

Readings: Acts 2:14a, 22-32; Psalm 16; 1 Peter 1:3-9; John 20:19-31

Grace to you and peace from the risen Christ. Alleluia and amen.

It was the first joke he ever got. We'd nestled in for bedtime reading, but instead of *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* or *Goodnight Moon* or even *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* he chose a little worn paperback that (short of carbon-dating it) looked like it came from a garage sale sometime in the '80's. *Dumb Jokes for Smart Kids* was the title.

Now, he was two maybe three years old. And it's true, I could've pressed the issue. "How about a storybook, Elijah? You're probably not going to *get* these jokes anyway." But, I decided it was a battle not worth fighting. And so, I resigned myself to *Dumb Jokes*...

Chapter One – Animal Antics. *What do you call a dog with a bunch of daisies on its head?* **A collie-flower.** No response. *What happens when a frog's car breaks down?* **It gets toad away.** Still nothing. *What is a cat's favorite TV programme?* **Miami Mice.** I couldn't blame him for not laughing at that one.

Well, this went on for several minutes. *What do you give a sick pig?* **Oinkment.** *What do glow-worms eat?* **Light snacks.** *What game do cows play at parties?* **Moosical chairs.** And all the while, nothing. Deadpan. I could just as well have been reading the encyclopedia.

And then... *It's raining cats and dogs.* **I know. I just stepped in a poodle.** And the giggling started small, but it soon erupted into a full belly laugh. I tried other jokes, but he kept making me come back to that one – *It's raining cats and dogs.* **I know. I just stepped in a poodle.** And everytime I said it. Several minutes of laughter ensued, as if he heard it for the first time.

Aristotle had a theory that "laughter is what separates us from the beasts, and that a baby does not have a SOUL, until the moment it laughs for the first time."¹

¹ <http://www.radiolab.org/story/91589-is-laughter-just-a-human-thing/>

In fact, Aristotle thought that one of the most important moments for a human (maybe even more important than birth) is the 40th day of existence. The day – Aristotle theorized – that a baby would laugh for the first time and at *that* moment “heated air from lower in the stomach moves through a membrane into the soul, *ensouls* the creature, and at that point...the creature moves from being a human into a human *being*.”²

Now, we might disagree about the 40th day part and scientists aren’t so convinced that other creatures don’t laugh as well, but it’s an interesting thought – that *laughter* is one of, if not *the defining* characteristic of what makes you not just human, but a human *being*.

So what. What does this have to do with faith, with the Gospel Reading from John 20, with “doubting,” with God, with the resurrected Christ?

Well, one more thing about laughter. Dr. Robert Provine (a neuroscientist) did what scientists do best, which is to take something beautiful like laughter and make it completely *unfunny* by doing a study. He looked closely at people laughing and asked what causes people to laugh, what’s the catalyst. What’s your guess? A punch line, right? It’s gotta be a joke that makes someone laugh.

“Wrong,” says Dr. Provine. 85% of the time, nothing funny (no joke, no punch line) precedes laughter. And they looked at what people do laugh at, and the theory they came up with is it that it’s not about some catalyst like a joke, it’s all about “social relationships.” We laugh because it is what defines not who we are as individuals, but who we are when we’re *together*.³

Enter Thomas. Actually, *exit* Thomas. He’s gone out to the grocery store for a candy bar or maybe just a walk or maybe, as one person theorized this week, he’s the only one out looking for the resurrected Jesus. Who knows, we don’t even find out he’s gone ‘til later in our Gospel Reading from John. Because it starts by reminding us that it’s actually *last* week.

“When it was evening on that day...” Remember, *that day* was Easter Sunday. Not with the Easter lilies or the Easter bonnets or the pancake breakfast sponsored by the high school Rap Group. It was *that day* (some 2,000 years ago), Easter Sunday. Jesus was crucified. Jesus was dead for three days. *That day*.

² Historian Barry Sanders quoted in *Radiolab* on “Is Laughter just a Human Thing?” See previous footnote.

³ <https://www.wnyc.org/people/dr-robert-provine/>

And the morning of *that day* some women went to the tomb and they came back to the other disciples and they said, “You’re not going to believe this! But Jesus wasn’t in the tomb, he’s alive! And we saw him!? Flesh-and-blood saw him!” *That day*.

And time passes. And it’s the evening of “*that day*” and they’re gathered together. In *fear*, the story adds ...and Jesus came and stood *among them*.

It’s a great word that’s used for “*among them*.” The word that’s used can mean “in the *midst* of them” or “*right, smack, dab* in the *middle* of them.” It’s used in Matthew’s Gospel where Jesus tells his disciples, “Look, I’m sending you out like sheep *in the middle* of wolves.” (Matthew 10:16) It’s used when Jesus teaches them that the kingdom of God is like someone who plants good seed in a field and someone else comes at night and plants weeds *among them, in the middle of them*. (Matthew 13:25)

It’s a word that means *tangled up in*, at the *center of things*, at the very *heart* of it all. It’s about being together, it’s about relationship where one thing bleeds into another.

