

**A Time to Laugh**  
**Ecclesiastes 3:1-8**  
**I Corinthians 1:18-23**

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There is a rhythm to the life of the church. There are things that are just expected. We expect to have a large crowd on Easter Sunday. We expect to have a small crowd the Sunday after. It is often called low Sunday.

This is the Sunday that, as my former colleague put it this week, the associate gets to preach on “Doubting Thomas.” That is always the lectionary text for today, and it is one week that I almost could guaranteed that he would be preaching! I don’t know how many sermons he has on that text. Many I am sure!

That is just the rhythm of the church. At least I thought it was.

But a couple years ago as we were planning worship Christianne asked, “Are you doing Humor Sunday?”

I had never heard of such a thing! No! The Sunday after Easter is Doubting Thomas Sunday! Everybody know that!

Well, not everyone! It seems that Humor Sunday, or Laughing Sunday really is a thing! And not just recently! Churches in 15<sup>th</sup> century Bavaria used to celebrate the Sunday after Easter as *Risus Paschalis* (‘God’s Joke,’ or ‘the Easter laugh’). Priests would deliberately include amusing stories and jokes in their sermons in an attempt to make the faithful laugh. After the service, people would gather together to play practical jokes on one another and tell funny stories. It was their way of celebrating the resurrection of Christ – the supreme joke God played on Satan by raising Jesus from the dead.

But apparently people were having too much fun and you know the church can’t tolerate that, so it was banned by Pope Clement X in the 17th century.

In 1988 the Fellowship of Merry Christians (isn’t that a church that you would want to join?) began encouraging churches to resurrect some of these Christian traditions as a way of celebrating the grace of God we receive through laughter.<sup>1</sup>

And we do need some laughter, don’t we?

The pandemic has taken away so much joy. And then on top of that we have just finished Lent, which is never a happy happy joy joy season full of laughs! This past Lent we focused on Repentance! Another subject that just brings out howls of laughter! Then we went through Holy Week and Good Friday (talk about the poster day of oxymoron!) Easter gave us a break but it is more joy than laughing!

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<sup>1</sup> <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2011/03/laughter-sunday.html>

We need to remember to laugh! Especially this year. In the middle of a Pandemic II, a time when the most asked question is “Have you got your shot?” There is a growing segregation by which one you got. This Hour Has 22 Minutes in their season finale did a wonderful skit where the Harry Potter Sorting Hat made the decision for you!<sup>2</sup> “You are a Moderna!” “A Pfizer you will be!” “You are in the middle so AstraZeneca are you!”

If you can get an appointment get the shot. Remember the best shot for you is the one you can get first. This message brought to you by Health Canada. (Sorry for the commercial interruption!)

One of my favorite books on preaching is Frederick Buechner’s *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy and Fairy Tale*.<sup>3</sup> I think that most of the time the church has been very familiar and comfortable with the first. We easily recognize the tragedy in the gospel, don’t we? Especially this week after Holy Week? The week in which we recalled the lynching of the very Son of God?

We are familiar with the tragic in the gospel just by paying attention to our world, our lives. As we see thousands stricken by this pandemic; with struggles with families, with our own health, with anxiety of a world that isn’t anything like we thought it was going to be like.

Oh, we know the tragedy part.

And I think we know, or are at least comfortable with the fairy tale part of the gospel. Too often we treat it like a Disney Movie, believing that at some point God is going to swoop down like a Fairy Godmother and wave her magic wand and make everything perfect. Bibbity bobbity Boo! Jesus comes popping out of the tomb and says “TADA!”

But the comedy?

That is the hard part. I had a conversation with a Lyn Tribble, a university classmate who now teaches English at the University of Connecticut. I asked her about the difference between the Shakespeare’s tragedies and comedies. You would think it is apparent just by the names, but she assured me that it isn’t. In the end she said, the comedies have a twist, an unexpected ending.

And is that not the gospel? Throughout the Bible we have stories of unexpected things happening—an old retired couple having their first child; the youngest kid out keeping the sheep being crowned king; the first being last, those despised being the most honored, a dead man coming back to life!

Oh our faith is one of total comedy! And the response to comedy is laughter!

That is why this past week I asked on social media if people had a favorite joke that could be told in church. I think it was that last part that really cut down the contributions! One friend sent an offering that I thought was rather timely.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g6S8vIVnyc8>

<sup>3</sup> Frederick Buechner. *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy and Fairy Tale*. (Harper and Row:San Francisco, 1977.)

*"During Lent the children's pastor was using the children's sermon time to educate the kids about Easter. Who can tell me what we are getting ready to celebrate? One kid says Thanksgiving, one kid says Christmas. So the CP calls on the preacher's kid, Johnny, who correctly says Easter. Johnny, can you tell me what we celebrate on Easter? As the preacher beamed from the side, Johnny replied 'Yes, Jesus came to earth, lived, died and was buried in a tomb but on the 3rd day he came out of the tomb. And if he see's his shadow, there will be 6 more weeks of winter.'"*

Very appropriate for Nova Scotia, eh?

Another sent me a Jesus joke. You have to be careful with those! He told the story of the woman who was caught in adultery, who was dragged and thrown in front of Jesus and the Pharisees demanded, "what should we do with her?"

