

Holy Laughter

There are times in life when you just have to laugh – when you find out your best friend is getting married, when you ace the test, when the Tigers lose another easy baseball game. Sometimes we laugh so we don't cry and sometimes we laugh for the sheer joy of being alive.

Unfortunately, places of worship haven't been seen as the happiest places on earth. Some believe that worship, to be worship, is always solemn, somber and dignified, and that members of the clergy have no sense of humor.

“One day Groucho Marx was getting off the elevator and he happened to meet a member of the clergy. The clergy 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 Sunday is a celebration of laughter, of holy humor. I can just imagine God's glee at the resurrection and the appearances Jesus made to his best friends. This gift of the resurrection reminds us that death does not have the final word in our lives and that we are given a joyful eternity with God.

On the morning of that third day, on Easter morning, the joy of the resurrection slowly dawns on people, first to Mary and then to the other disciples as they realize that the tomb, the grave, cannot hold Jesus within its confines. Resurrection joy is too big for anything to contain it.

Mary was the first witness of the resurrection and she ran from the garden where Jesus appeared to her, and had told the disciples all that had happened, that Jesus was alive!

As night falls on that first day of the week, the disciples were afraid and were gathered behind locked doors for fear of what might happen to them. Suddenly Jesus appeared before them. They rejoiced – some translations say they were exuberant and filled with joy. I can imagine them laughing and slapping each other on the back and shouting Hallelujah or L'Chaim or whatever words they used to whoop it up in those days. Their fear had been forgotten. Christ was alive.

But Thomas saw none of it. It wasn't until a week later that Jesus appeared again and Thomas reacted with wonder and awe.

I think I appreciate this scripture more this year – sheltering in place, trying to process the grief and trauma of the last year. I get the locked doors and the desire to protect myself – even as I miss the physical connection with you all. I've always wanted to shake those disciples who were gathered behind locked doors, but this year...I get it.

I get Thomas' desire to experience the presence of the risen Christ, just as the others had. He, like the others, is trying to get some grip on his own trauma and brokenness and he needs reassurance, he needs proof, he needs the physical sensation of touch. It's hard to be apart. It's hard to understand when you missed the experience. It's hard. That's where we find Jesus appearing, allowing intimacy, inviting closeness and experience.

Joy is best when it is shared, right? The idea of setting aside one Sunday as Holy Humor Sunday (otherwise known as Laughter Sunday, Bright Sunday or Holy Fools Sunday) has its roots deep in Christian tradition. Churches in 15th century Bavaria used to celebrate the Sunday after Easter as Risus Paschalis, translated as 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 death.

The observance of Risus Paschalis was officially outlawed by Pope Clement X in the 17th century. I guess people were having too much fun. In 1988 the Fellowship of Merry Christians began encouraging churches to resurrect some of these Christian traditions – to celebrate the grace and mercy of God through the gift of laughter and joy.

Often the best laughter comes through poking fun at life, through looking at the truths we all experience. Humans are funny creatures and God created us with the ability to laugh at ourselves. I'm going to share a few of those stories and jokes that poke fun at church and at us as Christians. They are told with love and joy. As the saying goes, "He who laughs, lasts."

One of the things we could point to in humor is what used to be called worship wars. Let's face it, there are people who prefer traditional worship with traditional music and there are those who like a more contemporary service with contemporary music.

One joke from several years ago pokes fun at the different kinds of music in both kinds of services. I've heard the joke several times, but to me, it never stops being funny.

"An old farmer went to the city one weekend and attended the big city church. He came home and his wife asked him how it was. "Well," said the farmer, "It was good. They did something different, however. They sang praise choruses instead of hymns."

"Praise choruses?" said his wife. "What are those?"

"Well, it's like this – if I were to say to you, Martha, the cows are in the corn" well, that would be a hymn. If on the other hand, I were to say to you:

Martha, Martha, Martha, oh Martha, Martha, Martha,
the cows, the big cows, the brown cows, the black cows,
the white cows, the black and white cows,
The COWS, the COWS, COWS,
are in the corn, are in the corn, are in the corn, are in the corn,
the CORN, CORN, CORN.

Then if I was to repeat the whole thing two or three times, well, that would be a praise chorus."

The next weekend, his nephew, a young, new Christian from the city came to visit and attended the local church of the small town. He went home and his wife asked him how it was. "Well" said the young man, "It was good. They did something different, however. They sang hymns instead of regular songs."

