

“Just Kidding!”
John 20:19-31

Pastor Liz Miller
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I know this will disappoint some people and be a relief to others, but I'm not going to tell many jokes in my sermon today. If you couldn't tell from the knock-knock jokes, I'm really terrible at coming up with jokes and I'm even worse at telling them. I always forget the punchline or mess up the details needed to make a joke funny.

A few years ago I took improv comedy classes at Second City in Chicago, the theatre that has launched the careers of dozens of comedians and actors. I didn't go there to become a professional actor or a standup comedian, but to learn the skills of improvisation that might come in handy for ministry, like thinking on my feet, saying yes to new ideas, and collaborating with other people. On the first day of class, I was incredibly nervous about my inability to tell a good joke. I thought I would be the laughing-stock of my class for all the wrong reasons.

I was relieved when right away our teacher told us the worst thing we could do was try to be funny. He said that when we do something on stage for the sake of trying to make someone laugh, we will almost always fail. When you try to be funny you often just come across as trying too hard. Most people in the class looked crestfallen when he told them not to be funny, but I was so relieved! The pressure was off and I could just be myself, funny or not funny, jokes or no jokes.

Our teacher went on to explain that true humor comes from natural reactions to regular situations with an unexpected twist or surprise. And that does not come from focusing on setting up a planned punchline. It comes from trusting your instincts and allowing yourself to say or do the first thing that comes to mind – if you overthink it or plan it out, it sounds forced and does

not create the surprise that results in a hearty laugh. Comedy is created when you stretch the rules of how you are supposed to respond to something that is presented – by amplifying it, twisting it, or turning it on its head – but the harder you focus on the goal of eliciting a laugh, the harder it is to do.

I've since learned (as all you academics who have your own niche interests will surely not be surprised by) there are researchers whose entire academic careers are to study what makes something funny. Peter McGraw and Joel Warner are two such researchers who wrote a book called *The Humor Code* that explains why some things make us laugh, and why other things fall flat. McGraw and Warner discovered things that truly make us laugh have a precarious balance of breaking the rules or unsettling us and allowing us to feel comfortable or safe enough to respond to it. If something breaks the rules too far, it's offensive and not funny. If it is too safe, it's benign and still not funny.

They use tickling as an example. Tickling someone breaks the rules of normal personal space boundaries, and being tickled is only funny when you feel safe enough for those boundaries to be crossed. They say, “You can't tickle yourself because it isn't a violation. Nor will you laugh if a creepy stranger tries to tickle you, since nothing about that is benign.”

You see this unfold when babies laugh. What's the number one way to make a baby laugh? Play peek-a-boo. When you hide your face with your hands and then uncover it, they are SHOCKED that your face is still there! They laugh both because they feel safe and secure and because their baby brains can't fathom how you reappeared after disappearing. When it comes to things that make us laugh as adults, our brains function in the same way they did as a baby – the best laughter comes when we feel equally surprised and safe.

When you think of things that are both surprising and comforting, a celebration of humor becomes perfect for the Easter season. I can't think of anything more simultaneously surprising or more comforting than the resurrection of Christ! When you look at it from the perspective and experience of the disciples, Christ's resurrection is surprising because even back then it was a pretty strong rule that once you are dead, you don't get to come back in any way or form.

But despite it being a total surprise to have Jesus stand among them again, it would have also been comforting. Their leader, their friend, their messiah, returned to be with them. The disciples' last memories of Jesus were no longer the vision of a violent death on the cross, but instead they heard Jesus say, "Peace be with you," and they received instructions to go out and serve. Seeing Jesus would have been a surprise, even a shock, but also a great relief. The world would have felt safer when he appeared to them. The Gospel says they were filled with joy when they saw the Lord – it's easy to believe some of that joy manifested as sacred laughter.

I know in our congregation there is a wide spectrum of beliefs about the Easter story – whether it is important that it actually happened on one end of the spectrum or whether it is a metaphor for hope in the face of injustice on the other end of the spectrum. In fact, there is probably a good joke to be made about how if there are 10 Edgewoodians in a room together, you'll get 13 professed beliefs about Christ's resurrection and one person who would prefer to change the subject all together. Regardless of where you fall on the spectrum, there is much to resonate with in this Easter story of unexpected joy, this Holy Humor day where we celebrate the intersection of sacred surprises and holy comfort.

This day is for you if you have ever been in a relationship and had a fight. Not a little fight, but a drawn out, painful, shake you to the core, kind of fight. One where things are said that you can never take back; one where you wonder if you will ever be okay again. One where time

passes, wounds are mended, and at the moment you realize that your relationship will be okay after all, you let out a laugh of relief. Your laughter represents the surprise that things did not actually fall apart, and the safety you feel in the sustaining strength of that relationship in the face of hard moments.

This day is for you if you have ever sat in a doctor's office awaiting test results that you are sure will be the worst news you have ever heard. Results that will have implications on your work, your family, and your future. Results that you do not feel brave enough to hear, but you sit there anyway, both wishing the clock would move slower to delay the inevitable and would speed up to get it over with. When you finally talk to the doctor, you are so surprised it is not the news you feared, it is not cancer after all. You are so surprised that laughter escapes you – filling the office with your hope for health despite all your fears. You know that not everyone receives this good news, and you know that your health is not guaranteed forever, but your laughter is an expression of your gratitude and a release of the fear as it disappears into the atmosphere for now.

This day is for anyone whose soul has been split apart at the death of their beloved. Who wept and raged and felt emptiness too deep and too wide for words. It is for you who returned to your bed that first night after death, a bed suddenly too big for one person, a bed that you are convinced you will never be able to fall asleep in again because the all-consuming grief demands you stay awake. When you arrive at morning the next day, you laugh at the sight of the sunrise, because although the grief is not any less raw, you understand that you are still alive, and that despite the pain and the loss, you will keep living. There is bitterness in your laughter that morning, but there is also acknowledgement that life continues after death, and that the sun will keep rising for us no matter what.

Laughter comes when we share puns and tell knock-knock jokes and act silly, but it also resonates with something much deeper inside of us. It is a sign of relief. It is a symbol of hope. When we laugh, it is a sign that something has been broken open – an expectation, a feeling, a story. It is a sign that we are open and we are at peace. It is a sign that we are overflowing with joy. Holy humor is a response to the surprise and relief of resurrection – an embodied response to God's eternal love and hope in the face of death and pain. My hope for us all is that on this Holy Humor Sunday we will remember two things – LOL and LAL. The first thing we should remember is to LOL – laugh out loud. My second hope is that I hope we will remember the LAL – the Lord allows laughter! (I told you I was bad at telling jokes.)