

Sermon Preached by Pr. Jennifer Rose
April 3, 2016
First Sunday of Easter - Holy Humor Sunday
"Easter Joy"

Eastewwwwr..... is what bwings us togewwwwehr... today... that dwwweeammm wiffin a
dweeammm..

I have always wanted to begin a sermon with that line from the Princess Bride. Finally, the day has arrived. Praise be to God!

Happy Easter friends! We are now in the Easter season. Easter does not last for only a day. As you see from the Gospel story today, Jesus' appearances to His loved ones after His resurrection lasted for more than just a day. Some could not recognize Him at first. Some could not get out of the fierce sadness of Good Friday. But we celebrate the Easter season as a church to remind us that the resurrection is an ongoing unfolding of life in the world and not a one-time miracle.

That is why I wanted to try something new with you today. How many of you have ever heard of Holy Humor Sunday?.... It is an incredible tradition for Christians. It is not a new idea, but goes back farther than you might think. Churches in the 15th century used to celebrate the Sunday after Easter as Risus Paschalis or the 'Easter Laugh'---in other words Easter was seen on God having the last laugh over death and evil. As a part of this service, the priests would deliberately include stories and jokes in their sermons. After the service, people would gather to play practical jokes or tell funny stories. It may come as no surprise that the observance of this holiday was officially outlawed by Pope Clement X in the 17th century.

One day Groucho Marx was getting off an elevator and he happened to meet a pastor. The pastor came up to him, put out his hand and said, 'I want to thank you for all the joy you've put into the world.' Groucho shook hands and replied, 'Thank you, Reverend. I want to thank you for all the joy you've taken out of it.'"

This comment tells us a lot about how many people view clergy, Christianity, and God. A lot of people assume that clergy are supposed to be boring, serious people and that God never laughs. It would appear to these people that the Christmas angel announced to the shepherds: 'Behold, I bring you bad news of great sorrow for all the people!' Religion is typically seen as dour, finger-wagging, and way too serious by non-believers and maybe even by some of us.

So enough seriousness here, we need a couple jokes.

So it was discovered that Lena was using the following password on her computer: MickeyMinniePlutoLouieDeweyDonaldGoofySacramento. When asked why she had such a long password, she said she was told that it had to be at least seven characters long and include one capital.

What kind of car does Jesus drive? A Christler. What kind of car do the disciples drive? A honda. (They were all in one accord...) (Oh, I love groaner jokes!) And What do a pastor and a small blender have in common? They are both mini-stirs! (True story - I got that joke from a laffy taffy wrapper!)

It was Palm Sunday but because of a sore throat, 5-year-old Johnny stayed home from church with a sitter. When the family returned home, they were carrying several palm branches. Johnny asked them what they were for.

"People held them over Jesus' head as he walked by," his father told him.

"Wouldn't you know it," Johnny fumed, "the one Sunday I don't go and he shows up."

Where have we gotten this idea: that our faith has to be so utterly serious? That church cannot be fun and filled with laughter and celebration? Our kids know better. If we asked them to draw a picture of God, would they draw a God who is angry or a God who is smiling? Are we able to fit into our image of Christ a God who beams with joy and laughs with delight? As we think about we can live an Easter life as hopeful Easter people, humor inevitably is a part of that. Despite obstruction by some parts of the church, observances of Holy Humor Sundays continue.

A Presbyterian Church in New Bethlehem, PA passed out Good Humor ice cream to every single churchgoer that day. Another in Portland, OR greeted church members arriving with clowns. Their choir wore their robes inside out and the opening hymn was accompanied by a band of kazoos. There are many, many examples of this. These churches (and I think our church, too) understand something so important about our faith. Humor and grace go together. Being convinced that God loves us just as we are is all the more meaningful the more we can see clearly just how absurd we all are at times. The word "humor" even comes from the same root Latin word as "humility", the root of both being "earth" or "down to earth". Humor allows us to take a look an honest and unflinching look at ourselves, to see our need and to recognize where we have been blessed.

There is a story of a pastor who stood up one Sunday morning and for some reason the PA system wasn't working properly. So he said "There seems to be something wrong with the sound system." And the congregation replied in unison, "And also with you."

This morning, we heard the story of doubting Thomas. Poor Thomas, though he went on to do such good work, we always think of him as Mr. Doubtful. The other disciples have seen the risen Christ and so they believe. But they tell Thomas and since he wasn't there, he just won't believe that Christ is risen. He tells them: "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

Perhaps Thomas' real problem was that he was so devastated by what had happened that he could not see the wonderful reversal that God has accomplished in the resurrection. He was blind to the miraculous power of God. Even his friends' shiny, happy faces could not convince him. Thomas could not connect to their joy.

No doubt there are some of you here today in the same boat. Life has dealt some crushing blows — financial struggles, loss of loved ones, insurmountable problems, diseases, depression, the list goes on and on. We so desperately want to be Easter people we look around and at times, it looks a lot more like Good Friday. Hope seems to have dried up and our joy is nowhere to be found.

The message of the story of Thomas is: open your eyes! You might not see it at first, you might doubt it, but the resurrection is real! The resurrection is for you! Celebrate! Go ahead and laugh!

We need this reminder so much. Life can be so hard and we can get so down that we forget which way is up. And then along comes Holy Humor Sunday and we are given the chance to have laughter and light-heartedness, for comedy and silliness. We can throw our hearts into celebrating the victory of the resurrection. The psalmist says that God "sits in the heavens and laughs," and I believe God invites us to do join in the heavenly laughter. God wants us to have joy.

At the pearly gates again, a taxi driver and pastor are waiting in line. St. Peter consults his list and says to the taxi driver, "Take this silken robe and golden staff and enter the Kingdom of Heaven."

St. Peter next greets the pastor saying, "Take this cotton robe and wooden staff and enter the Kingdom of Heaven."

"Just a minute," says the pastor. "That man was a taxi driver, and he gets a silken robe and golden staff while I get a cotton robe and wooden staff. How can this be?"

"Up here, we work by results," says St. Peter. "While you preached, people slept; while he drove, people prayed."

Little Susie, a six-year-old, came home from school whining, "Mommy, I've got a stomachache." "That's because your stomach is empty," her mother replied. "You'd feel better if you had something in it." She gave Susie a snack and sure enough, Susie felt better right away.

That afternoon the family's pastor dropped by. While he was chatting with Susie's mom, he mentioned he'd had a bad headache all day long.

Susie perked up. "That's because it's empty," she said. "You'd feel better if you had something in it!"

Let us pray. All-powerful God, who turns mustard seeds into trees and conceals the meaning of life in bread and a cup of drink, we thank you for creating us with such complexity and variety. We give you our deepest thanks for your great love for us, and for turning our world topsy-turvy to give us joy and draw attention to that joy. To you, who is as invisible as the wind and as solid as a rock, we thank you for sending a part of you - your son and our brother Christ - to die for us. Snickering at the feeble attempts of evil, you show us how to resist temptation, giggling at sin's desperate desire to hold on to us. Help us to embrace your howling laughter at death's foolish belief that the tomb could hold you. As the stars pealed with joy, and you gave us that delight, help us to rejoice in offering such great news to the broken, the sad and the lonely. As you tickle us with your grace and our hearts overflow with blessing, we give you thanks. In Jesus' name, Amen.