

Sermon on John 20:19-31

So far this morning, we've heard some jokes that are real groaners. They are my favorite types of jokes. But sometimes they can take a second to land. I was previewing a few of our jokes for this morning with my family this weekend, and there were a couple where it took a second for the punchline to click. Sometimes the best jokes are the ones where the punchline doesn't come right away. I particularly like jokes where the punchline is surprising, where you think you know what's happening, but then everything flips.

That's Easter. Easter is God's cosmic joke on the powers of death – and this punchline takes a little while to land. Last week, as we heard the story of the empty tomb, we were reminded that the women journeyed toward the tomb in grief, confusion, and fear. They were asking, "What just happened?" Easter doesn't feel like a cosmic joke at first.

If we rewind the story just a little bit to Holy Saturday, we can see why. Holy Saturday is the day in between. It's the day where the disciples are hiding, where it feels like hope has failed, and where it looks like empire got the final word.

Jesus is dead thanks to Rome doing what Rome always does. Violence and fear won. The cross did what the cross was designed to do, which was to squash insurrection, to eliminate the possibility of something different. And as far as anyone can tell on Holy Saturday, that's the end of the story.

But the church, from its earliest days, has insisted that something else was happening on that day. While the world sat in silence and the disciples locked the doors, Christ was not resting in the tomb. In the Apostles' Creed, which we say together whenever someone is baptized or brought into membership, says "Christ descended into hell." Let's pause for a minute and contemplate this reality. Christ doesn't just die, he descends to the deepest places of pain and suffering. And he descends not as a victim, but as a liberator. My church history professor, Dr. Warren Smith, referred to this as "Christ's commando raid into hell." This old tradition imagines Jesus busting down the gates of hell, grabbing Adam and Eve by the wrists and pulling humanity up out of the grave, freeing all from captivity.

It's this wild and unexpected image – like death itself didn't see it coming; like the devil set a trap to overcome God, but then God turns it inside out.

So now let's flash forward to today's story of Thomas. Poor Thomas. I feel for him. He's gotten such a bad rap over the years. We call him "Doubting Thomas," as if he is the only one who doesn't get it. But really, Thomas is the only one willing to say out loud what everyone else has probably been thinking. When the other disciples say, "We have seen the Lord," Thomas responds with an answer we can probably relate to: "I'm going to need to see that for myself."

To me, that actually feels like the most reasonable response in the entire resurrection story. I mean, Thomas wasn't there the first time. He missed it. When the resurrected Jesus shows up to the disciples the first time, they are afraid, locked in a room. Jesus just appears and says, "Peace be with you." That must have been either deeply comforting, or perhaps utterly terrifying. And then Jesus shows them his wounds, and suddenly, they believe. But Thomas misses that moment. He has not yet seen for himself. He missed the first punchline, and he's still stuck in Holy Saturday, living in the space where death feels final. He's still trying to make sense of a world where the one in whom he placed his hope has been crucified.

When they tell him, "Jesus is alive," Thomas says, "Unless I see it for myself, I cannot believe." We've often heard it as doubt. I just think it's deeply human. And I wonder if it's not just a need to see to believe. I wonder if Thomas is refusing to accept a version of resurrection that skips over the wounds of Jesus, that pretends like the suffering didn't happen. Thomas wants to see the resurrection that still bears the scars. It's through seeing the scars, the wounds of his crucifixion, that Thomas will believe it's actually Jesus.

And so, a week later, Jesus shows up again, and this time Thomas is there with the others. Jesus doesn't scold Thomas, or shame him, or tell him, "Why did you doubt? You should have believed your friends." Instead, he essentially says, "You needed proof? Come here and touch the wounds." And it's almost a playful scene, as I imagine Thomas approaching Jesus, looking him up and down, and realizing it is actually Jesus. I can imagine Thomas almost laughing in shock as he makes his confession, "My Lord and my God!" Thomas finally gets it – the joke is on death itself!

The resurrection is a reversal. It's God taking everything that the powers of this world use to control us – fear, violence, death – and turns it upside down. The cross was supposed to be the end, but instead it became the beginning. The tomb was supposed to be sealed, but instead it became empty. Death thought it had won, but God laughs at the foolishness saying, "You really thought that was the end?"

And that's part of the reason this tradition known as Bright Sunday and more recently Holy Humor Sunday exists.

It's not just to tell jokes, though we've done that and we'll do that some more. It's to remember that our faith, at its core, is built on this divine reversal, this holy surprise. It's the cosmic punchline that says, "Ha! Love wins! Good wins! God wins!" even when it doesn't look like it.

A lot of us are still living like Thomas. We're still waiting for the joke to land. We're still holding onto grief, fear, exhaustion, uncertainty. We're still asking: "Where is God in all of

this?” “Can new life really come from this?” “Is resurrection actually real, or just something we say in church?” And Jesus meets us there, where we are – not with shame, but with invitation. “Come and see,” he says. “Come and experience the kind of life that death cannot destroy.”

And here’s the part I love the most: Jesus doesn’t get rid of the wounds. The risen Christ still has his scars. Resurrection doesn’t erase what we’ve been through, but it does transform it. It means that even places of pain can become places of new life. Even things that seem like the end can become a beginning. Even when we continually witness the violence of powerful and destructive systems of our world, we know they are not ultimate. If God can turn even death itself into the setup for a joke, the what makes us think that God is not still doing this now?

Perhaps today we need to laugh – not because everything is easy. It most certainly is not. The world feels like a terrifying place right now. Perhaps we need to laugh, not because suffering is funny in any way, but because death doesn’t get the last word. Perhaps we need to laugh because the joke has already been told and the resurrection is the punchline. We are invited to live like people who are in on this great cosmic joke – people who refuse to believe that violence is ultimate, or that fear gets the final say. We are invited to live like people who can hold sorrow and joy at the same time because we know how the story ends. Sometimes we might be like Thomas, where we need to see and touch and wrestle, but Christ shows up anyway, offering us peace. May God’s great reversal bring us peace today.