

The Easter Laugh
John 20:1–10; 21:1–8, 20–24
Sunday, April 7, 2024 (Easter 2 – Holy Humor)

Today is my absolute favorite Sunday of the year to preach. Some pastors love Christmas Eve, some love Easter Sunday; I love the Sunday *after* Easter. I think it's one of the most *important* Sundays of the year. Because last week we celebrated the good news that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead, and *this* week it's like we're being asked, "What are we going to *do* with that good news? What *difference* will it make in our lives? How are things going to *change* as a result of this? Christ is risen...so what now?"

Many Christians observe the Sunday after Easter as something called *Bright Sunday* or *Holy Humor Sunday*. This isn't something new. For *centuries*, the entire week and the Sunday after Easter have been observed as days of joy and laughter, with parties and picnics to celebrate Jesus' resurrection. As author Francis Weiser writes, "In the early days of Christianity, all of Easter Week was one continuous feast...a week of intense happiness and spiritual joy." Churchgoers and pastors would play practical jokes on each other, drench each other with water, tell jokes, sing, and dance.

The custom is rooted in the idea of some early church theologians like Augustine, Gregory of Nyssa, and John Chrysostom (all around the year 400) that on Easter, God played a practical joke on Satan by raising Jesus from the dead. The powers of evil thought that they had won, but God had the last laugh. It was referred to as *Risus paschalis*, "the Easter laugh." It was briefly outlawed by Pope Clement X in the 1600s, because apparently it got really out of hand. There are written accounts of how the priests' sermons became so filled with inappropriate stories, rude gestures, and obscenities that "a decent man could not tell them at a dinner party without shame."

But it was later brought back in a much more appropriate manner, and then in its current form as *Holy Humor Sunday* in the 1980s.

I was talking to a friend of mine who is a pastor in Nebraska about this (his church has been doing it for years). He told me how last year on the Sunday after Easter, a turkey vulture somehow got into their sanctuary. Turkey vultures are really common out there, and if you've never seen one, they are big, scary, disgusting-looking birds. They found it just before worship, and they were trying to figure out how to get it out. So they called the Game Warden, and asked him to come get it, but he was handling something else, so he couldn't come before worship started. So they said, "Well, what do we *do*?" And the Game Warden said, "Just let it stay and leave it alone." My friend said, "We have to start worship!" And the Game Warden said, "It's okay...it's a bird of *prey*."

That same friend, he's a Lutheran pastor out there, so he wears a clerical collar most days. He and his wife already had two kids, and then they had another. So his wife was in the hospital for a few days, but he had to go back and forth to take care of the other kids at home. So he stopped in to the hospital one morning to check in on his wife and the baby. He walks into the room, kisses his wife. They're fawning over the baby, and she says, "I think he has your nose." So he's there for a while, and as he's leaving, he gives his wife a kiss and walks out of the room. Once he's gone, the wife's roommate says, "Wow, your pastor sure is a lot friendlier than mine!"

Speaking of birds (with the turkey vultures), did you know that Noah almost didn't let chickens onto the Ark? They were using too much *fowl* language.

That friend of mine who's a pastor, the other Sunday he announced that they were going to have a board meeting right after worship. So worship ended, and they all gathered together, but there was this one guy there who wasn't a board member. My friend said, "Ralph, you know that this is a meeting of the board, right?" And Ralph said, "Yeah, and after that sermon, I was as *bored* as everyone else!"

Right after the board meeting, my friend was going back to his study, and one of the little boys from the church was standing there waiting for him. When he walked up, the little boy said, "I lost a tooth last night, and the Tooth Fairy gave me a dollar, but I want you to have it." He handed my friend a dollar bill, and my friend said, "That is so kind of you, but you don't have to do that. You can keep it." The little boy said, "No, my dad said you're the poorest preacher we've ever had."

If you were here last week, you'll remember that I talked about Schrodinger's Cat, the thought experiment where if you seal a cat in a box with something that can kill it, until you open the box to observe it, the cat is simultaneously dead *and* alive. And I was *really worried* that I was talking too much about dead cats on Easter. I debated cutting it out, because that's not exactly the kind of thing that people want to hear on Easter Sunday. Well, someone came up to me after worship and said, "This morning, as I was getting ready to come to church, I saw the little girl next door standing in her yard crying. I went over to see what was wrong, and she said, 'My pet fish died, and I just buried it.'" This person looked at the hole that the girl had just filled and said, "I'm so sorry! But that's an awfully big hole for a fish." And the girl said, "That's because it's in your cat!"

Did you know that Jesus actually drove a car? I'm serious. He drove a Honda. He never talked about it, but he says in John 12:49, "I speak not of my own Accord."

No, I'm just kidding. Everyone knows he drove a *Christler*.

Speaking of Jesus, I actually *saw* him the day before Easter. My boys and I went to get a haircut, and he came in to get his *nails* done.

Which reminds me of the time that Jesus and Moses were hanging out in heaven, and they were bored. So Moses said, "You know what we should do? Go down to Earth and perform some miracles. We haven't done that in a while." Jesus thought that was a great idea, so the two went down to Earth. Moses said, "What are you going to do first?" Jesus said, "I really liked walking on water. The last time I did that, people went wild. They're still talking about it." So, Jesus walked to the edge of a lake, and all these people were there watching him. He took one step out onto the water, and he sank. Confused, he got out of the water, tried again, and sank a second time. He turned to Moses and said, "I don't know what's wrong. The last time I did this, I didn't have any problem!" And Moses said, "Yeah, but the last time you didn't have those *holes* in your feet."