"Hymns?" asked his wife. "What are those?"

"The young man said, "Well, it's like this – if I were to say to you, Martha, the cows are in the corn – well that would be a regular song. If on the other hand, I were to say to you,:

'Of Martha, dear Martha, hear thou my cry
Inclinest thine ear to the words of my mouth
Turn thou thy whole wondrous ear by and by
To the righteous, inimitable glorious truth.

For the way of the animals who can explain
There is their heads no shadow of sense.
Hearkenest they in God's sun or His rain

Unless from the mild, tempting corn they are fenced.

'Yea, those cows in glad bovine, rebellious delight
Have broke free their shackles, their warm pens eschewed
Then goaded by minions of darkness and night
They all my mild Chilliwack sweet corn have chewed.

So look to the bright shining day by and by
Where all foul corruptions of earth are reborn
Where no vicious animals make my soul cry
And I no longer see those foul cows in the corn.

"Then if I were to do only verses, one, three and four, and do a key change on the last verse, well, that would be a hymn."

I love this joke because it pokes fun at both sides of the conversation about church music and helps those of us who are on one side or the other realize that ultimately, it is the vast richness of a whole variety of music that helps us give voice to our praise and worship of God.

Hymns and praise choruses aren't the only thing about church we can laugh about. We can also find humor in our prayers.

A man was circling the block searching for a parking spot. Finally, after the third time around, he prays, "God, if you help me find a parking spot, I will go to church every Sunday and tithe ten percent of my income." Immediately a spot opens up. The man prays, "Never mind, I found one."

God has to laugh at all the ways we think we are taking care of all our needs when it is really God who is taking care of us. Don't you think that God is full of laughter and joy when looking at some of the things human beings do? How, all too often we are clueless about our faith? How time and time again the disciples got it wrong or didn't understand what Jesus was saying? How even though they had been told about it numerous times, the disciples were taken completely by surprise by Jesus' resurrection?

God has a sense of humor or God wouldn't have made us the way we are. We are beautiful creations of God, but we are also funny.

After creating heaven and earth, God created Adam and Eve. And the first thing God said was "Don't."

"Don't what?" asked Adam.

"Don't eat the forbidden fruit."

"Forbidden fruit! We have forbidden fruit! Hey, Eve, we have forbidden fruit!"

"No way!"

"Yah way!"

"Do not eat the fruit," said God.

"Why not?"

"Because I am your creator and I said so," replied God, wondering why God hadn't stopped creation after making the elephants. A few minutes later, God saw his children taking an apple break.

"Didn't I tell you not to eat the fruit?"

"Uh huh," Adam replied.

"Then why did you?"

"I don't know" said Eve.

"She started it," said Adam.

“Did not”

“Did too!”

“DID NOT!”

Having had it with them, God’s punishment was that they should have children of their own.

There were three candidates for Elders orders who were to appear before the Board of Ordained Ministry 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 was asked the same question. “What is the meaning of Easter?” The 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 at the doorway...” The excitement was building and growing palpable. “And if he sees his shadow, there’s six more weeks of winter.”

You’ve got to laugh. The resurrection from the dead is one great and joyful peal of laughter in the face of all that threatens to bring us down.

In the midst of all the bad news, Christ is at the head of the resurrection parade transforming our tears of sadness into peals of laughter, giving us dancing shoes for the resurrection party. God’s resurrection laugh lasts through all the doubts and challenges and trials that threaten to bring us down. God gave us a gift so great that even we cannot contain our joy.

An inexperienced preacher was to hold a graveside burial service at a pauper’s cemetery for an indigent man with no family or friends. Not knowing where the cemetery was, he made several wrong turns and got lost. When he eventually arrived an hour late, the hearse was nowhere in sight, the backhoe was not to the open hole, and the workmen were sitting under a tree eating lunch.

The diligent young pastor went to the open grave and found the vault lid already in place. Feeling guilty because of his tardiness, he preached an impassioned and lengthy service, sending the deceased to the great beyond in style. As he returned to his car, he overheard one of the workman say to the other, “I’ve been putting in septic tanks for twenty years and I have never seen anything like that.”

Despite Groucho Marx’s opinion, Christians do have a sense of humor and we are laughing all the way from the resurrection.

I close with one more joke. On the final test, a confirmation student was asked to list the Ten Commandments in any order. The student wrote, “3,6,1,8,4,5,9,2,10,7. Amen/