

Signs of New Life: First in Series

“Setting Aside Our Fear”

Sunday, April 16, 2023

The Sunday after Easter

Rev. Dr. Chris Keating

For some reason, Presbyterians are not often known as people of joy. We tend to be categorized the same way John Steinbeck described one of his characters in the novel *East of Eden*: “she had a dour Presbyterian mind, and a code of morals that pinned down and beat the brains out of nearly everything that was pleasant to do.” I’m not sure where Steinbeck derived that notion, but it might have something to do with John Calvin himself. Here, for example, is a picture of John Calvin. And here is a picture of John Calvin laughing.

As one denominational leader said a few years ago, the tag line for Presbyterians could be “Presbyterians: the people who brought you presbyteries.”

But Presbyterians are hardly unique. There’s a certain “tamping down” of humor among Christians, writes the Jesuit priest James Martin. While there is certainly irony, paradox and outright comedy in scripture, Father Martin notes that many of us overlook the gifts of laughter, humor, and joy. He tells the story of a group of Christians – Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians -- who were on an ecumenical tour of Europe. Sadly, their bus crashed and everyone perished. When the Baptists got to heaven, St. Peter greeted them and said, “Welcome! We are glad you are here, and have set aside a special room for you. Please proceed to Room #5, but do not look in Room #1. He gave similar greetings to the Methodists: please go to room #4, but please do not look at room one. The same for Presbyterians and the Episcopalians: Presbyterians to room three, and Episcopalians to room 2. Having listened to all of this, the Episcopalian bishop and Presbytery executive went up to St. Peter and asked what the big deal about room number one was. “Oh,” said St. Peter. “That’s where the Catholics are. They think they’re the only ones here.”

Father James Martin has said, “if you’re Catholic you may know priest who make you wonder how they can “celebrate” Mass when they never crack a smile.

If you're a member of another Christian denomination, you may know pastors, ministers, or elders who exemplify the "frozen chosen."

Humor allows us to take ourselves a bit less seriously, and offers us the chance to breathe. "Humor," wrote Reinhold Niebuhr "is a prelude to faith, and laughter the beginning of prayer." That is the idea behind "Holy Humor" Sunday, the Sunday following Easter. Some years ago, we started observing that ancient tradition, which was once called "Bright Sunday." It was a day when Christians practiced the "*risus paschalis*," or "Easter laugh," by laughing at God's outwitting of Satan. The resurrection was a source of joy, and Christians celebrated that through acts of laughter, sanctified silliness, holy mischief. After all, it was argued, God pulled one over on the devil by raising Jesus from the dead – why should we not celebrate and laugh?

It's not bad advice, and it seems to me that if our witness as Christians is going to make a difference in this world, then we ought to be known as people of joy. Resurrection plants seeds of new life, and what grows is pure joy. Our songs in Christ are not only "They'll know we are Christians by our love," but also, "They'll know we are Christians by our laughter."

Yet so often that is not the case – nor was it on that first Easter evening. When last we saw them, the disciples were running back from the empty tomb, breathless and confused. As the hours pass and daylight begins to fade, we find them hunkered down. John, ever mindful of the powerful metaphor of night and day, pencils in the details. Inside that room, the shades are drawn, and the doors are bolted. The disciples are quivering more than Scooby-Doo in the face of danger. They're afraid and scared—and not because someone failed to put away the deviled eggs after Easter brunch.

It's still Easter, but joy is nowhere to be found.

The disciples cower in fear, triggered not only by Jesus' crucifixion, but also by the sudden disappearance of his body. If the dead do not stay put, then what else can happen? They seem to have either ignored or not paid attention to Mary's eyewitness account of meeting the risen Christ. Her encounter with Jesus has released her from the bondage of suffering and hopelessness. Filled with joy, she has run back to the disciples, shouting, "I have seen the Lord."

But they dismissed her testimony. Whether they are shocked by what she has told them or simply too pained to accept it, we do not know. By evening, no one is laughing. They've pulled down the shades and locked the doors. The light of resurrection has not yet dawned on them.

It's not hard imagining their struggle to believe. They have allowed fears to displace their faith. They have settled for anxiety instead of trusting what eyes cannot see. They have accepted half truths and conspiracy theories and ignored the promise Jesus offered just a bit earlier in John 15. "I have said these things to you so that my joy will be in you and your joy will be complete." We have become a people of sorrows, well acquainted with grief and pain—and have settled for living in fear and not faith.

That sort of perspective leeches out of the church walls and into the world. Our Christian sense of humor – our deep understanding of joy – can attract others, especially those who have found that pains of the world are deep and lasting. Our joy does not malign others or exclude, but as theologian Don Saliers has said, reflects a fundamental disposition toward God.

Jesus brings joy when he breaks into that room. He offers God's greatest punchline: "Peace be with you." His presence conveys the breath of God's Easter laugh. It is the breath of the Spirit, the Spirit which forgives and restores. It was the Spirit that God breathed into creation in Genesis. And now it is the deep Spirit of resurrection joy that expands within our lungs.

And so, we laugh.

We laugh as we tell stories like the one about the priest, the rabbit and the monk who walked into the bar. The rabbit turned around and said, "Oops! I think I'm a typo!"

Or the one about the two bees that ran into each other. One asked the other how things were going. The second bee said, "Horrible! Too much rain, not enough sun. No flowers or pollen. I'm falling behind on my production quotas. The first bee said, "Well, lucky for you I've been certified as a life coach. Here's what you do. Just fly down five blocks and then turn left and keep going until you see all the cars. There will be a big synagogue. As it happens, there's a bar mitzah going on, and there are all kinds of fresh flowers and fresh fruit. You'll get all the pollen you

carry.” The second bee nodded with excitement and began to take off. But the first bee stopped him and said, “Wait just a second, buddy. Be sure to wear a yarmulke so that they don’t think you’re a WASP.”

We laugh when we recall that Easter is the source of our deepest joy. Friends in Christ, look around you. See the joy and new life that is already springing forth.

Let us become fools for Christ – not by putting on ridiculous wigs and oversized shoes. We are not going to all cram inside Harry’s Kia as a way of evangelizing the world. But I do believe that the time has come for Jesus’ disciples to regain our sense of humor, our capacity to discover joy, our ability to laugh, to know as Jurgen Moltmann once said, “behind the cross of Christ the sun of resurrection arises.”

We laugh because the resurrection grounds our lives with the assurance of God’s undefeatable presence and lasting home. We laugh because, as Jurgen Moltmann has said, the resurrection of Christ is not just a human event but a cosmic event. “Easter rejoice embraces the whole groaning creation,” Moltmann wrote. Christ’s joy has become ours, just as he promised.

Go ahead, giggle and laugh, smile and rejoice: Jesus’ resurrection is the greatest punchline ever told. Amen.