



“A Time to Laugh”

Texts: Ecclesiastes 3:1-4
and Genesis 18:1-15, 21:1-7

a sermon by Kevin Fleming

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

We are joining with many American churches in resurrecting an old Easter custom begun by the Greeks in the early centuries of Christianity. “Holy Humor Sunday” celebrates Jesus’ resurrection on the Sunday after Easter.

For centuries in Eastern Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant countries, the week following Easter Sunday, including “Bright Sunday” (the Sunday after Easter), was observed by the faithful as “days of joy and laughter” with parties and picnics to celebrate Jesus’ resurrection. Churchgoers and pastors played practical jokes on each other, drenched each other with water, told jokes, sang, and danced. We won’t take it quite that far on this inaugural effort. There’s always next year.

The custom was rooted in the musings of early church theologians (like Augustine, Gregory of Nyssa, and John Chrysostom) that God played a practical joke on the devil by raising Jesus from the dead. “*Risus paschalis* – the Easter laugh,” the early theologians called it. Along the way, things went so far toward celebration and laughter that the pope actually issued instructions to tone it down. This, of course, led to the phrase “party poper.” That’s called a “groaner.”

The idea of a Sunday given to humor seems particularly challenging to Presbyterians. Many of us, who were brought up in the church, were pretty well taught that laughter and humor were not exactly what God wanted from us in worship. Look at our spiritual ancestors. John Calvin is always pictured as being weaned on persimmon juice. John Know always looks like his shoes were two sizes too small. Go into the buildings of long established churches, like ours, and there are usually portraits of former pastors hanging on the wall. Most of them look like they weren’t all that happy to be there in life and they continue to look gloomy in death.

So, we'll admit that we are in somewhat uncharted waters this morning. But, it's still Easter and what sound could be better during the Easter season than the sound of laughter.

There was a Session meeting at a little country church. One of the newer, younger elders made a motion: "I move that we buy a chandelier for the church." This led to an hour-long discussion of the matter, at the end of which an old, revered elder stood. The Session fell silent in anticipation of his words.

"Now, I appreciate the motion that is here before us. I have three concerns. First, ain't none of us got enough education to spell chandelier so's we can order one out of the Sears and Roebucks catalogue. Second, once we get it here, we ain't got anyone knows how to play it. And third, what we really oughtta be talkin' about is getting more light in the church."

When you look in a concordance to see how many times the word "laugh" and "laughter" appears in the Bible it is actually depressing. There aren't that many. We do read about joy, and happiness, and blessings - but there's not too many instances of anyone being gripped with laughter.

Still, the ancient wisdom writer we know only as Koheleth, tells us in the Book of Ecclesiastes,

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven...

a time to weep, and a time to laugh...

Laughter has its place and its time. Laughter is a creation of God. Everything God created is proclaimed "good" and laughter is good.

According to a WebMD article, laughter is good for us.

We change physiologically when we laugh. We stretch muscles throughout our face and body, our pulse and blood pressure go up, and we breathe faster, sending more oxygen to our tissues.

People who believe in the benefits of laughter say it can be like a mild workout - and may offer some of the same advantages as a workout.

"The effects of laughter and exercise are very similar," says Wilson. "Combining laughter and movement, like waving your arms, is a great way to boost your heart rate."

One pioneer in laughter research, William Fry, claimed it took ten minutes on a rowing machine for his heart rate to reach the level it would after just one minute of hearty laughter.

So, this sermon may be better for you than you imagined!

One day Groucho Marx was getting off an elevator and he happened to meet a clergyman. The clergyman 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."

I love the stories from Genesis that we read again this morning. Three mysterious strangers arrive at Abraham's camp. Abraham immediately springs into action, offering the hospitality native to the Middle East. The strangers are served food and enter into conversation with Abraham, during which they disclose that Abraham and Sarah are going to be parents. Now, remember that Abraham is nearly 100 and Sarah is pushing 90, so the story is pretty funny right there.

But when Sarah hears this news, as she is hiding behind the tent flap, she giggles. The Hebrew word for "laughter" or "giggle" is Yitzak, or Isaac, and when the baby is born, that's what they name him. And, in the epilogue to the story, Sarah says: "God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me."

Imagine being so filled with laughter and joy that you simply had to share it with everyone you meet. That's Sarah's story. And the source of her laughter and joy is God.

There were three candidates for the Ministry of the Word and Sacrament who were to appear before the Presbytery's committee to be approved for ordination. One by one, the candidates were called into the meeting room.

The first candidate appeared and was asked, "What is the meaning of Easter?"

The candidate paused, and said, "It was night and the sky was filled with angels singing to some shepherds. A bright star appeared and..."

"Stop right there. Go back to seminary and learn some more."

The second candidate was called into the room and asked the same question, "What is the meaning of Easter?"

The second candidate looked nervous and began, "Well, it is a day of love when we give gifts of flowers and candy to the people we love the most."

"Stop right there. Go back to seminary and learn some more."

The third and final candidate was called into the room and asked the question, "What is the meaning of Easter?"

The candidate looked confident and began, "Well, very early in the morning..." The committee was engaged and growing hopeful. "They go out to the garden..." "Yes, yes, yes," thought the committee, "we've got a live one." "And he stands in the doorway..." The excitement was building and growing palpable. "And if he sees his shadow, there's six more weeks of winter."

If ever there was a reason for laughter, it is surely to be found in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. God completely turning the tables, shouting back to us "life" when we shouted "death," God totally and perfectly having the last word to our rejection of God and God's messenger – and, perhaps most importantly, being assured of our forgiveness by God and our adoption as children of God – what could be more appropriate and honest than laughter?

We talk a lot about grace and well we should. But grace is best celebrated with laughter and joy. In our laughter, we see our arrogance and ignorance – we are laughing at ourselves. And in our laughter, we see the goodness and righteousness of God who loves us in spite of ourselves.

We believe with the Bible that
“there is a time to weep and a time to laugh.”

We believe with Chrysostom that
“laughter has been implanted in our souls.”

We believe with Aquinas that there is a time for
“playful deeds and jokes.”

We believe with Luther that
“You have as much laughter as you have faith.”

We believe with Calvin that
“we are nowhere forbidden to laugh.”

We believe with Wesley that
“A sour religion is the devil’s religion.”

We believe with Kierkegaard that
“Humor is intrinsic to Christianity.”

We believe with Dostoevsky that
“If a person laughs well they are a good person.”

We believe with Chesterton that
“A good joke is the closest thing we have to divine revelation.”

We believe with Flannery O’Conner that
“Christianity is a strangely cheery religion.”

We believe with Elton Trueblood,
“Never trust a theologian without a sense of humor.”

And we believe with Charles Schultz that
“Humor is proof that everything is going to be alright with God nevertheless.”

So, laugh! After all, Jesus said, “The laugh shall be first.” For now and evermore. Amen.



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