

# Sermons at First Church

**A Ministry of the Word**

**April 11, 2021**

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**First Presbyterian Church**

**Clarksburg, WV**

**John 20:19-23**

*Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you."*

(Mark 11:7 N.R.S.V.)

## A Time to Laugh

*An Irishman walks into a bar in Dublin, orders three pints of Guinness and sits in the back of the room, drinking a sip out of each one in turn. When he finishes them, he comes back to the bar and orders three more. The bartender approaches and tells him, "You know, a pint goes flat after I draw it, and it would taste better if you bought one at a time."*

*The Irishman replies, Well, you see, I have two brothers. One is in America, the other is in Australia, and I'm in Dublin. When we all left home, we promised that we'd drink this way to remember the days we drank together. So I drink one for each o'me brothers and one for me self."*

*The bartender admits that this is a nice custom, and leaves it there. The Irishman becomes a regular in the bar, and always drinks the same way: He orders three pints and drinks them in turn.*

*One day, he comes in and orders two pints. All the other regulars take notice and fall silent. When he comes back to the bar for the second round, the bartender says, "I don't want to intrude on your grief, but I wanted to offer my condolences on your loss."*

*The Irishman looks quite puzzled for a moment, then a light dawns and he laughs. "Oh, no, everybody's just fine," he explains, "It's just that me wife had us join that Baptist Church and I had to quit drinking. But it hasn't affected me brothers though."*

It feels good to laugh, doesn't it? Laughter is so good for us. It is a special gift that God gives to us. Laughter lifts our spirits. I am convinced that angels can fly because they are light with laughter.

Our text from Ecclesiastes reminds us that there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven: A time to be born and a time to die; a time to morn and a time to dance; a time to weep and a time to laugh.

There is an ancient tradition that the first Sunday after Easter is Holy Humor Sunday. The season of Lent and Holy week before Easter are times to mourn our sinfulness and to weep for the pain that we have caused our Lord. But with the coming of Easter, the time for mourning and tears is past. Now we enter the time for celebration and laughter. It is a time to laugh at the Devil. With the crucifixion, he thought that he had won. But Jesus had the last laugh when God raised him from the dead. So we join with Jesus in his laughter.

The Devil thrives on suffering, fear, and anger - but the one thing he can't stand is laughter. Laughter shatters the illusion of his greatness. The laughter of Christians breaks his spirit.

So the ancient tradition is that on the Sunday after Easter, Christians tell jokes to each other. They relax and celebrate and laugh, because Jesus is alive!

Laughter also helps us to sit a little lighter on ourselves. It is a reminder not to take ourselves too seriously. The world will not be saved by us. That is God's job.

*There is a story about a guest preacher who stayed at a church member's home on Saturday night so that he could be at the church to preach on Sunday morning. The church member did her best to make the preacher feel comfortable. On Sunday morning she cooked a big breakfast for the preacher. But when he came downstairs, he explained that he never ate breakfast on Sunday morning. It adversely affected his preaching. The member said that she understood.*

*After the service, this member was in line to greet the preacher. When she came up to him, she said, "You should have eaten."*

I guess she thought the sermon couldn't have been any worse.

Laughter is a wonderful gift. It releases tension and helps us regain proper perspective. I remember starting seminary and feeling the tension and the huge responsibility of my calling. Who did I think I was that I wanted to be the spiritual leader of a congregation? What if I led people astray? What if I endanger their souls? Wow! That is heavy stuff!!!

There is a balance needed. My work as a pastor and all of our work as a Christians is important stuff. But from time to time we need that reminder that it is not all up to us. There is a God, and you and I are not him.

Once when I was on a spiritual retreat, I spent some time out by myself, walking across a snowy field. I came upon a pond there that was all frozen over. On a whim I decided to walk out on the ice a little ways. And the thought hit me, hey, I'm walking on water just like Jesus. Just about then the ice gave a loud crack. I am pretty sure that as I scrambled back to the shore, all the angels in heaven were laughing. And as soon as I got safely back on solid ground, I joined them. And it felt good to laugh.

Laughter is a great stress reliever. It is also a powerful tool for puncturing inflated egos.

If there is one thing that the overly serious and self important can't stand, it is laughter.

Part of the reason the scribes and pharisees were so angry with Jesus is because he made them look foolish.

