

Laughter at Easter

Matthew 28:1-10

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Of all the traditions surrounding Easter, among all of the different ways various branches of the Christian Church celebrate this holy day, perhaps none is so strange—and yet, in its own way, so strangely fitting—as one ancient 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 venerable 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, necessarily, but jokes that tease laughter out of the worshipers. I've never been to such a service, but it's fun to imagine. I try to imagine the extravagantly bearded priest, all vested in full Orthodox regalia, and the extra twinkling light in his eyes as he looks out over his congregation on such an occasion. I imagine the laughter of the congregation cutting through the aroma of incense that lingers in the air after the Easter services. I imagine the laughter ricocheting off the ancient stone walls of the church. I imagine the laughter carried by clusters of worshipers into the streets, like food that has been sanctified in worship and then given to share with the world. What a strange tradition! And yet, in its own way, so strangely fitting.

I have a friend who, a few years back, shared this tradition with his New England Congregational church on Easter Sunday. He used the children's sermon time just to tell jokes, one right after another, silly jokes mostly, elephant jokes and knock-knock jokes and the like, whatever got them laughing. In this dignified New England Congregational church, the people gathered for worship on Easter Sunday, of all times, and here is the preacher telling jokes. I, of course, would never do that. Not in a thousand years. Well, okay, maybe just this once.

Knock-knock.
Who's there?
Why.
Why who?
One question at a time, please!

(I made that one up. You can tell, right?) Anyway, this friend of mine went on like that, telling jokes, one right after another. You'll be relieved to hear that I'm not going to do that.

But there is this one: Why are Congregationalists such bad singers? Because they're always reading ahead in the hymnal to see if they agree with it.

Anyway...Lead me not into temptation—I can find the way myself.

Have you noticed that the early bird gets the worm, but it's the second mouse who gets the cheese?

What do Attila the Hun and John the Baptist have in common? The same middle name.

For every action there is an equal and opposite criticism.

Moses coming down from Mt. Sinai, after receiving the commandments from God, says to the people: "I've got good news and bad news. First, the good news: I got Him down to ten. The bad news: adultery's still in."

"Dad, I'm going to a party. Would you do my homework for me?" "I'm sorry, son, but it just wouldn't be right." "Well, maybe not. Give it a try anyway."

Or, our Alanna's favorite when she was a little younger: What do you call cheese that doesn't belong to you? Nacho cheese.

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. Philosophers, psychologists, and literary theorists have all taken a stab at defining what makes something funny. Some have produced elaborate theories. Aristotle wrote at length about humor. Sigmund Freud wrote a whole book on the subject called, *Jokes and the Unconscious*, which is a stifflingly humorless book, but it does contain what Freud called his favorite joke: A husband says to his wife: "Dear, if one of us should die, I think I will live in Paris." That's about as good as the book gets. Anyway, among all of these great thinkers, and others who have addressed the subject of humor, there is no particular consensus on what makes something funny, no comprehensive theory that encompasses the variety of things that make us laugh. But there is at least one recurring theme: much humor is based on surprise, on the reversal of expectations.

When I was a boy my favorite joke was about the man who showed up with his dog at the office of a theatrical agent, hoping that the agent would take them on as clients. He says to the agent, "You've got to see this. This dog of mine talks. I'll prove it to you. I'll ask him a question: Fido, what do you call the thing on top of the house?" The dog responds, "Roof!" The agent says, "That's terrible! You're wasting my time!" The guy says, "Hold on a second. I'll show you. Fido, what is the texture of sandpaper?" The dog responds, "Rough!" The agent says, "You're killing me here..." "Hold on, hold on. One more chance. You'll be really impressed, I promise you. Fido, who was the greatest baseball player of all time?" And the dog seems to say, "Ruth!" So the agent says, "That's it. I've heard enough!" And he throws them out the door. The dog and his owner go tumbling onto the sidewalk. Then the dog looks up at his owner and says, "DiMaggio?"

