

“When All Else Fails, Try Laughter.”
April 18, 2020 (Holy Humor Sunday)
John 20:19-30
The Rev. Chris Keating
Woodlawn Chapel Presbyterian Church

It is now more than a month since we have had in person worship, and many folks have been self-distancing a bit longer than that. I am happy to report that after four weeks of isolation, walking five miles a day, eating no meat, dairy or flour and instead eating fresh home cooked vegetables three times a day, the change has been fantastic. I feel great! It is a healthy gluten-free, caffeine free diet and I am exercising at least one hour each day at home. I’ve lost 20 pounds and gained muscle mass...I have absolutely no idea who wrote this statement, but I saw it on Facebook and was so proud of them that I thought I would share this with you!

It is, of course, the Sunday after Easter, a day that Christians have often celebrated as “holy humor Sunday.” And, thanks to Roger and Patty Nekula, we are not celebrating in an empty sanctuary – they made sure to collect photographs from lots of church members whose smiling faces are looking back at me right now!

Holy Humor – which was also known as “bright Sunday,” was originally a little day of pratfalls and practical jokes, of slapstick and silliness to celebrate the promise of the resurrection. After all, it was argued, God pulled one over on the devil by raising Jesus from the dead – why should we not celebrate and laugh?

Our laughter does not ignore the serious problems of our world. Our laughter does not disrespect those who are suffering, or who are seriously ill – at least if it is not aimed at making fun of them. Rather, our laughter emerges from the complete conviction of faith, acknowledged in the words of the Heidelberg Catechism, “What is your only comfort in life and death?” Answer: That I belong--body and soul, in life and in death--not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.” This is why we laugh.

And so on this day we stories like the one about the priest, the rabbit and the monk who walked into the bar. The rabbit turned around and said, “Oops! I think I’m a typo!”

We tell stories about the man who was so desperate to sell his house in Chesterfield that he cleaned it up, had it painted, put in new carpeting and landscaping...only to be dejected when the realtor told him it couldn’t be listed for more than \$250,000. Suddenly, the man had an idea...he ran to Costco, purchased four cases of toilet paper and told her to raise the price to \$500,000.

And we tell stories about common, every day, struggling to believe disciples like Thomas—someone who should never be called “doubting Thomas.” As you read this story, I invite you to see Thomas not as doubting Thomas, but as laughing Thomas – someone who

suddenly discovers that all he has ever wanted, all that he has ever longed for, all that brings meaning to his life, is standing straight in front of him.

And then imagine the smile that breaks across his face. We laugh because we know that laughter helps release the tensions and unravel the mysteries with waves of my what my good friend Tom Willadsen says is “carbonated holiness.”

A church in Washington was replacing its old pews, so it placed an ad in the paper: “Newer wood church pews, sleeps six persons, \$100 each.”

Or the church which advertised a going away party for their retiring priest. The announcement said, “We’re anxious to give Father a little momentum.”

We laugh because of all the misprints we have ever noticed, including the church bulletin which should have been more careful about typos the secretary had typed, “Come, Christians, Join to Sin.”

A good joke catches us all by surprise, wrote Frederick Buechner. “Who would have guessed,” said Buechner,¹ “that Israel of all nations would be the one God picked, or Sarah would have Isacc at the age of ninety or the Messiah would turn up in a manger? Who could possibly see the duck-billed platypus coming or Saint Simeon Stylites or the character currently occupying the pulpit at First Presbyterian? The laugh in each case results from astonished delight at the sheer unexpectedness of the thing.”

Let me share with you a true story about someone who had lost her ability to find delight in the sheer unexpectedness of grace. One Monday morning, many years ago when I was a pastor in Kansas City, my phone rang. The receptionist was laughing as she passed the call to me and said, “Good luck with this one!” I could hardly wait. A woman from another church in town was calling. Her voice was clipped and curt, and there was no mistaking her anger. “I need to know something, sir,” she said. “Yes?” “This is a very serious question. Do you let clowns serve communion at your church?”

I was not exactly sure how to answer. I was tempted to say, “You mean aside from me and the senior pastor?” but I thought perhaps this was not the time and place. Instead, I said, “I’m sorry, could you repeat that?” Her anger was at a full boil right now: “I SAID. ‘DO. YOU. ALLOW. CLOWNS. TO SERVE COMMUNION?’”

At this moment, I realized the depth of her anger, and determined she was in no mood for laughter. As far as she was concerned, communion was not the place to allow Bozo the Clown to lead worship. What had obviously been one person’s idea of creativity had flopped as far as she was concerned – and before she decided to attend another Presbyterian church, she needed to find out once and for all if this was some sort of denominational trend.

¹Buechner, “Beyond Words,” p.163.

I was not then nor am not now prepared to argue about the theological suitability of clowns distributing sacraments. I do not believe that was actually the root of her concern. What she was worried about was actually the same problem Thomas faces in the scripture today: "Is Jesus Christ real to me?"

She was watching as beloved religious traditions which she valued were withering away. Everything she had known and had been taught to value about the church seem to be changing. In all of this change, she wanted to know, "Can God be still taken seriously?" To me that sounds a lot like the sort of questions Thomas was probably asking.

It is a mistake to label Thomas "Doubting Thomas." We have made Thomas the center of jokes for generations, and that is a mistake. It is a mistake because it misses the point of what Jesus' resurrection means to Thomas. There is no flaw in Thomas' character. Instead, he is like each one of us, yearning for our own experience of resurrection...yearning to have the deepest questions of our heart answered: "Do you believe God is to be taken seriously?"

That is especially true in a world that has been turned upside down by the Coronavirus. I laughed the other day when I read a posting by Steve McClelland, who is Bob and Dottie's son. Steve is a Presbyterian pastor in New Jersey. He wrote the other day that the world has been turned upside down: its the older people who are sneaking out of the house and the younger ones who are getting mad! We are behaving like dogs, he wrote, lying around the house all day long, looking for anything we can eat, and getting excited about taking a trip in the car!

Thomas' world has been turned upside down. He is not doubting...he is yearning to smile again. He longs for an experience that will allow him to say, "My Lord and My God."

I know this may sound silly: but imagine the disciples surrounding Thomas, all of them smiling and laughing together as he looks into Jesus' eyes? I imagine them rejoicing in the power of the resurrection, in Christ's ability to appear to them in their fears. That gives me reason to smile as well. Amen.