Listen to these excerpts from H.A. Williams' book *Tensions*

*No wonder the Pharisees, who seem to have been always wholly serious, had to have Jesus put down. He couldn't be allowed to go on indefinitely standing everything on its head and making their piety look ridiculous. Why, in the end, they might even laugh themselves, and that would be the ultimate catastrophe.*

*Who in reality had ever witnessed a pious man blowing a trumpet before he put a dollar in the church box? And then there were camels going through the eyes of needles, not to mention camels being swallowed easily by those who choked when they swallowed a gnat.*

*And worse: idlers who were given full pay, stewards who were successful cheats, spendthrift and debauched sons being feted on their return home - what had all this pernicious nonsense have to do with religion?*

*...but Eternity had the last laugh after all. Here are Caiaphas and all his crowd, Pilate and Herod and all theirs, sitting complacently in a state of grave and dignified self-congratulation. They have done their duty and justified the authority vested in them by efficiently disposing once and for all of a dangerous fool. He is safely dead. And with solemn calm again restored, they can concentrate once more on the really serious matters to which their lives are dedicated.*

*But behind their backs, without them having the slightest inkling of what is going on, the fool has popped up again like a Jack-in-the-box and is dancing about even more vigorously than before and even more compellingly. People here, there and everywhere are falling under his spell...*

*If that isn't funny, nothing is. It (the resurrection) is the supreme, the final, the ultimate joke. And since laughter, although not irresistible is none the less highly contagious, perhaps the brass hats themselves will in time catch the disease, turn around, see the joke, and then laugh with the rest of creation because the kingdom of God has drawn near.*

Let me pause to add a disclaimer here. The gift of laughter, like many good gifts, can be misused in cruel and heartless ways. In no way do I advocate that kind of humor.

Humor helps us most when we laugh at ourselves. The laughter helps us sit a little bit lighter on ourselves and on others. Our devotions to God is serious business, make no mistake about that. But when we get carried away and start acting like the fate of the world is all on our shoulders, we need the gift of laughter to puncture our inflated egos. The fate of the world is not on our shoulders. That is God's job.

We do need to take seriously the call for us to live out the faith Christ has given us. And we do need to set an example for those who are newer in the faith. But when that become harsh judgement rather than accepting love, we need the gift of laughter to remind us that we are not perfect, and we do not need to be perfect. Salvation is a pure gift of God's grace - it is never something we have earned. We are none of us perfect.

There is a wonderful story about an older pastor who attended another church while he was on vacation. *The young preacher that day began his sermon by saying, "I have a confession to make. Last night I was in the arms of a woman who was not my wife."*

*The congregation gasped.*

*The preacher continued. "It was my own dear mother. She was simply giving me a hug. And now I'd like to talk to you about jumping to conclusions and gossip."*

*The older pastor was so impressed that after the service he asked the younger preacher if he could use that story in his church. The young preacher readily agreed.*

*So the next Sunday after his vacation, this older pastor began his sermon by saying. "I have a confession to make. Last night I was in the arms of a woman who was not my wife."*

*The congregation gasped.*

*The older pastor paused for a moment and then he said, "And now I can't remember who she was."*

Laughter is such a great gift. It transforms the ordinary into the extraordinary. In our New Testament passage the disciples are hiding. They are hiding behind locked doors. You can imagine them huddled fearfully together in a darkened room. Maybe Peter is over by the window, lifting a corner of the curtain to see if the soldiers are coming to arrest them. Suddenly there is Jesus in the midst of them. You know that Jesus had a wonderful sense of humor. Maybe he said, "Boo," when he suddenly appeared. Perhaps that is why he has to say "Peace" to them twice. Do you suppose he is struggling not to laugh out loud as he is peeling them off the ceiling?

Good laughter helps us to correct each other gently, it strengthens the bonds between us.

One more story. It really isn't all that funny, but for some reason I found it hilarious.

*The irate customer calling the newspaper offices, loudly demanded to know where her Sunday edition was. "Ma'am", said the employee, "today is Saturday. The Sunday paper is not delivered 'til Sunday."*

*There was quite a pause on the other end of the phone, followed by a ray of recognition. "So that's why no one was in church today."*

Being a Christian is serious business but we are also called to rejoice, to be filled with joy. That means being able to appreciate laughter. Rejoicing means being able to laugh at our selves and our situation. Just like God was probably laughing just a bit when everyone was looking for Jesus in the empty tomb. God's great joke was that Jesus was not dead; he was and is alive!

Rejoice therefore, and let out a good laugh. There is no moment so perfect as when our laughter blends with the laughter of God!

Amen.