

John 20:1-18

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So, she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, ‘They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.’ Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went towards the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping?’ She said to them, ‘They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.’ When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?’ Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, ‘Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Mary!’ She turned and said to him in Hebrew, ‘*Rabbouni!*’ (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, ‘Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.”’ Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, ‘I have seen the Lord’; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written,
‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.’

Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.

Back when I was learning foreign languages in school, one of my professors told us that we would know we had made it, that we really understood what we were reading in a foreign language, when we laughed at the jokes. He assigned the class long passages to translate that included lots of incidental humor. Sometimes I got the jokes while I was translating my lines for the evening. Sometimes I had an “aha moment” when I saw him smile in class. Other times the joke had to be explained to me, which, as Mark Twain said, is like dissecting a frog: when you’re done, everyone is kind of disgusted, and the frog is dead.

The Bible is full of jokes, but, all too often, we are way too stodgy, way too committed to taking this religion stuff seriously, to get them. In Matthew 22, when Jesus is confronted with a question about taxes and tithes, his response – “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”—is a joke. This does not mean Jesus is not serious. A joke does not have to be either silly or false. In fact, the best jokes are neither.

I’m wary of proving Twain right, but let me say that jokes have a structure to them, usually a premise, shared assumptions about how the world works, and a conclusion that is held in tension. A good joke depends on our ability to see the difference between the world as it *is* and as it *could be*. A good joke in the moral sense, then, depends on our ability to see the difference between what *is* and what *should be*. A good joke can light up the dark between the two, can help us see one from the other. Not everything that is funny is a joke, and not every funny joke is a good joke, but a good joke helps us see the distance between who we are and who we should be. If you understand their purpose, then, jokes can be noble, and laughs can be as honorable as tears.¹

¹ My thanks to Miles Townes, whose February 21 article in *The Christian Century* was invaluable to me in preparing this sermon. The last sentence is paraphrased from Kurt Vonnegut’s address “Palm Sunday,” which is cited below.

Jesus saw more clearly than anyone on Earth the difference between what *is* and what *should be*. He saw the gap between Heaven and Earth better than any of us. What else could he do, but laugh?

When you look at what Jesus says and does in that context, some things make more sense. His response to the mob who wanted to stone the adulterous woman in John 8, for example. “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” And then he pretends to be surprised when not one of her self-appointed executioners harms a hair on her head. That’s funny!

At roughly the same time that King Herod arrives in Jerusalem in his chariot with a military parade showing his might, Jesus rides into town on a donkey, with his followers walking along on foot. And his is the parade that is remembered, two thousand years later. That is a joke about the difference in how Jesus and Herod see power.

At a dinner in Bethany, the day before Palm Sunday, Jesus knows that one of his closest friends is going to betray him for money. He knows that he is going to be arrested, tried in a mockery of justice, and crucified. His life on Earth is almost done, but life has to go on for now. There is a crowd outside, but they mostly don’t want to see Jesus. They want to see Lazarus, whom Jesus had raised from the dead.² Lazarus is sitting there at the table with Jesus, and he is

² John 12:9

not necessarily grateful for the novelty of the whole dying-and-being-brought-back-from-the-dead experience.³

Lazarus' sister Mary breaks a jar of ointment and anoints his feet. I imagine that Jesus closes his eyes for an instant. In that terrible moment, that had to have felt awfully good. And then that hypocrite Judas starts objecting! ““Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?” He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.”⁴

Jesus says something that Christians have misinterpreted and used as an excuse ever since. Jesus says “You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.” Or, in more conversational English, “Judas, don't worry about it. There will still be plenty of poor people left long after I'm gone.” The implication being that Judas would have more opportunities to steal at a later date.

Kurt Vonnegut, a noted authority on dark humor, calls this “a divine black joke...It says everything about hypocrisy and nothing about the poor. It is a Christian joke, which allows Jesus to remain civil to Judas, but to chide him about his hypocrisy all the same.”⁵

So, when Mary sees the empty tomb and assumes that Jesus' body has been stolen, there is a gap between what is and what could be. Mary confuses the two. Despite everything that Jesus has told his followers, the idea that he would be resurrected apparently does not occur to

³ We do not know how Lazarus felt about being allowed to die and be resurrected for the glory of God: The Bible never says.

⁴ John 12:5-6.

⁵ Kurt Vonnegut, *Palm Sunday: An Autobiographical Collage*, “Palm Sunday,” Dial Press Trade paperback ed. New York: Dial, 2011.

her. She goes and finds Peter and another disciple, probably John. They look at the linen wrappings and come to the same conclusion.

The men leave, but Mary stands there, fully in the moment.

Tears running down her face, she looks into the tomb again. I don't know what she expects to see, but it's not what she sees. She sees the angels, who ask her why she's crying. She tells them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." She turns around, and there's Jesus standing there.

If this were a television series with a laugh track, it would be hitting high decibels at that moment. And, then, to make it funnier, she does not recognize Jesus. She thinks he's the gardener or the caretaker. She asks him if he has moved Jesus' body, which, of course, he has. Just not in the way she is thinking of.

Before we start thinking that this is some kind of a cruel joke at Mary's expense, let's consider how often we don't recognize Jesus. Jesus told us that, the way we treat the least of human beings, the least important, the least significant, the least worthy of respect, that is the way we are treating Jesus.⁶ I figure that means that each of us does not recognize Jesus, all the time. The joke is at Mary's expense, but it's also at ours.

It's not a stretch to say that the Resurrection was a joke, and a good one. How could Jesus have more effectively mocked the powers of the world that killed him than to rise from the dead? They did the worst thing to him that they could think of: killing him in a protracted, terrible, horrific way, and he came back. If he were a modern movie hero, he'd say, "Is that all you've

⁶ Matthew 25:31-46.

got?” By being raised from the dead, he brought light into the darkness between the world as it is and the world as it should be.

We post-resurrection Christians are Easter people. We live in that gap between the world as it is, and as it should be. We not only acknowledge that gap, we are called to work toward shrinking it.

We are called to act in this world, to make life in this world less “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”⁷ We are called to love our neighbors and to love our enemies, which is convenient, considering how often they are the same people.⁸

We are called to build community. We are called to be known in this world not for what we’re against, but for what we’re for. We are for abundant life for all human beings, because there is no us and them, there is only us. And we are all God’s children.

We are called to live our lives as if money and power were merely tools to get things done and our enemies were really our brothers and sisters. We are called to live our lives as if ultimate power belongs to a God who loves us far more than any of us is even capable of deserving, and who loves *THOSE* people that much, too.

We’re called to live our lives fearlessly, as if all the things out there to be scared of, even death, do not get the last word. As if the worst thing is never the last thing. As if in baptism we joined Christ in his death, and, after we die, we will join him in glorious resurrection.

Because these things are True.

⁷ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (1651), describing the state of human life with no government and no organization.

⁸ G. K. Chesterton.

This following Jesus stuff sounds daunting.

And it is.

But, on this Easter April Fool's Day Sunday, I ask you, what's the worst thing the world can do to you?

Kill you?

AMEN.