

I want to take a quick survey. Who here likes to laugh? I know it sounds like kind of a silly question, but stop and think about it for a moment. If you do like to laugh, then consider this: what is it that makes *you* laugh? I mean everyone's sense of humor is a little different. The things *I* find funny may bring about nothing more than a puzzled look from someone else. But beyond our own individual senses of humor, I've been wondering in more general terms, just what is it that consistently makes people laugh?

One conclusion I reached this week was that we laugh at things that poke fun at experiences we share with others. Consider these examples: the jokes seminary students tell each other would probably not be very funny to a group of middle school students; jokes about rural life would hardly make a lifelong resident of a big city laugh; jokes about fishing would make some of you laugh but would likely leave me clueless. Jokes are funny when we laugh at experiences we can identify with.

But I think *most* of what makes us laugh comes from the unexpected. From silly pranks that brothers and sisters play on each other, to the dry sense of humor that I appreciate, to side-splitting jokes and stories, I think it is the unexpected that *really* makes us laugh. I mean, who expects to see their intern enter worship on a chariot and sit on a big throne. Who expects Warren Robinson to dress up like a gangster, and to do so on the Sunday he is scheduled to be a lector? Who expects to have one of the lessons read from Starbucks? Who expects to be encouraged to leave their cell phones on during worship? Who expects to sing "Joy to the World" on the Sunday after Easter?

We are celebrating Holy Hilarity Sunday today/this weekend. This practice has its roots in very old customs of the church. It is a way of celebrating God's joke on death. This is not a *new* invention. An old Bavarian custom included a time of story-telling and practical joking on

Easter afternoon. Early orthodox churches gathered on the Monday after Easter to tell stories and jokes. Early theologians had a Latin name for it – the *risus paschalis* – the Easter laugh. In a variety of ways Christians have celebrated God’s joke on death.

Think about it. Who would have expected the events to take place as they did? Jesus was put to death on a cross, like a criminal, because he was a threat. He was a threat to the political and religious establishment. And once he died, that was it. That was the end of him, so everyone thought, including the disciples. Who would have expected what actually happened? The stone was rolled away from the tomb, and the body was gone. Jesus was *raised from the dead*, and then as we hear in today’s reading, he came and stood among the disciples. The unexpected happened, and the laugh was on death itself. It brings to mind the expression, “Who’s got the last laugh now?”

Today we encounter the story of Jesus appearing to the disciples in a locked house. They were gathered together in fear. They were afraid of the religious authorities. Keep in mind that something big had just happened, and sometimes such big events get people stirred up. The disciples were probably afraid that somehow they would be blamed for what happened. They might even be killed next.

Into the midst of this fear walks Jesus. Jesus came and stood among them. Sometimes the Bible frustrates me. I wish the gospel writer would say how Jesus entered the room. And maybe that detail is not important. But I also wish the Bible would tell us more about that moment when Jesus appeared. How was Jesus feeling? What else did he say to his disciples? What was the *initial* reaction of the disciples? How did the rest of the conversation go? Of course sometimes these ambiguities cause the story to speak to us in new ways. So I want to suggest something. Can you imagine, just for a moment, that *maybe* Jesus was laughing? Jesus

came and stood among them, and laughed. He laughed not at the disciples in their fear, but because he had been raised back to life. Didn't see that one coming, did you?

Now I admit this image of Jesus standing and laughing among a group of fearful disciples is a bit disarming. Maybe an image of Jesus laughing is one that you have a hard time visualizing. We don't expect this, but that is part of the whole Easter story. Nothing about it was expected.

Over the years there have been artists who have depicted Jesus laughing. Just go on the internet and search for "Jesus laughing." Some are kind of tacky, but some are worth looking at, such as three I have to show you this morning. The first one is a simple but effective one that resonated with Latin American culture in the 1970's. I like this second because of the color and the people surrounding Jesus. This last one is by an artist named Ralph Kozak, who has a website www.jesuslaughing.com through which he sells his images of Jesus laughing. These images all show a side of Jesus that maybe you have never thought about before. However, Jesus *was* human, so why *wouldn't* he laugh? We have no idea what sort of jokes he would have laughed at, but I do believe he laughed from time to time. And I can also picture him laughing at the biggest joke of all – the joke on death.

Having said all of this, I do not want to overlook the feelings of the disciples. They were afraid. According to John, the disciples have not yet seen Jesus for themselves. They have only seen the empty tomb. They do not know for sure what is going on. They had just seen Jesus die, an event which left them absolutely devastated. Now the tomb is empty, and so far only Mary has seen him. Once they actually see Jesus, they are overjoyed, but until then, they were afraid.

The same goes for Thomas. It is very easy for us to pick on Thomas for doubting, but put yourself in his shoes. He was not in the house when Jesus first appeared. He missed out on seeing Jesus. Like the other disciples, he had been devastated by Jesus' death. Earlier in his

gospel, John portrays Thomas as a fiercely devoted disciple. When Jesus was going to set out for Jerusalem to raise Lazarus from the dead, Thomas said, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.” When we are strongly devoted to someone it hurts even more to lose them. I am sure that Thomas was also afraid of what might happen next. Now imagine how he feels when the disciples come to him saying, “We have seen the Lord!” It was easy for them to believe, they already got to see him. But, Thomas had missed out. But then a week later, Jesus came and stood among them for a second time.

Today we are having a few laughs as we do some unexpected and creative things in our worship service. This is not to overlook the pain and brokenness that some of us are carrying today. Like the disciples maybe you are afraid: Afraid because you have lost someone you love; afraid because you are carrying anger inside of you and are uncertain how to handle it; afraid because someone has hurt you and might do so again; afraid because your job is far from secure; afraid of the doctor’s diagnosis. When we are afraid, the last thing we want to do is laugh, and the last thing you want to hear someone say is “just laugh, because everything will be OK.”

And I’m *not* going to say that. But I *am* going to say this. When Jesus came and stood among the disciples the second time, something amazing happened, something I have missed in all the years I have heard this story read. Thomas had been concerned with seeing and touching the miraculous, seeing and touching the mark of the nails in Jesus’ hands, and placing his hand in his side. Then Jesus appears and calls his bluff, and shows his hands and side. Thomas responds, “My Lord and my God!” Suddenly, Thomas moves to a deeper understanding of Jesus. Don’t miss what is happening here. Thomas moves from believing in miraculous *signs* of the risen Christ, to believing in the *risen Christ himself*. Thomas now sees and understands who Jesus truly is; Jesus who is truly God; Jesus who, through his rising from the dead, has changed everything!

This same Jesus stands among us now. He stands among us who are afraid, and as Jesus stands among us he is laughing, even if we are not. Jesus is laughing at all those things that keep *us* from laughing. He is laughing at pain, anger, fear, sadness, evil, injustice, and most of all *he is laughing at death itself*. Even if you are not laughing now, there will be days when you will be able to laugh again. But then there will be days when fear takes over again. This is the cycle of life in this broken world. But one day that will all be done for good. The cycle will be broken. We know this will happen because Jesus is alive. One day we too will be laughing, not at the funny things we did on Holy Hilarity Sunday, but at death itself, because we will *all* be raised to new life. And Jesus will be there standing among us, laughing with us.

Amen.