

**Psalm 126**

**1 Corinthians 15:50-58**

**April 11, 2021**

**Holy Humor Sunday**

*Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC*

## **GOD HAS THE LAST LAUGH**

***Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.***

Did you hear about the church that completely renovated its crib nursery? The crowning touch was the plaque that was hung on the wall above the crib. It had a scripture verse from today's epistle lesson —

1 Corinthians 15:51 from the King James Version of the Bible: "Behold, I shew you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed."

The Sunday after Easter has often been referred to as "Low Sunday." Many people think it's because attendance drops off after the Easter Sunday celebration. Although the origin of the term "Low Sunday" is uncertain, it might have to do with the contrast between the rather subdued worship a week after the excitement and glory of Easter Sunday.

The Sunday after Easter also has other names, such as Laughter Sunday or Hilarity Sunday or God's Laughter Sunday or Bright Sunday or Holy Fools Sunday. It's also known as Holy Humor Sunday, our designation for today's worship. In the Eastern Orthodox tradition, the week after Easter was (and still is) dedicated to enjoying the good news of Christ's resurrection from the dead. On the Monday after Easter, believers would gather to tell jokes and funny stories, dance and eat together.

Beginning in the 1400's, Christians in Bavaria celebrated the Sunday after Easter as "Risus Paschalis" which means "God's joke" or "the Easter laugh." Priests would tell jokes and funny stories during Mass. Following worship and throughout the week, parishioners would play practical jokes on each other and on their priests. A couple of hundred years later, Pope Clement X prohibited "Risus Paschalis," either because it got out of hand or the Pope thought it made fun of the faith or a combination of both.

It might seem like an oxymoron to think about "Holy Humor Sunday" in a Presbyterian Church, since we're so often described as "God's Frozen Chosen." But, since Eastertide lasts another six weeks, why not enjoy a good laugh in response to the best good news we have ever and will ever hear? Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Or, as the apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians Christians, "When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: 'Death has been swallowed up in victory.' 'Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?'" (1 Cor. 15:53-55)

Speaking of death, I saw a cartoon the other day. Death, in its black robe and holding its long scythe, was pointing a bony finger at an old man. "I'm death," said Death. The old man, bent over his walker, said, "OK, then I'll talk louder!"

Charles Spurgeon was a 19th century British Baptist preacher. He was so well known and influential that he was given the nickname “The Prince of Preachers.” In his autobiography, Spurgeon wrote about how somber the Christian faith could be in worship and on the Sabbath among his pastor colleagues. He noted “the 12th commandment must have been “Thou shalt wear a long face on Sunday.”

Speaking of the Ten Commandments, did you hear about the Confirmation exam that asked “List the Ten Commandments in any order.” One boy wrote, “3,6,1,8, 4, 5, 9, 2, 10, 7.” That reminds me of the story I was told when I was a freshman at Davidson College getting ready to take Introduction to Old Testament with Dr. Max “The Ax” Polley. Apparently in days gone by, a standard question on the Old Testament final exam was “List the kings of Judah and Israel in order.” A freshman student was determined to ace the exam and impress the professor, so he spent all semester memorizing the kings of Judah and Israel in order. When he opened the exam, to his horror he saw the question had been changed to “List the major and minor prophets of the Hebrew Bible.” He wrote the following answer: “Far be it from me, a lowly freshman Bible student, to distinguish between the major and minor prophets. But as for the kings of Judah and Israel, they are . . .”

Charles Spurgeon said “it is less a crime to cause a momentary laughter than a half-hour’s profound slumber.”<sup>1</sup> Which brings to mind the preacher who preached a very long, very dry, very confusing sermon, and then announced he wished to meet with the church board after worship. The first man to show up at the meeting was a total stranger. The minister said, “You misunderstood, this is a meeting of board members” to which the man replied, “I know, but if there is anyone here more bored than I am, then I’d like to meet him.”

You know I love good preacher jokes, so why not share a few at my own expense?

\* The preacher’s little girl asked her daddy why he closed his eyes and bowed his head every Sunday before he preached. He told her, “I’m asking God to help me preach a good sermon.” The little girl asked him, “Well, daddy, why doesn’t God do it?”

\* It must have been the same little girl who complained of a stomach ache one Saturday afternoon. Her mother told her, “That’s because you have an empty stomach. You need to feed it.” After worship the next day, her preacher daddy sat down at the lunch table after preaching a long sermon and complained of a headache. His daughter told him, “That’s because you have nothing in your head. You need to feed it something.”

\* A preacher served two churches out in the country. He preached at 9:30 at one and 11:00 at the other. He had just enough time to drive from one church to the other, but he would often have to park down the road and run to the church. He finally solved the problem by putting up a sign near the entrance to the church office that said, “YOU PARK HERE — YOU PREACH!”

\* Then there was the minister who put hot air dryers in the church bathrooms, only to take them out after a couple of weeks. When the Clerk of Session asked, “Didn’t they work?” the minister said, “Oh, they worked fine, but I saw a sign next to the one in the men’s room that said, ‘For a sample of this week’s sermon, push the button.’” And

that reminds me of a true story. I met a Baptist lay minister years ago at a class cookout at Wallace Elementary School. He admitted he could get long-winded in the pulpit. He laughed and said one Sunday he preached a really long sermon. After worship, the oldest member of the church came out, shook his hand, and said, “Preacher, sermons are like biscuits. They’re both better with shortening!”

