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Easter Sunday

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Easter is Laughter



I was at the doctor's office this past week, having some routine blood work done, when the person sitting a couple of chairs down from me did the most annoying thing. She was on her phone (annoying enough!), and at some point, she just started laughing. It started as a small harmless chuckle, but it slowly started gaining momentum. I think she grew a little self-conscious that others in the waiting area were aware of her, and that only made her laugh more. We are at a doctor's office; people are sick; our world is full of war and rumors of war; our democracy is failing. And you are laughing? I wanted to ask her who granted her this permission?

What I hope to suggest to you this morning is that Easter Sunday offers us permission to laugh.

Laughter is one of the most human things in the world. Have you ever noticed that animals don't laugh? Aristotle called humans the "laughing animal." Laughter opens up a joy that goes beyond words. There's something divine in laughter that humanity is invited to share in. And laughter – joyous, physically consuming, whole-body laughter – is at the heart of God.

When I lived in Pittsburgh, our church took a yearly mission trip down to West Virginia to work with another Episcopal church there to repair trailers and mobile homes. Father Jesse was the priest at this church. And he was a genuinely funny man. He was simple and uncomplicated, and he had the thickest southern accent you've ever heard. You think I have one!? He was someone who was always offering a quip, and before his audience had a chance, he'd start laughing, letting out these deep, rib-splitting bellows. He had all these wise quips about ministry in his tool kit. He loved this one: "You can't try and change people, son. Never forget: You can't teach a pig to sing; it'll frustrate you, and irritate the hell outta the pig."

I wonder whether you've ever been so overcome with laughter that it almost hurt. If you think about the words we use for hilarity, they're very physical, almost uncomfortable

words. We talk about laughing our heads off, splitting our sides, being creased up, doubling over, even dying laughing. There's no doubt laughing is a whole-body experience like almost no other.

But there's more than one kind of laughter. One thing I discovered about myself as a pastor early on was that when I was worried, or sad, or embarrassed – particularly when I was embarrassed – my first resort would often be to try to be funny and make a joke of it. Eventually I realized that if I was going to be much of a priest, it was a habit I needed to let go of. After all, being a priest means giving people the confidence that whether they're discovering despair or joy, the glory of God or the terror of emptiness, they can do it in the presence of someone who won't be out of his or her depth. I realized that sometimes my laughter signaled that I was out of my depth.

This is a kind of defensive laughter. Sometimes the defensive kind of laughter is all too necessary. It's amazing how much laughter you find in places of dire poverty or oppression. In these situations, a sense of humor often means the ability to see irony and incongruity and paradox, and so realize that the world isn't a conspiracy against you. When you look back on the times you've split your sides laughing, I wonder how many of those occasions were in fact during difficult times in your life, when somehow the explosion of laughter was a release of pent-up frustration or disappointment or hurt.

Of course, there's another kind of laughter. This second kind of laughter isn't about defense. It's about attack. There's lots of this kind of laughter in the account of Jesus' crucifixion. The soldiers mock Jesus by putting a crown of thorns on his head. The chief priests mock Jesus by saying "He saved others; he cannot save himself." The passers-by mock Jesus by saying "You talked about destroying the Temple but you can't even get yourself down from the cross." Even the bandits crucified next to Jesus mock and taunt him. It's all a big laugh.

Probably most humor is of this kind – laughing at other people. Whether it's the most basic slapstick humor or more sophisticated satirical cartoons, the purpose is the same. We feel just that little bit better about ourselves and the world when we see the other guy is really pretty foolish, and the release of tension and sense of reversal makes us laugh. When the other guy is famous, powerful or oppressive, humor is often the best, the most dynamic and the most successful way of getting one up or one back.

Think about these two kinds of laughter for a moment. One is the laughter of defense, of denial, of distraction, of wishing reality were not so demanding and dangerous. The other is the laughter of attack, of the determination to have the last word, make the other guy look small, win the verbal war, cut the world down to less than your size. A laughter that is about fight, and flight.

This is the world that Jesus came into. And what Jesus brought was a different kind of laughter altogether. Now, I know there is no place in the New Testament texts that mention laughter, but can't you still hear it? It's an infectious, irresistible laughter. The laughter of a newborn Jesus who has just let out a gurgly gic sound, only to laugh. A laughter of a blind man who just received his sight and is caught up in the hilarious game of figuring out the difference between people and trees. The laughter of Lazarus who's kicking off his graveclothes like they are a bad habit. The laughter of a woman who searched high and low and finally found a lost coin; or how about that surge of uncontrollable, uncontainable joy that welled up in the heart of the prodigal father whose son just come stumbling into view. A playful laughter that doesn't humiliate or dominate, a laughter that doesn't deflect or deny. It's a laughter more contagious than a virus, more irrepressible than a sunrise, and stronger and surer of itself than a thousand armies.

