurrection is a joke! Not at all! Rather, the good news of Easter is that God’s joke is on us. It is God’s unexpected surprise for us.

Here the women are walking to the tomb, grieving because death has had its way. Then two men in dazzling clothes say, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here but has risen.”

They had doubted that there is any hope in the face of Caesar’s power but their expectations were reversed.

They doubted that there are any cracks in the universal reign of death. But surprise, now they know the cracks are there.

They doubted God’s power on earth. Now they’re sure of it.

They doubted there was any place left for love and tenderness and forgiveness. Now they’re certain there is.

Yes, one of the reasons that joking and jesting are so fitting for Easter, is because of the big joke God pulled on the last enemy in the resurrection. The forces of evil didn’t win after all. Death celebrated with a victory dance, but it was premature because the game wasn’t over.

You see, my friends, Easter demonstrates God’s grace has the last word. Or better, God’s grace has the last laugh. In fact, God insists on the last laugh.

Yes, surprise is part of laughter but there is one other characteristic of laughter that makes it so appropriate at Easter.

Briefly it is this: laughter is a lot like faith. For both, we have to “get it.” And we can’t by our own efforts. Both are brought forth from us. Laughter, like faith, is evoked from us. We cannot make ourselves *truly* laugh. We have to “catch on” to what is so funny and then it brings forth from us laughter. The joke is told and “we get it” and so we laugh. We don’t get it on our own. Something or someone else makes us laugh, gives us joy. When it’s a good one we “get it” as a gift.

And so it is with faith. We have to “get it.” And it is given to us by the grace of God. Faith is not something we can get on our own. We “get it” because God’s love and mercy bring it forth from us. We cannot make ourselves believe in Jesus Christ. We cannot make ourselves believe in Christ’s resurrection. Faith is evoked from us by what God has already done for us in Jesus Christ our Lord. Faith, like laughter, is a gift. We “get it” because it is given to us by God in Christ.

The women at the tomb “get it” and become the first evangelists, the first to share the story of God’s victory over death, telling the disciples the good news. At first, the disciples don’t “get it”, considering the women’s good news “an idle tale.” In other words, they *laughed at Easter*. But friends, God had the last laugh!

Let me close by telling one more good one. It makes me smile just to think of it. It’s so hilarious it can bring you to your knees, as it brings forth

your laughter. So I really hope you “get it.” Are you ready for the punch line?

Try not to laugh too hard but here it is . . .

Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!!! Amen.

SOURCES

Buechner, Frederick, *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale*.

Copenhaver, Martin, “Easter Nonsense” on Luke 24:1-12, *Journal for Preachers*.

Craddock, Fred, *Interpretation: Luke*, John Knox Press.

Culpepper, R. Alan, on “Luke,” New Interpreter’s Bible, Volume 9, Abingdon Press.

Wardlaw, Theodore, “Unnatural Event” on Luke 24:1-12, *Christian Century*.

Winn, Albert, “Who Will Roll Away the Stone?” on Mark 16:1-8.