This is where Jesus shows up on the evening of *that day* – in the middle of things, in the middle of them. And Jesus... well, you could say that Jesus *ensouls them*. “Peace be with you,” Jesus says. And he shows them his hands and his sides. Did you notice that? He begins by showing them his wounds, *not his glory*. But then he says, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” And then Jesus *breathes* on them (or Jesus *spirits* them, or you could say Jesus *ensouls them*) and he says, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they’re forgiven. If you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

At least, that’s what the good folks who translated the NRSV decided we’d hear this morning. But a woman named Sondra Schneider makes a really interesting case for a translation of that second half, that it’s not about retaining sins, but about retaining people. “If you forgive the sins of any they’re forgiven. If you *retain* (if you “*hold on to*” is another way to translate it) anyone, they will be held on to.”⁴ The church has two tasks, when it comes down to it. To forgive. To hold on to one another. That’s it.

⁴ Sondra Schneider, quoted by Susan Briehl in a lecture (see next footnote).

And I think this is a much better translation, in part because the very next verse says, “But Thomas...was not with them.” Thomas (for whatever reason) was not being held onto.

Wasn't there was an episode of *Cheers* where *amazing* stuff kept happening? ...and one of the characters (Norm or maybe it was someone else) keeps showing up just after everything happens with perfect timing as everyone else is sitting there with their jaw on the floor, and the character straddles up to the bar, and says, “So, did I miss anything?”

It's comical really, isn't it? Thomas' timing. Susan Briehl⁵ says that, Thomas has an “out of body” experience. Out of the body of Christ, that is. Out of the body of those who gather together. She points out that Easter can be an especially hard time for those for whom (for whatever reason) belief is not coming easily, because of all the “certainty and confident hymns.”

But brothers and sisters for whom belief is not coming easily, here on the evening of *that day* in the very first community of believers is one at the *center of the story* who says, “I won't believe [πιστεύω is the word in Greek. It doesn't just mean *belief*, it means *trust* or *have faith*]. Not unless I see as well. Not unless I touch those wounds will I believe.”

And it's counter-intuitive, but Susan Briehl says one thing this story reveals is that the best thing you can do when belief is not coming easily is to *not* separate yourself from the worshipping community. Because belief, faith, trust – it's about relationships.

We call him *doubting Thomas*, but it really has very little to do with “*doubt*.” Nowhere, in fact, in all of our Gospel reading is the word “*doubt*” even used. When Jesus says, “do not doubt, but believe...” (as our translators put it) Jesus actually says “do not ἄπιστος, but πιστός.” Jesus apparently skipped class the day his grammar teacher was talking about double-negatives. Jesus says, do not *not believe*, don't *unbelieve* but *believe*.

Again, Susan Briehl says if anything, the opposite of belief is *certainty* not *doubt*. Thomas longs for a sign. Thomas longs for *certainty*. Thomas longs for something he can hold onto if not touch. This is the mark of Thomas' *unbelief*.

⁵ These and other comments from Susan Briehl titled “Preaching the Gospel of John” come from her lecture in Pierre, South Dakota at the “Fall Theological Retreat” September 22-24, 2013.

He wants proof. He wants certainty. But if anything, the good news is that when it came to his belief, to his faith, to his trust... it was less about Thomas' need to hold onto something and it was more about the community holding onto him.

And maybe that's where faith, where belief is like a good joke. When you get it, it just happens. It washes over you like a child's beautiful belly-laugh. You can't help yourself. Your whole body *gets* it.

Still, Thomas gets a bad wrap, doesn't he? But we have to correct that if we're going to be church together. If you want to criticize anyone, ask yourself, what are the disciples doing locked in that same room a week later?! *They have seen the resurrected Christ, so why aren't they living like it? (...is the question we might just as well ask of ourselves.)* Maybe Jesus wasn't clear enough the first week when he said, "Go. Get outta here! As the Father sent me, so I send you!" Forgive sins. Hold on to one another.

And so, perhaps Jesus shows up as much for Thomas (and for us this week) as he does for the other disciples... so he can say again and again, "Do you remember what I told you last week? No, you've forgotten it already, haven't you. But I was serious about that! I have breathed the breath of *ensouling life on you* so that you can *get outta here!* Go! Forgive sins! And hold on to one another!"

And week after week, we have gathered together. To hear the good news again and again (like a joke that never gets old) to hear the good news of God's forgiving love that frees us to forgive and hold on to one another.

It's raining cats and dogs. I know. I just stepped in a poodle.

Like the good news, it never gets old. It's funny every time. It's good news every week, that Alleluia! Christ is risen! ...and you know the punch line: *Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!* ...and amen.