Please don’t get me wrong. Death is no laughing matter! Nowhere in the Bible does it suggest that we shouldn’t take death seriously. We all know from personal experience how wrenching and serious death is. Paul calls death “the last enemy to be defeated.” (1 Cor. 15:26) When his good friend Lazarus died, Jesus saw Lazarus’ sister Mary weeping and the Jews who were comforting her also weeping. When Jesus saw where Lazarus had been buried, Jesus began to weep. (John 11:33-35)

In 1925, Eugene O’Neill wrote a play called *Lazarus Laughed*. The play required 151 actors playing 420 roles and had only one major stage production. The play is about the events surrounding the raising of Lazarus from the dead by Jesus. In one scene, different guests at a dinner party celebrating Lazarus being brought back to life are talking about what happened and how Lazarus seems different. They say things such as:

\* The whole look of his face has changed. He is like a stranger from a far land.

They must have forgotten sorrow in the grave.

\* I thought we were invited here to eat — and all we do is stand and gape at him!”

\* Be silent! We are waiting for him to speak.

\* He did speak once. and he laughed.

\* Laughed?

\* Laughed! I heard him! It was a moment after the miracle — just as he appeared in the opening of the tomb, wrapped in his shroud — I helped to pry away the stone so I was right beside him. I found myself kneeling, but between my fingers I watched Jesus and Lazarus. Jesus looked into his face for what seemed a long time and suddenly Lazarus said “Yes” as if he were answering a question in Jesus’ eyes. . . Jesus blessed him and called him “My Brother” and went away; and Lazarus, looking after Him, began to laugh softly like a man in love with God! Such a laugh I never heard!”<sup>2</sup>

We are not laughing today because of death, for death is much too real and too painful to laugh **because** of death. Along with the sorrow we feel when someone we love dies, we are reminded of our mortality. We can talk about death in the abstract, even admit it will happen to each of us one day, but when we think seriously about it, merely the thought of death is enough to make us anxious and sad and fearful. That’s why we need our Easter celebration last Sunday and the Easter laugh. As the apostle Paul says, “If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of this who have died.” (1 Cor. 15:19-20)

The Easter laugh is our confession that even though we die, because Christ lives, we shall live again. And yet, as we prayed last Sunday in our Unison Prayer of Confession, “Yes, this is a glorious day of celebration and song, but forgive us when we are quick to forget its Good News.” In the play *Lazarus Laughed*, some of the characters forget the wonder of his new life and they say, “Lazarus, give back thy laughter! Death

slinks out of his grave in the heart, so that Ghosts of fear creep back into the brain. We remember fear! We remember death! Forgotten is laughter; we remember only death! Fear is god! Forgotten is laughter! Life is death!” “and Lazarus laughs his full-throated laugh at their gloom, but a touch sadly that they have missed the reason for joy, even in the middle of the real problems and heartaches they do indeed face.”<sup>3</sup>

Our Easter celebration and faith don't deny the real problems and heartaches that we do indeed face. But our Easter laugh assures us, strengthens us, encourages us in our living. As the prayer says, “Help us to live as those who are prepared to die. And when our days here are ended, enable us to die as those who go forth to live, so that living or dying, our life may be in Jesus Christ our risen Lord.” As Paul writes, “Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.” (1 Cor. 15:58)

Standing at the graveside of a loved one or friend is one of the most difficult things to do. Yet, as a prayer of commendation for the graveside in the *Book of Common Prayer* reminds us, “All of us go down to the dust; yet even at the grave we make our song: Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia!” One little boy tried hard to understand life and death after attending his first Ash Wednesday service. When they got home from church, his mom started cooking supper and he went up to his room. Suddenly he rushed into the kitchen looking very worried. His mother asked him what was wrong and he said, “Remember when the preacher said that we are from dust and to dust we shall return? Well, I just looked under my bed, and I think there might be somebody either coming or going!”

And that reminds me of this final Easter laugh: A brand new preacher fresh out of seminary was headed out into the countryside to officiate at a graveside service of someone he didn't know. He got hopelessly lost and was running terribly late. Finally, he spotted a little church with a cemetery next to it. But there were no cars in the parking lot, just a backhoe parked next to the open grave and two workers eating lunch under the shade tree. The minister was completely embarrassed, but figured he'd better do what he came to do. So, he grabbed his robe and his prayer book and, as he was getting ready to shut the door, his bagpipes, which he was learning to play.

When he got to the graveside, he realized the lid had already been placed on the casket liner. He solemnly went through the whole service. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed the workers had respectfully taken off their ball caps. After the final prayer, he inflated the pipe bag and squeaked out a barely recognizable version of “Amazing Grace.” Then, without looking back, he hurried to his car. One of the workers looked at the other one and said, “I've been putting septic tanks in for twenty years and I ain't never seen anything like that before!”

*Let us sing praise to him with endless joy.  
Death's fearful sting he has come to destroy.  
Our sin forgiving, alleluia! Jesus is living, alleluia!*

As they say, he who laughs last, laughs longest and best. In raising Jesus from the dead, God has the last laugh over death. And that's reason for us to laugh and celebrate this Easter!

***Let us pray: Good and gracious God, we laugh as a sign of the joy you have brought into the world through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Help us to see light through your eyes – eyes of grace and forgiveness – and help us to laugh when the world presses in around us and we are afraid. Amen.***

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>All information about Charles Spurgeon is taken from Jeff Robinson, "Should We Use Humor in Our Preaching?" November 5, 2019 at [www.thegospelcoalition.org](http://www.thegospelcoalition.org).

<sup>2</sup>Dr. Gilbert W. Bowen, "Lazarus Laughed, Romans 6:1-4," at [www.sermonwriter.com](http://www.sermonwriter.com).

<sup>3</sup>Kenneth R. Elkin, "To Laugh, Yes, to Laugh!" March 9, 2008 at [www.stmarkswilliamsport.org](http://www.stmarkswilliamsport.org).