

John 20:19-31    2 Easter    4.22.25    Bill Uetracht

I have been a pretty big fan of Pope Francis. So, his death has brought me a good deal of sadness. He was a man of integrity and humility, somebody who understood Jesus' call to attend to the vulnerable.

Last year, Francis did something somewhat unique for a pope. He wrote an op-ed for the New York Times. His subject was humor. He urged his readership not to "wallow in melancholy." He said, "Irony is a medicine, not only to lift and brighten others, but also ourselves, because self-mockery is a powerful instrument in overcoming the temptation toward narcissism. Narcissists are continually looking into the mirror, painting themselves, gazing at themselves, but the best advice in front of a mirror is to laugh at ourselves. It is good for us."

Francis went on to say that "nothing cheers me as much as meeting children. When I take children in my arms during the audiences in St. Peter's Square, they mostly smile, but some of them, when they see me dressed all in white, think I'm the doctor who has come to give them a shot, and they cry."

"Children," he claimed, "are examples of spontaneity, of humanity, and they remind us that those who give up their own humanity give up everything, and that when it becomes hard to cry seriously or to laugh passionately, then we really are on the downhill slope."

I agree with Francis. Emotions matter. Laughing, not taking ourselves so seriously, *is* a serious matter. We need laughter. Our communities will grow because of it. There is a time and purpose for everything under heaven. Seriousness is necessary often. But so, too, is laughter and fun. Without them, our humanity really suffers.

It was Easter night, the first day of the week, the eighth day, the big day, the day that is thought to be the fulfillment of everything, but the disciples are living life as usual—in fear, gathered behind locked doors. Fear is where most of us live most of the time. And sometimes that is understandable. After all, the Romans and the Jewish leaders have just killed your leader, your master, the one whom you loved so much. It's no surprise that you are afraid. If they went after him, they could go after you. So, no wonder you lock the doors.

Fear is often the agenda of the day. It's operative big time now, sometimes for good reasons, sometimes because fear sells and appeals to our protective instincts. Life is always easier for us if there is someone out there to blame, particularly someone who is different than us, someone we need to be afraid of. And so, we lock the doors. Fear is life lived as usual.

But, Jesus, John's story would have us know, doesn't put up with our locked doors. Somehow, someway—and I must admit that I find this story a bit humorous—he comes through the locked doors and appears to those living life as usual. He appears to fear-drenched disciples and offers them shalom. "Peace be with you," he says. What they are lacking he gives them. Now note, he is not pollyannish; he doesn't pretend that the ugly past wasn't real. He shows his disciples his hands and his side, his marks of crucifixion. The one who had been raised from the dead, you see, is the crucified one. You don't need to tell him about what makes for fear and seriousness. He gets it. He has been there and done that. So, his peace is not a peace without scars. It is a wounded peace.

The wounded, risen Lord appears to his disciples. The one who had been murdered offers his wounds, his risen life to those who are afraid, who had little reason to laugh. He breaks into their

seriousness. Now I wish John would have had the risen Jesus telling a joke at this point, helping me to make my point. I wish the humor would be more apparent in the story. But I, nevertheless, sense the story is taking us to a more fun place, a less serious place, a remarkably joyful place, as we hear about the disciples' mission of forgiving sins, and as we encounter Jesus' call to Thomas to trust.

Fear makes life very serious. Fear and anxiety get in the way of our laughter. Fear and anxiety produce the need to control, a need which begets seriousness. Some of the most serious people I know are the most controlling people I know. When you are controlling, you don't have time or the inclination to laugh. Control often keeps you from joy. You will note that narcissistic people seldom laugh. They are too busy making it all about them to laugh at themselves or at life itself, too busy trying to control.

I have to admit that many religious people are masters of control, oh so serious. Sometimes you don't even like to be around them because, well, they are too serious, too judgmental, too miserable. Martin Luther once said that "if you are not allowed to laugh in heaven, I don't want to go there." A lot of religious people create what feels like hell to me—unending seriousness. I am with Luther. I don't want to live in unending seriousness.

But Jesus is not stopped by locked doors. He breaks through the fear, the anxiety, and the seriousness. He lightens the atmosphere. He enlivens it. He transforms it. By giving his disciples the power of the Holy Spirit and the power to forgive sins, he is providing them the power to create a new future. Only forgiveness has the power to transform life. Forgiveness is what makes sure that tomorrow is not going to be the same as today. If you want more of the same, then stay in anger and unforgiveness, which is a recipe for a life lacking in joy and humor. But God in Christ has given to us the

mission of forgiveness, a mission that frees us to tell the truth about our stupid selves and enables us to live in the utter joy of having been forgiven.

Jesus tells us in Luke that those who have been forgiven much love much. I want to say that those who have been forgiven laugh much. Those who have been forgiven recognize that their attempts to control, even themselves, are futile. Control is an illusion.

Laughter is a matter of telling the truth.

It strikes me that the big call in John's reading about Jesus' two post-resurrection appearances is the call to trust. "Do not doubt but trust," Jesus tells Thomas. "Have you trusted because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen me and yet come to trust." That's us, by the way. We haven't seen him, but we still trust. Trust is the call. And trust is the very opposite of control. Trust is the freedom to let go of control. And when we let go of control, we love like we've never been hurt, we dance like nobody's watching, we sing like no one's listening.

No, I am going to put it differently. We dance, even if people are watching. We sing, even if they are listening. We love even if we have been hurt or will again be hurt. We laugh uproariously, even if people think we are fools.

Truthfully, we are fools—fools who believe something contrary to life as usual, something opposite of what runs the world. We are fools who trust that in the midst of the seriousness of life, a seriousness that sometimes causes us to lock our doors and fear the other, has appeared a risen Lord, revealing his wounds, preparing us for a new future, and kicking us out of the garden of seriousness and into the garden of delight, the garden of joy and laughter.