

## Sermon Easter Sunday 2016 The Last Laugh

Very early in the morning on the first day of the week, the women went to the tomb, bringing the fragrant spices they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they didn't find the body of the Lord Jesus. They didn't know what to make of this. Suddenly, two men were standing beside them in gleaming bright clothing. The women were frightened and bowed their faces toward the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He isn't here, but has been raised. Remember what He told you while He was still in Galilee, that the Messiah must be handed over to sinners, be crucified, and on the third day rise again." Then they remembered Jesus' words. When they returned from the tomb, they reported all these things to the "eleven" and all the others. It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told these things to the apostles. Their words struck the apostles as nonsense, and they didn't believe the women. But Peter ran to the tomb. When he bent over to look inside, he saw only the linen cloth. Then he returned home, wondering what had happened.

John 24:1-12

Christ is risen! [He is risen indeed.] And He is laughing in His sleeve! I learned about Jesus laughing in His sleeve at an interview when I was in the ministry process. At an interview I was asked what drew me to ordained ministry, and I said (mostly kidding) that after seven years of youth ministry I was tired of sleeping on the floor at youth events. Pastor Debbie Weatherspoon was on that interview committee and I would eventually work for her as an associate pastor. She told me later that that day, when I made the comment about not sleeping on the floor anymore at youth events, she was pretty sure she saw Jesus standing behind me laughing in His sleeve.

I looked up the meaning of that phrase, "laughing in your sleeve" and it means to secretly find something funny, to laugh quietly to yourself. And Jesus must have been laughing in His sleeve when I said that I was pursuing ordained ministry because I tired of sleeping on the floor at youth events because at the next three churches I was appointed to, I worked with youth, and I slept on the floor at youth events. And when Janet Thompson and I took our first Confirmation class on an overnight trip to Sebastopol and my air mattress sprang a leak so that I was lying directly on the floor... I remembered that Pastor Debbie had seen Jesus "laughing in His sleeve" at me.

Today's gospel lesson is from Luke's and each one of the gospel-writers has their own take (because each of them reacted to it differently) on resurrection morning. The stories Jesus told are called parables, which are allegories, stories with layers of meaning, and the stories that are told about Jesus are called gospels... which is a word that means "good news." This gospel story is about the surprise of the women who came to the tomb and found it empty, and the cynicism of the men they told about it. It's about the presence of angels in life's most significant moments; and about Jesus laughing in His sleeve.

The women who came to the tomb on that resurrection morning were grieving for Jesus. They'd taken with them embalming spices for His body before wrapping it for burial. They knew what they would find in the tomb and they were focused on what they had to do... But the tomb was empty and the stone (and those square-shaped stones were too big and heavy for even a couple of men to move) was rolled away. So the

women were surprised and confused. And to add to their confusion and alarm... angels were there.

Just to recap the highlights of the Jesus-story angels were there when He was born. Angels filled the night sky and sang "Alleluia!" (which means "Praise God!") to the shepherds who were out in the fields watching their sheep. The surprise in that piece of Jesus' story is that angels sang to shepherds... who were unwelcome pretty much everywhere because they were seen as "unclean," they were smelly and shifty. But all through His life Jesus made it clear that He hadn't come looking for prosperous, successful, holy people... He came for the lost, the poor, the marginalized, and the sinner.

Jesus' friends, Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James, with some of His other women-friends had come to the tomb to prepare Jesus for burial. They were grieved and exhausted (because that's what grief does to you) and so to say they were shocked that the stone sealing the tomb had been rolled out of the way is an understatement. They were stunned when angels appeared and spoke to them. The surprise in this piece of Jesus' story is that angels spoke to women. In the ancient world women were regarded as not much more than property. The disciples' dismissing the women's experience of the empty tomb and the angels... is telling about the status of women at that time. But again remember that Jesus came to find and heal... shepherds, women, the oppressed, the demon-possessed, (and lest any of you feel left out) Jesus came to find and love and redeem sinners like all of us.

We live in a cynical age when mystery and spiritual experience is regarded with suspicion. I think however that for many of us, especially seekers - people who pray, who worship, who practice mindfulness, and are attentive to the presence of God in the world - for us, reason and fact can be robotic responses to the joy and wonder and grace of this human life.

I think of cynicism as a postmodern reaction to mystery and uncertainty, but it existed in the first century too. The women shared their experiences with "the eleven" (the twelve disciples minus Judas who had betrayed Jesus, and was paid off by the Pharisees, and then hung himself) and the other followers of Jesus, and they were disregarded. What a ridiculous thing to believe: that angels converse with people and a man could be raised from the dead.

