

***“Are You Joking?”***

***Acts 5:27-32; Revelation 1:4-8; John 20:19-31***

***Bright Sunday/Confirmation, April 28, 2019***

***Hamden Plains United Methodist Church, Hamden, Connecticut***

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Today is Confirmation Sunday. We celebrate Daniel and Luke joining the church. In some churches they require confirmation students to recite part of a catechism. We don't, but in that tradition it just seemed right to begin with a quick quiz, not just for Daniel and Luke but for all of us. Here it is:

*What is greater than God, more evil than the devil;  
The poor have it, the rich need it and you die if you eat it?*

The answer: Nothing! Nothing is greater than God, nothing is more evil than the devil; the poor have nothing, the rich need nothing and you die if you eat nothing.

Yes, yes, I know we can argue about the “rich and poor,” spiritually speaking. Be a sport. By the way, 80% of kindergartners got this right compared to 17% of a class at Stanford University. As the texters write: “JK, JK.” “Just kidding!”

I almost titled this message “J.K.” Whether “J.K.” or “Are you joking?,” the idea is the same. For this Sunday after Easter is Bright Sunday, a tradition celebrating the *Risus Paschalis*, the “Easter laugh.” Joy in God's humor is the foundation of Bright Sunday, rooted in the musings of early church theologians (like Augustine, Gregory of Nyssa, and John Chrysostom) that God played a practical joke on the devil by raising Jesus from the dead.

At some point, we have to laugh. I think Thomas must have. We give Thomas a lot of grief, even resorting to the childish name-calling of “Doubting Thomas.” We forget how often, like Thomas, we demand proof from God. Missouri is known as the “Show Me” state, and sometimes I think we're

all Missourians at heart: “Show me, God. Show me your power. Show me that you’re here with me. Show me that you’ll make a way for me. Show me that you’ve been raised from the dead. In fact, Lord, unless I put my finger in the holes in your hand and my hand in the spear-wound in your side, I’m not going to believe.”

I think Thomas’ doubt was no different from ours and our very human tendency to react to good news with “it’s too good to be true.” The skeptics say, “If it’s too good to be true, it probably isn’t.” In lighter moments we say “Are you joking?” meaning, “Stop it. You don’t fool me.”

But God has fooled us. That’s the whole point of the Easter season. When we live as if death and sorrow and defeat have the last word, we forget that the worst word is not the last word; that truth is stranger than fiction; and that the very outlandishness of the Gospel makes it believable. Tertullian, a first-century bishop, said, “*It (resurrection) is by all means to be believed because it is absurd.*”

How absurd? There’s a story that when the great composer Beethoven died he was buried in a churchyard. A few days later the church sexton heard strange noises coming from where Beethoven was buried. Alarmed, he got the priest. The priest heard the sound, too, as some faint but unrecognizable music coming from the grave. The priest was also alarmed and got the church organist.

The organist listened carefully and then said, “Ah, yes, that’s Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, but being played backwards.” She listened a while longer and said, “There’s the Eighth Symphony, and it’s backwards, too. Most curious.” She kept listening. “Hmmm...there’s the Seventh, the Sixth, the Fifth...” Suddenly, she realized what was happening, stood up and announced to the crowd that had

gathered: “My friends, there’s nothing to worry about. It’s just Beethoven, de-composing.”

But back to Thomas. It’s hard to blame his doubt. After all, the witnesses to Jesus’ resurrection he relied on were the other disciples who denied Jesus and ran off and left him. Now they’re telling Thomas, “Oh man, you should have been here! Jesus was here! Jesus is alive again!” You can almost hear Thomas, between the lines, saying, “Are you joking?”

The challenge is whether our deeds match our creeds. One of the things I pray is that if I’m ever arrested for being a Christian that there’ll be enough evidence to convict me. In fact, I prayed it last Sunday and one of you commented on it. It’s a powerful prayer and I don’t pray it lightly, and neither should you. But I do pray it fervently because that is exactly how it was in the first century. In the reading from Acts, the disciples were being arrested for proclaiming Jesus as Messiah. Arrested! Daniel and Luke, you are about to proclaim Jesus as Lord. In some places in the world today, you can be arrested for that. In Sri Lanka last Sunday, 253 people were killed for being Christian worshippers.

So, then, how can we laugh? In my household, in response to some outrageous statement or behavior, Carol will say she laughs to keep from crying. There’s light-hearted truth in that. The alternative for laughter is despair. I stood with a family this week whose mother died. Despite their grief, we laughed at how she, a single child, had eight children of her own. She flipped the script of her own life because she took to heart the saying of G.K. Chesterton: *“The essence of Christianity is that if you do not like the life you have, you may have another.”* George Goldtrap has framed it this way: *“If we expire when we die, shouldn’t we inspire while we live?”* Of course we should. Easter is the season when the Lord laughs out loud, at all the things that pretend to be all powerful, like cruelty and madness and despair and

death; and God says to them – just like the Good Witch Glinda says to the Wicked Witch of the West in the movie “The Wizard of Oz” – *“You have no power here. Be gone”* God sweeps them away with his wonderful resurrection laughter, and so should we.

Life can be serious, of course. But someone has said that angels can fly because they take themselves lightly. What would it look like if we were just a little slower to take offense and just a little quicker to forgive; just a little slower to judge and just a little quicker to try to place ourselves in the other person’s shoes. I think we’d be, as one of our Presidents said, “kindler and gentler” as Americans and as Christians. And the ability to laugh can help us get there.

So, men, this one’s on us: There’s a story of a woman, walking on a California beach, in deep prayer to the Lord. She said, “Lord, you promised ‘ask, and it shall be given to you.’” So I ask that you will grant my prayer.”

Suddenly the sky darkened and a voice thundered, “I have searched your heart and know it to be pure. Because you are faithful, speak your prayer.”

The woman said, “Lord, I’ve always wanted to go to Hawaii but I’m deathly afraid of flying and I get seasick. Could you build a bridge to Hawaii for me?” The Lord laughed and said, “Impossible! Think of the logistics! How would the supports ever reach the bottom of the Pacific Ocean? Think of the amount of concrete....of steel! Your request is both materialistic and disappointing. I could do it but cannot justify this worldly craving. Offer another prayer that will honor and glorify Me as well.”

After a long time she said, “Lord, I haven’t been able to settle down. My boyfriends say they don’t understand me. So I pray that I could understand men...how they feel inside and what they’re thinking when they are so silent....I want to

know what they really mean when they say ‘nothing’s wrong’....I want to know how to make them happy. That is my prayer, Lord.”

After a few minutes the Lord replied, “You want two lanes or four lanes on that bridge?”

Humor is a way to laugh at our imperfections. Daniel and Luke, making these powerful commitments before God and the Church, are also going to make mistakes. So say we all, right? Years ago a church member sent me a note that said, “Good judgment comes from experience and experience—well, that comes from poor judgment.” So Luke and Daniel, know that when we are sharing our experience with you, we have made some mistakes, too.

But Jesus does not rebuke us, any more than he rebuked the disciples who hid in fear; or any more than he rebuked Thomas in his doubt. Instead, Jesus brings forgiveness and peace by giving his spirit, the Holy Spirit, that is the spirit of laughter and, most importantly, love.

So as Daniel and Luke make their vows today, let we who will affirm them with our words also support them with our love. May we come to know more deeply the God who frees us from the tomb of our imperfection and fears, inviting us to rejoice in God’s great joke over death. For God has triumphed over the grave and over the living death to which we too often surrender, offering instead the victory of abundant life here and eternal life in the life to come.

Am I joking? Not at all! And, absolutely! Amen.