

A Sermon Preached at St. Christopher's Episcopal Church,  
Oak Park, IL on the Second Sunday of Easter: "Holy Humor Sunday,"  
May 1, 2011 (year A) by the Rev. Paris Coffey

*My heart, therefore, is glad, and my spirit rejoices . . .*

Psalm 16:9a

In recent years, some churches have begun to resurrect the practice of celebrating "joy and laughter" on the Sunday after Easter. Imagine that! They call it "Holy Humor Sunday," allegedly in honor of early theologians who saw Easter as the greatest joke God ever played on death. You might say that it's God's best trick, as reflected in one little girl's conviction that Jesus' first words out of the tomb were, "Ta-dah!" You can almost hear the drum roll and picture a little resurrection bow as Jesus unveils this amazing feat—a feat the Orthodox sometimes refer to as the "Easter Laugh" or "Risus Paschalis."

Undoubtedly, it's sound theology, and yet like Thomas in today's Gospel, I'm skeptical that "Holy Humor Sunday" – or "Bright Sunday" as it's also called – was an *early* church tradition. Common sense says otherwise, since the core group promoting this practice names Augustine as a primary source of support for its claim . . . and Augustine was no stand-up comic. That said, you have to admit that "Holy Humor Sunday" – or "Risus Paschalis" – sounds better than "Low Sunday," which is what Episcopalians call today. Clergy insist that this is NOT because of low attendance on the Sunday after Easter, but because the day is more subdued. Still, "Holy Humor" sounds more appealing, and certainly more fun, than Low Sunday – an appeal that only increased as I began to dig a little deeper.

This digging reinforced my skepticism of the practice as an *early* church tradition. At the same time, it strengthened its appeal when I discovered that its roots were in the fifteenth century instead, and that Pope Clement X had tried to prohibit the practice. There's nothing like prohibition to peak one's interest, and this tradition – described as a Bavarian custom where priests used jokes in their sermons during Eastertide – allegedly prompted abuse of scripture. I've never thought of Bavarians as a particularly raucous group, but I suppose it's possible. At the same time, not laughing at certain things in scripture can be an abuse or at least a misreading, since there are some very funny scenes in the Bible that we miss because we're afraid to laugh in church, thank you very much, Pope Clement.

Case in point, the late Erma Bombeck told a story of watching a small child in church one Sunday who was turning around smiling at everyone. "He wasn't gurgling, spitting, or humming," she emphasized, "kicking, tearing the hymnal, or rummaging through his mother's handbag. He was just smiling. Finally, his mother jerked him about and in a stage whisper that could be heard in a little theater off Broadway, said, 'Stop that grinning! You're in church!' (And) with that," wrote Erma in dismay, "she gave him a belt on his hind side." Tears rolled down the little boy's cheeks as the mother resettled primly into her pew. "That's

better,” she said, and returned to “listening” to the Word of God – and I use the word “listening” loosely.

This is *hardly* the kind of spiritual climate that Jesus seeks, or longs to offer us in God’s Church. What’s more, it’s hardly what we need. We need places where we can laugh, while still facing life’s challenges. We need balance, for without joy the burden of tornadoes, unemployment, war, and other afflictions will sink us, as today’s readings suggest. All four of these readings use the word “rejoice” in one way or another, beginning with *The Acts of the Apostles*. “Therefore, my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced,” says Acts, quoting today’s Psalm. Likewise, *First Peter* says, “rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials,” a message lived out in today’s Gospel by fearful disciples who “rejoice” when they see the Lord.

Fear and hope, laughter and turmoil go hand in hand it seems. Consequently, we need community where we can face serious issues and ethical dilemmas, but at the same time be ourselves and laugh at ourselves, knowing that we’re all in this together. Indeed, together we can be more than we can ever be alone, as today’s Gospel shows in the person of Thomas who expresses doubt for the whole community – doubt that’s in *all* of us at one time or another. Thomas’ story tells us that God will meet us where we are, even in the midst of doubt, and yet ‘Doubting Thomas’ must still have been a difficult title to bear. At least this is the premise of a cartoon depicting Thomas – eyebrows arched, hands waving in frustration – saying to the other disciples, “All I’m saying is that we don’t call Peter ‘Denying Peter’ or Mark ‘Ran Away Naked Mark.’ Why should I be saddled with this title?”

Another disciple says, “I see your point, Thomas, but it’s time to move on,” which is another way of saying, “Don’t take yourself so seriously.” It’s a reminder we all need at times, along with the reminder that there’s always someone better-off AND worse-off than we are, as a nine-year-old theologian makes clear. Trying to explain the New Testament to his mother he says, “Jesus is the star of the New Testament, Mom. He was born of a virgin, but I’m not sure if was the Virgin Mary or the King James Virgin. During Jesus life he had many arguments with sinners like the Pharisees and Republicans, (but he) also had twelve friends called the opossums. The worst one was Judas Asparagus. Judas was so evil that they named a terrible vegetable after him;” so compared to ‘Judas Asparagus,’ I guess ‘Doubting Thomas’ doesn’t sound so bad.

We laugh at children’s explanations of the Bible, and yet I’m not at all sure that *this* child would sanction “Holy Humor Sunday,” especially if the custom really *is* Bavarian. Bavarians, after all, seem suspect in the eyes of this nine-year-old who goes on to explain that, “Despite the fact that Jesus preached to some *Germans on the Mount*, the Republicans and all those guys still put Jesus on trial

before Pontius the Pilot, and they killed him. But he came back to life again, went up to Heaven, and will be back at the end of the Aluminum. In the meantime, we're supposed to be kind to strangers because you never know when you might be entertaining angels in their underwear."

I couldn't have said it better myself; and if you're missing the joke on any of these references, then you've been outshined by a nine-year-old whose knowledge of scripture is definitely amazing. Granted, there are a few misunderstood words and phrases here and there, but even these invite reflection. Jesus' arguments with "Republicans," for example, comes to mind, as does his speech to "Germans on the Mount." These words and phrases turn the tables on our expectations, making us laugh, for turning the tables is part of humor. Humor, of course, is a complex phenomenon. On the other hand, it often hinges on a twist in what's expected or even logical. Such is the case with Easter – and the Sunday after Easter – when Jesus walks through walls to bring peace in the midst of fear, healing to the heart of pain, faith in the face of doubt, and life smack dab in the middle of death.

It may *not* seem funny at the time. It may seem *deadly* serious. The truth, though, is that life is too short to be *too* serious, as I realized one Easter Vigil when a family of the newly baptized asked for a group photo. The family wanted everyone in the shot – priest, parents, godparents, aunts, uncles, everybody they could round up. As a result, it was taking a long time, causing the youngest to get antsy. "I don't want to be in the picture," one child complained, and pretty soon there was a whole round of resistance. I could see everyone starting to lose it, and so in an effort to persuade the children otherwise I said, "Just think how nice it will be to look at this picture when you're all grown-up and can say, 'Look, there's Jennifer; she's a lawyer now,' or 'that's Michael. He's a doctor.'"

One little girl – the first one to have complained – stared at me with a frown on her face. "Good point," she conceded, adding, "And there's Mother Paris. She's dead." I had to laugh. How could I not? God, though, gets the last laugh – today, on Holy Humor Sunday – and at our inevitable end, which God insists is just the beginning. "Ta-da!" Jesus will say to us on the other side of the river. "We are risen! We are all risen indeed. Alleluia!" *Amen.*