One of the guys who was standing there watching wanted to try walking on water, too. He thought, "Peter did it in scripture, and I have a lot of faith, so surely I can do it, too!" But he didn't know how to swim, and he ended up drowning. Jesus felt *terrible*. So he said to the man, "Look, I feel so bad that you died. Let me take you up to heaven. I'll show you around myself." So, they're walking around heaven, and Jesus is saying, "That's where Elvis lives. There's the Catholic neighborhood. There's the Jewish neighborhood. You were Presbyterian, right? Let

me show you to *your* neighborhood.” But as they were walking along, they came up to this big castle, and Jesus said, “Ssshhh...we have to be really quiet here.” So they tiptoed by, and the man said, “What was that all about?” Jesus said, “That’s where the Baptists live. They think they’re the only ones here.”

How many of you felt the earthquake the other day? Were you scared? Just a little shaken up?

And now we’re having an eclipse tomorrow? I remember the one we had a couple of years ago. It was really disappointing. I couldn’t see anything. The moon was in the way the whole time!

Do you have your special eclipse glasses? They’re really hard to find now! But if you don’t have them, you can just use a colander. It totally works, but it will strain your eyes a little.

I have more eclipse jokes, but they’re a little dark.

Comedian George Burns said that “the secret of a good sermon is to have a good beginning and a good ending; and to have the two as close together as possible.” So let me get on with it.

Did you know that there is humor in the Bible? This is not a joke, I’m serious. We think of the Bible as a sacred, serious book (which it *is*), but the Bible can make us laugh. There’s a story in the book of Acts, chapter 20, where Paul is in the city of Troas. I’m just going to read it to you, so that you know I’m not making this up:

“On the first day of the week, when we met to break bread, Paul was holding a discussion with them; since he intended to leave the next day, he continued speaking until midnight. There were

many lamps in the room upstairs where we were meeting. A young man named Eutychus, who was sitting in the window, began to sink off into a deep sleep while Paul talked still longer. Overcome by sleep, he fell to the ground three floors below and was picked up dead. But Paul went down, and bending over him took him in his arms, and said, ‘Do not be alarmed, for his life is in him.’ Then Paul went upstairs, and after he had broken bread and eaten, he continued to converse with them until dawn; then he left. Meanwhile they had taken the boy away alive and were not a little comforted.” That is the story of the first child to be bored to death in church.

And we actually get some holy humor in our reading from John’s gospel. It talks all throughout here about “the disciple whom Jesus loved.” At the very end of our reading today, it says, “This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them.” So the disciple whom Jesus loved is *John*. Very convenient, since John is the one *writing* this!

So with that in mind, look at how it starts. On Easter morning, Mary Magdalene goes to Jesus’ tomb and finds it empty. John writes, “She ran and went to Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved (John), and said to them, ‘They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.’” Then it says, “Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. They were running together, but the *other* disciple *outran Peter* and reached the tomb first.” John is saying, “I run faster than Peter. I got there first.”

Then John writes about how all of the disciples are out in their boat fishing, but they aren’t catching anything. Jesus calls out to them from the shore, but they don’t *know* that it’s Jesus. He tells them to cast their net on the *other* side of the boat, and they catch a ton of fish. When this happens, it says, “The disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, ‘It is the Lord!’” Peter didn’t

recognize Jesus. It says that *John* recognized Jesus and *told Peter* that it was Jesus. John is saying, “Peter didn’t even *recognize* Jesus until I told him.”

Once Peter hears this, it says, “he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea.” So John inserts a little jab there that, “Oh, by the way, Peter didn’t have any clothes on.” Why did he feel the need to mention that?! John is *making fun* of Peter here. It says he jumped into the sea and started swimming to the shore, but the rest of the disciples came in the boat, “for they were not far off from land, only about a hundred yards off.” He is making Peter look *silly* here. It’s like there’s this rivalry between the two of them.

And then – at the end of a story that we’ll talk about next week – Jesus says to Peter, “Follow me,” and the very next thing it says is, “Peter turned and saw the disciple who Jesus loved following them.” Peter says to Jesus, “Lord, what about him?” And by this point, it’s like Jesus has had enough. He says to Peter, “If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? *Follow me.*” So John is writing this like, “Peter was so jealous of me that Jesus got onto him about it!”

I have studied this for years, because I’m fascinated by it. I have read books and commentaries about it. I have asked respected biblical scholars questions about it. And I have not been able to find *a single legitimate reason* why these details are included here. They serve absolutely no purpose. They’re just *fun*. John’s just having a laugh.

So often, we take things *way* too seriously. And don’t get me wrong, there are serious problems in our lives and in the world around us. People’s *lives* are at stake. There are some things we *have* to take seriously. And *faith* is something that I take very seriously. This *matters*, what we

are doing here. There are *eternal* implications to this. *And...*one of the fruits of the Spirit is *joy*. It's the *second* one, right after love. How is our faith made manifest and visible to the world around us? How do we bear the fruit of God in the world? Love, *joy*, peace patience, kindness, and so on. We are called to live lives characterized by *joy*. It's not about making light of things or not taking anything seriously. It's about finding *joy* in life. It's about being able to *laugh* and not taking *ourselves* too seriously.

There *are* serious problems in our lives and in the world around us. But we have received the best news in the history of the world! Jesus Christ is risen from the dead, and he has defeated the powers of sin and death and evil. Those things are still present, but they no longer have the last word in this world or in our lives. They *thought* they did. But who's laughing now? In Jesus' death on a cross, all our sin has been forgiven, the slate has been wiped clean, so that we can live a new life with God and with each other. And in Jesus' resurrection, that new life will *never end*. God has said, "*Nothing* will *ever* keep you from me again."

That good news should fill us with *joy*. It should make us want to *celebrate*. It should make us want to *laugh*. I mean, Jesus was crucified, and he wasn't even *mad* about it. He was just a little *cross...*