Ralph's dad, Grandpa Chet, was a "licensed local pastor" and he and I liked to argue theology. He was skeptical about the Virgin birth of Jesus and for some reason I felt like I had to defend what was written. I hadn't heard yet theologian Phyllis Tickle's quote about the virgin birth: "*It's too beautiful not to be true, whether it happened or not.*" (You can spend all day trying to wrap your head around that.) I just take it on faith that angels spoke to the women who came to the tomb. I take it on faith that Jesus rose from the dead. I believe in miracles. The word miracle comes from the Latin words, "to wonder at." There is so much in God's story to wonder at.

There's much in this life to wonder at. Some miracles or angel-encounters are small and fleeting, and some of them take your breath away... like when you hold your just-seconds-old babies and their waxy skin still seems imprinted with God... or when you're paid to do something you love and it makes a difference in the world... or when you realize that someone you've lived with for years and who loves you also knows all

the weak, stupid, selfish things about you. You all have your own miracles... those are three of mine.

You might be tempted like the “eleven” who discounted the women’s story of the empty tomb and the angels to dismiss mystery and miracle but don’t. Because too much of God’s story, and too much of this life, contain things to wonder at... and you’ll miss them if you’re too rational or cynical. If we can’t believe in or accept things we can’t test or prove then we risk overlooking love, and hope, and forgiveness, and grace... and all the things Jesus showed us... all the things that matter to God... all the things that redeem our humanity.

At this time, in God’s story and in history, the religious establishment and the Roman authorities had an uneasy relationship. Each had their own jealously guarded domain and into the midst of it came an itinerate Rabbi who ignored the boundaries of religious and secular and political life and who taught His followers that all of life is sacred, and that all people matter, and that love speaks louder than a speech any preacher or any politician ever made. No one in the establishment or among the authorities found the message of this Rabbi tolerable and they cut a deal with each other to get rid of Him...

Last Sunday we heard the story of Jesus’ last days, His betrayal, arrest, trial, and crucifixion. After each reading a candle was extinguished and the lights were dimmed, and gradually we were sitting in the darkness. Hearing the story of Jesus’ passion reminds us that Easter follows what must have been an unbearable week for Jesus - and for His followers - as everyone who followed Him abandoned Him; He was tried in a kangaroo court; He was tortured; and He died an excruciatingly painful criminal’s death. So Easter comes as a surprise, a mystery (and so some people can’t believe it.) Easter comes announced by angels, and in the midst of it, Jesus is laughing in His sleeve.

Taking ashes on Ash Wednesday to BART was pretty boring except for the mentally ill woman who came over to us sobbing about how unfair it was that Jesus died, and how Barabbas got off free, and why Jesus didn’t run away and save Himself. She would not be comforted, because every time one of us offered her a theologically pretty-good pastoral reply it would only momentarily soothe her... and then she remembered that God hadn’t intervened, that Jesus hadn’t saved Himself, and He’d been crucified, and she’d begin sobbing again because it was all wrong. I couldn’t argue with her.

There’s a lot in this life that’s all wrong. Bombings in Brussels, and refugee toddlers lying dead in the sand, and people in our own community who can’t find work or homes, and politicians serving up hate and fear like food for the hungry at a soup kitchen. It’s all wrong.

But Easter happens. I know that’s not the word preceding “happens” that most of us were expecting: but Easter happens. Because God’s love will not die. God’s love couldn’t be silenced on a cross; God’s love couldn’t stay in the grave. Love - God’s love - always wins. God’s has the last laugh. And Jesus, who knew the plot against Him, and the tenuous loyalty of the people who followed Him... who knew the horrific and humiliating death He had to endure... somehow I think Jesus was laughing in His sleeve. Because Jesus knew that nothing could stop God’s love. Jesus knew that God’s love would rise from the dead. Jesus knew that He [God] would have the last laugh.

Now why does this, and why should this, matter to you? It matters because darkness and despair and hopelessness and sin are rampant in the world and sometimes they're rampant in your life. Some days seem like Good Friday, when Jesus was put to death on a cross. Some situations seem like Holy Saturday when God's love was silenced. But we've come here today, some of us believers and some of us skeptics and some of us merely hopeful that Easter is more than a story written in ancient ink, more real than Cadbury bunnies laying chocolate eggs. Our hope is that God's love cannot be defeated, that God's love always wins in the end, and that that love will find a home in us. Because living in hate and fear and defeat is no way to live. And because we all (can I say this for all of us?) we all want to live in love.

There were angels there on resurrection-day and they asked the women at the tomb, "Why do you look for the Living among the dead?" God's love (we know Him as Jesus) is alive; He's present in the ashes of our dreams, the misery of our broken hearts, and the graveyards of our losses. Because love wins. On your worst day and in the worst experiences remember: love wins. In the long view of life, and eternity, love wins. And because of this Jesus was laughing in His sleeve at the plot to get rid of Him. Because of this God has had the last laugh. So alleluia! Christ is risen! [Christ is risen indeed!] Amen.