Jesus looked at the woman and said, "Let the one who is without sin cast the first stone." Then he knelt down and started writing in the sand.

Suddenly a rock came flying out of the crowd and hit Jesus! He looked up and said, "Mother!"

(Sometimes you have to understand the theology behind the joke!)

I think that most preachers have their favorite Jesus joke. One of mine is the story about how the disciple were all together after Easter. They were there on the Sea of Galilee with Jesus, eating bread and fish. That was their go-to meal, sorta like donuts at Tim's! They were there reminiscing about the good old days, remembering their favorite Jesus story.

"Remember when Jesus took that little boy's lunch and fed all those people? And do you remember we had to get some people to help him take all the leftovers home! He left with more than he came with!"

Another jumped in. "And, do you remember that time when those guys tore up the ceiling to bring their friend so Jesus could heal him?"

And they all nodded their heads. And then Peter said, "But do you remember that time when Jesus went walking on the water and invited me to join him?" There was a lot of laughter as everyone had to chime in about Peter sinking like a rock!

"Jesus. Do it again!" Let's row out and you just walk back to shore!"

Jesus just said no, but the disciples were not going to be deterred! "Come on Jesus! For old time sakes!

Finally Jesus agrees and they row out a ways, and then Jesus steps out of the boat and...sinks!

The disciples pull him out of the water. He is spitting water, dries his face off and says, "Must be a bit rusty!" And he steps out again.

Same thing! Right under he goes!

He does it a third time with the same result! When they pull him out that time he exclaims, "I forgot about those holes in my feet!"

Sacrilegious?

Maybe! But perhaps that is why we need to tell jokes like that! We need them to be more like Jesus than Clement X!

We often miss it. We just read the stories out of THE HOLY BIBLE. We don't get to hear Jesus tell the story, to see the glimmer in his eyes, the slight smile when he says, "Get the log out of your own eye before you try to get the speck out of someone else's eye." "It is easier for a Clydesdale to get through a revolving door than for a rich person to get into heaven."

He was always telling a joke, with a point.

"A priest, a rabbi and a minister walk into a bar. The bartender says, is this a joke?"

Jesus talked about a priest and a levite walking down the road seeing a man in a ditch. The people knew the punchline!

But they didn't! They would never ever ever had expected a Samaritan being the hero of the tale! It was the unexpected that drove the point home, that they remembered, that made them laugh!

We need to laugh to be like Jesus.

We also need to laugh not to turn Jesus into an idol. I have often wondered about people who cannot, or will not laugh, even at themselves. To watch world leaders like George Bush laugh at Dana Carvey's impression of him, or his son laughing at Will Ferrel, or Barack Obama bringing out his Anger Whisperer. We have also seen leaders who cannot laugh. And many times their followers take that lack of humor to tragic lengths

We saw that take place when terrorists broke into the offices of Charlie Hebdo in Paris killing 12 and injuring 11 others over a cartoon of the prophet. Laughter keeps life in perspective.

It also helps us feel the truth. In recent years I have watched as faith has gotten more and more serious while losing any sense of eternal truth. Too often our faith has lost that sense of relevance, of truth. When you think of the truth tellers, the prophets of our age, who comes to mind?

While there are some individuals of faith, for most of the world, I am coming to believe it is our comedians who are the most adept at speaking gospel, good news, or at least truth. Many times we miss it because they wrap it with language that would make a sailor blush, but underneath it is truth.<sup>4</sup>

And perhaps that is how we best are able to hear the truth—about ourselves, about our world, about God. In Shakespeare's plays it is often the fool, the joker who speaks the truth. How often does God do just that? As Paul says God takes the things that are foolish and transforms it into the very truth of life.

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<sup>4</sup> For instance, listen to Dave Chappelle address the tragedy of George Floyd in his special, 8:46. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3tR6mKcBbT4>. Disclosure—this is Dave Chappelle! It is not Sunday school language!

We need to laugh in order to be like Jesus, to keep Jesus from being an idol, to speak and recognize the truth, but also so we can truly worship. Worship is at its best when we bring all of ourselves. That means all of us! Our praise, our needs, our anger, our love, our joys, our griefs, and yes our laughter! There are times when someone will come out of service and apologize for laughing! Oh please never do that to me! There are lines in a sermon that I write that make me laugh, and when you don't I almost want to back up and say, "Hey, did you catch that? That was funny!"

It is not because I aspire to be a standup comedian (OK I do, but that isn't the purpose of a sermon!) In worship I want us to be totally present to God, to each other. That means bringing all of ourselves, all of our times.

The time we are born and the time we die;

The time we mourn and the time we celebrate;

The time we are silent and the time we speak;

The times we cry and the times we laugh.

Laughter not only brings us joy, I also think it does the same for God.

The other week Alison sent us a Beau video. He was just there, laughing. Just laughing. And the joy it brought to us....

I think that is how God must feel when God hears us laughing. At a great joke, at something that just tickles our funny bone, at nothing at all. I think God just smiles, and laughs along.

May we always be open to laughter.—ours and God. For that may be just one way in which we worship, in which we make God smile.