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. And it's a biblical theme as well. God establishes a covenant with Sarah and Abram, and tells them that they are to parent a new people who will be as numerous as the stars in the sky. Which is all well and good, but they are having a hard time getting pregnant. Sarah is now in her nineties when a visitor comes to their home. As she stands at the kitchen door she overhears the visitor tell Abram that they are going to give birth to a son. And Sarah laughs. And who can blame her? She laughs at this surprising turn of events, not a brittle little laugh, but a full-bellied laugh. She laughs, as one person put it, at the thought of her baby being born in the geriatric ward with Medicare picking up the tab. And when that baby was born, they named the child Isaac, which means, "He laughs." Our God, a God of surprises, is always taking our expectations and upending them. And nowhere is that more true than in the life of Jesus. 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. They were the original "gang that couldn't shoot straight," and yet Jesus told them that they are to spread his gospel until it covers the earth like water covers the ocean. He said that in his realm children will be sitting at the head table, along with the poor and those who are so notorious that they never get invited anywhere else, while the wealthy and the members of the religious establishment will be checking their coats. Jesus was forever 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. It's called the final answer. Only Jesus was not through reversing expectations, upending the usual order of things. Easter is the ultimate surprise, the punch line of God's story, turning creation on its head with the most surprising reversal of all.

I can just see the headline in the *Wellesley Townsman*: "Village Church Pastor Calls Resurrection a Joke." But hear me out. According to M. Conrad Hyers, who has written a number of books on the intersection of religion and humor, "Comedy is closer to the deep springs of [the Christian] religion than tragedy. The tragic perspective ends in unredeemed and unredeeming conflict, in bitter defiance, without resolution and without hope, while comedy is a prefiguration of anticipated joy." If our story ended with Good Friday, it would be a tragedy, indeed, punctuated only with tears. But there is laughter this day, because our story has a surprising ending, indeed a joyful ending, in the good news of Jesus' resurrection.

So we laugh this day, not only in response to God's surprise on Easter, but we also laugh in gleeful recognition of God's triumph. I have worshiped here each day over the last several days and this has been a solemn place. There has been no laughter. There was no place for it. It would have seemed a sacrilege. There was no laughter at the Maundy Thursday service, as we took our place at Jesus' Last Supper and remembered the ways he was betrayed by his closest friends. There was no laughter when we gathered to worship on Good Friday, and remembered Jesus' agony and death on the cross. There was no laughter at the Easter Vigil held last night, as we marked the day when the rule of death was unchallenged. There was no laughter at any of those services. It would not have been appropriate. It would have seemed a sacrilege. It's not seeming to laugh at tragedy.

But today is different. One of the reasons that joking and jesting are considered appropriate in Eastern Orthodox sanctuaries on such a day is because of the big joke God pulled on Satan in the Resurrection. Satan didn't win after all. Death did a victory dance, but it was premature because the game wasn't over.

Also on Thursday, this sanctuary was full of people gathered to offer words of thanksgiving for the life of Jack Colbert and to hear God's promises about living and dying, about eternal love and everlasting life. Although we gathered on the day known as Maundy Thursday, we gathered as Easter people. There was actually quite a bit of laughter at that service—not the kind of black humor that masks a fear of death, but a more joyous humor. It was a laughter befitting someone who himself had a wonderful sense of humor and a laughter appropriate for people who worship in the light of the

Resurrection. At that service, I used an image that I often use to describe God's triumph over death. I said, "Our God is the kind of God who insists on having the last word." But I could have said, in fact it would have been strangely fitting to say, "Our God is the kind of God who insists on having the last laugh."

So there is surprise in laughter, and there is triumph in laughter. But there is one other characteristic of laughter that makes it particularly appropriate on such a day. Laughter can be an expression of joy. The late Joseph Campbell put it so well. He said, "[Humor] is a leap into the wild and careless, inexhaustible joy of life invincible." Doesn't that describe what this day is about? "A leap into...the inexhaustible joy of life invincible?" And so one of the lesser-known Easter hymns in our *Pilgrim Hymnal* puts it:

The whole bright world rejoices now,
Hilariter, Hilariter (Latin for "*hilarity, merriment*")
The birds do sing on every bough,
Alleluia, Alleluia.

Then shout beneath the racing skies
Hilariter, Hilariter
To him who rose that we might rise
Alleluia, Alleluia.

I love the way that hymn uses as a refrain both "Hilariter" and "Alleluia," interweaving merriment and praise. How wonderfully appropriate for a day such as this: our laughter and our praise offered to the surprising God who this day has triumphed over evil and death.

So as you gather around a table for Easter dinner, may I suggest that it is appropriate to offer prayers of thanks and praise, but also to offer a joke or two? And let your laughter, in some strange, and strangely fitting, way, remind you of the triumph of the God we worship here, through the Resurrection of our Lord, Jesus Christ. And remember: the one who laughs last...didn't catch on.