

## **Holy Humor and Hope**

Genesis 18:10-14 (The Message)

Matthew 28: 5-8 (NRSV)

April 19, 2020 Holy Humor Sunday

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### *Genesis 18:10-14 (The Message)*

*One of the visitors said to Abraham, "I'm coming back about this time next year. When I arrive, your wife Sarah will have a son." Sarah was listening at the tent opening, just behind the man. Abraham and Sarah were old by this time, very old. Sarah was far past the age for having babies.*

*Sarah laughed within herself, "An old woman like me? Get pregnant? With this old man of a husband?"*

*God said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh saying, 'Me? Have a baby? An old woman like me?' Is anything too hard for God?"*

### *Matthew 28: 5-8*

*The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, "He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him." This is my message for you." So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples.*

There is an ancient tradition that the Sunday after Easter is called Bright Sunday or Holy Humor Sunday. Churches in 15th century Bavaria used to celebrate the Sunday after Easter as *Risus Paschalis* '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. This occasion is rooted in the belief that God played a joke on the devil and on death when God raised Jesus from the dead. (1)

Here we are. The First Sunday after Easter. Here we are – 30+ days into the SF Bay Area Covid 19 pandemic shelter at home mandate. Could you use some joy? Some laughter? Some good news in the midst of so much fear and uncertainty and loss? I think many of us needed a break from cycle of updates and data and projections for opening up our communities and economy.

One of the most striking aspects of the description of the resurrection is the women's reaction. After hearing that Jesus has been raised and the tomb was empty, the women ran back in fear and joy. Fear and joy. What an interesting paradox. Fear – maybe they were confused about what had happened. Fear in terms of awe. And Joy – a deep seated joy that

comes from relationships and moments that offer beauty and love and hope. Joy is deeper than happiness. "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope" (Romans 15:13). True joy can be known in the heartfelt gratitude of God's love, mercy and grace! Joy - 210 times in the Bible.

Jesus' birth and life and ministry were defined by joy. In Luke's gospel we read that Mary who is pregnant with Jesus goes to see her cousin Elizabeth who is pregnant with John the Baptist. When they meet, Elizabeth says to Mary, "For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy." (Luke 1:44) John responds with joy to Jesus. The angel told the shepherds about Jesus' birth, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people."

*Chara* is the Greek word – "joy because of grace" God's grace.

The women felt that joy standing at the empty tomb. Full of joy and awe, they ran to tell the good news. They must have wondered about the mystery of Jesus being raised.

A pastor was speaking to a group of second-graders about the resurrection of Jesus when one student asked, "What did Jesus say right after He came out of the grave?"

The pastor explained that the Gospels do not tell us what He said.

The hand of one little girl shot up. "I know what He said: He said, 'Tah-dah!'"

I like it! Maybe part of faith is responding with joy and believing and discerning even when we cannot see. The women experienced something powerful – an empty tomb. They believed. They were called to share this good news. Joy.

Believing and seeing are ongoing themes in the season of Easter. There is the story of Thomas who will not believe that Jesus has been raised unless he sees and touches him for himself.

A friend of mine who is a pastor had a little boy about 3 years old. It was time for Easter brunch after worship. She said, "John, it is time to wash your hands." He responded, "Why? Why do I always have to wash my hands?" Mom said, "I think you know. You need to get rid of all the germs." John replied, "Jesus and germs! Jesus and germs! People keep talking about both them, but I can't see either one of them!"

Holy Humor coming from preacher's kids is good!

One of my favorite preachers is Rev. Susan Sparks. She serves as pastor of Madison Ave. Baptist Church in NYC. She is a person of great joy and humor. She has had quite a journey. She was a trial attorney. And then she became a stand up comedian. And then she went to seminary and became a Baptist preacher. Wow! She offers some wonderful stories and

images about how laughter, joy, grace and good news of the resurrection are woven together as we journey through life. Here is one of her Easter stories.

*Easter reminds me of resurrection. Which reminds me of death. Which reminds me of my grandmother's biscuits.*

*Ganny, as we called her, lived in a tiny little town in South Carolina. When we'd visit, the aroma of good things cooking would float through her screen porch and greet us — things like creamed corn, collard greens, and, hopefully, cornbread. I say hopefully, because the one thing Ganny could not cook was biscuits. Lord, have mercy.*

*She was not a big believer in things like baking powder. On those ominous days when she would decide to bake biscuits, she would open the door of her wood stove and pull out what looked like a tray of toasty hot shot-puts. My uncle used to joke that if you dropped those biscuits on the floor, they would wake the dead. Thus, their nickname: resurrection biscuits.*

*As Easter rolls around each year, I think about Ganny and those sad little resurrection biscuits. Scary as they were, they can offer us an important Easter message: Like biscuits without baking powder, life without resurrection can be heavy and flat. (2)*

We tend to think of the Easter message as one for the end of life, but I think we need the Easter message right now. We need that good news to face this pandemic.

Resurrection is more than a one time event on Easter morning. It is a journey, a way of living. To know that there is death that leads to life is a profound truth of Easter. To be fully alive each day and knowing we are called to let go is a lifelong lesson. In light of all that is happening in the coronavirus pandemic, there is need for certain structures and injustices to die so new life-giving structures and justice and practices can flourish.

It's easy to celebrate resurrection on a glorious Easter Sunday, but what about the next day. Like biscuits made without baking powder, we need life's missing ingredients back.

Deep down, the human spirit yearns for joy and lightness. It yearns to soar. And the key to this joy is already in our midst.

Sarah laughed when the promise of a child seemed impossible. Laughing at starting a new chapter at her age. Laughing at this news that was a dream she had given up on. Sometimes joy and laughter come when we catch a glimpse of a new way of living and being open to the Spirit. That is one of the ingredients.

Just as Mary recognized the risen Christ when he spoke her name in the garden, so, too, we have that spark of hope in our hearts just waiting to be claimed.

For everyone out there who feels that their dreams have been destroyed, their hopes dashed, their spirits crushed, here is the good news of Easter morning: The risen Christ can take our flat, heavy hearts and raise them to new heights. Christ can raise them so that our spirits are not stuck on the ground, dictated by human pain or disappointment. Christ can raise them so that our spirits are not mired in a tomb.

Easter brings each of us a second chance. As the pandemic slows down and we can be out again, we will not go back to normal. Normal never was. Our pre-corona virus existence was not normal when we normalized greed, disconnection, inequity, excess, frantic schedules. We are being given the opportunity for a different kind of life and world, a kind of resurrection. An opportunity to begin again.

May God help us embrace the missing ingredients of hope and compassion, Moments of joy and laughter, our imagination and action.

May we be open to the Spirit so that like hot fluffy biscuits, our hearts can rise up and live. Amen.

1) Re-Worship, "Holy Humor Sunday," re-worship.blogspot.com  
<https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2011/03/laughter-sunday.html>

2) Rev. Susan Sparks, "Resurrection Bisquits," 4/4/2010, Day1.org  
[https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2002995/resurrection\\_biscuits](https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2002995/resurrection_biscuits)