The Easter mystery contains some of the most baffling words in the whole of Christian tradition. The ancient Exultet Br. Jim sang for us last evening at the Vigil service includes the words, "Oh, happy fault! Oh, necessary sin of Adam!

That won for us so great a salvation!” “Oh, happy fault!” It seems an insult to laugh in the face of the world’s history of sin and suffering. It seems inappropriate in some ways to celebrate Jesus’ resurrection today when so much of God’s world lies on the cross or in the tomb. But see how gripped we are by those two rival versions of laughter, laughter on the one hand as denial of reality and laughter on the other hand as mockery and revenge.

Imagine a very different kind of laughter. Imagine a laughter that can’t be contained, that’s so infectious and so irresistible it bursts out of the tomb and floods the whole world. It’s a laughter that shakes your whole body, that splits your aching sides, that takes the head off your grief, that makes you rock deep down inside. And it’s not just you it’s everybody, it’s everything; the whole earth is overcome by joy, rocking and convulsing and aching with joy. The worst that humanity can do in denial and destruction has been met with irresistible laughter, not mocking, not deflecting, but laughter that creates a bigger community, tells a greater story, imagines a bigger world, laughs in tune with the laughter of God.

The rock star Mick Jagger and the jazz singer George Melly were reportedly once chatting at a party when Jagger noticed that Melly was staring curiously at his face. “I know what you’re thinking George,” said Jagger, “but these aren’t wrinkles. They’re laughter lines.” Melly put down his drink. “Mick,” he said, “nothing’s that funny.” I often wonder: when people look at the wider church do they see more wrinkles or laughter lines? Today, I suspect, laughing feels rather like the laughter in a doctor’s office. Maybe a tad out of place. But again, I’m not talking about a laughter that denies suffering; I’m talking about a laughter that knows that death isn’t the end of the story. Those most God intoxicated people – those we call saints – are the ones who are able to draw near to suffering, share the cries of pain, with those who are weeping; who take the world’s suffering seriously, but who’ve learned by grace not to take themselves so seriously. I’m thinking of Desmond Tutu – someone who fought racism,

LGBTQ exclusion, the insanity of our behavior towards the planet – who did it all and still never forgot how to laugh. He took the world, but not himself seriously. He died this past year, face full of laughter lines.

The Persian poet and Sufi Master Hafiz knew this laughter as well as anyone. Born around the same time as Geoffrey Chaucer, writing in the 13th century, Hafiz is remembered as one of the great God lovers of the Middle Ages. Love, for him, was the ultimate intoxicant, the only law for the authentic soul. In one poem he wrote:

What is the difference
Between your experience of Existence
And that of a saint?
The saint knows
That the spiritual path
Is a sublime chess game with God
And that the Beloved
Has just made such a Fantastic Move
That the saint is now continually
Tripping over Joy
And bursting out in Laughter
And saying, "I Surrender!"
Whereas, my dear,
I am afraid you still think
You have a thousand serious moves.

Addie is now 3.5 months old, and honestly, it's been one of the most joyful few weeks of my life, watching her learn to laugh. She's smiled since she was just a few weeks old. But laughter is something she's eased into. And I tell you, I'll do anything to make my daughter laugh. I'll dance around the room, I'll talk in a high-pitched voice, I'll stick my tongue out, or play peek a boo all evening. You remember doing things like this don't you? You'd travel around the world, go

to such ridiculous lengths to your your child laugh. Writing this sermon, I began to wonder if this is an analogy for the way God relates to us. God loves us so much and is showing up in our lives in countless places, in countless ways – dancing before us in sunrise and sunset, wooing our hearts through good conversation and joy-filled company, calling out to us in the resurrected colors of spring, whispering our names through the voices of our children, and through daily forgiveness helping us to wear our lives a little more lightly. I think the Holy Spirit conspires to move us into laughter.

Friends, we as a church are here to remind the world that suffering and death have been and will be swallowed up in the fuller joy of God. That the laughter of mockery, aggression, denial of reality, these are buried in the tomb. And bursting forth from the grave is the victorious energy of God’s life and light; a resurrection that gives us permission for joyous laughter even this day. And so, here in the presence of the love that created you; that defeated death for you; here in the company of friends, in the singing of music, in the glorious intonations of the trumpet; here at the Resurrection Supper of Holy Eucharist, if, despite everything, you find a sense of gladness bubbling up within, a certain delight in life, an intuition that death’s awful seriousness isn’t the last word, go ahead – worship God in your singing and your praying, in your loving and your breathing, and don’t forget to laugh.

