

The Easter Laugh

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Pullman, WA
April 17, 2022

Laughter is a biblical way of receiving a newness which cannot be explained.
—Walter Brueggemann

Ancient Witnesses: Genesis 18:1-2, 9-15 Luke 24:1-11

On this Easter morning I want to talk about the feeling that “it’s too late.” William Sloane Coffin wrote about a painting by Michelangelo that was of Adam and Eve being expelled from the Garden of Eden. In the painting they are looking back at the Garden with anguish, and Coffin comments that Michelangelo got it right, that “hell is truth seen too late,” to use Thomas Hobbs’ phrase. We might look back upon an incident with anguish and regret, realizing that the past cannot be changed. We look back on our lives and certain possibilities are no longer available. And sometimes this can fill us with despair and hopelessness.

When I look upon our slow, inadequate response to the earth’s dangerously changing climate due to our use of fossil fuels, I confess my own ominous feeling that it’s too late, my own despair, for I have children and grandchildren. And I fear that the kind of life that we have left them, that their time—that humanity’s time—is running out. And the oligarchs, the rich and the powerful, seem to have democracy by the throat, as the spirit of authoritarianism and fascism grow, making addressing this in meaningful ways impossible.

It was the theologian Kierkegaard, who once said that the opposite of faith is not unfaith, it’s despair. For despair is letting the power of destruction overcome us. Despair is saying that nothingness, darkness, will be the last word to us. And the essence of faith is to help us deal with this anguish and despair.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, there is that familiar story of Abraham and Sarah: God first tells Abraham that in their advanced age, and that they would bear a son. The text says that Abraham was 99 years old. Perhaps this was an exaggeration, but you get the point. They were really old. So hearing this, the text says Abraham “fell on his face and laughed.” “You must mean Ishmael, the son I had with my wife’s servant, Hagar.” “No,” says God, “I mean your wife Sarah shall bear you a son. And you shall call him Isaac, *Yitzhak* in Hebrew, which means “one who laughs.”

Later, in the form of three men, the Lord visits Abraham again. And when Sarah overheard them say that they would have a son, she laughed to herself saying, “After I have grown old, and my husband is old—how is this possible? After I am decrepit, do I get some pleasure? And with an elderly husband?” Not often in the scriptures do human beings actually laugh at God, and Sarah hastily denies it. “Why did Sarah laugh?” the Lord asked Abraham. She said, “I did not laugh.” God said, “Oh yes, you did laugh.”

They both *laughed in disbelief*. Ha! You gotta be kidding me!

Abraham and Sarah had plenty of reason to doubt. Sarah was barren, and in that day and age, not having children was as disastrous as you could get; it was the kiss of death. Their lives were barren with oppression, injustice and hopelessness. They were refugees and were treated very harshly. According to the measures of the world, they had plenty of reasons to despair and to give up.

In a world that assumes that everything is settled and fixed, that what you see is what you get, that we are on this planet by ourselves and it is up to humanity to control its own destiny—in this kind of world one can understand how difficult it would be for this family to believe the promise they they would no longer be barren or landless. Who wouldn't find it difficult?

So Abraham completely doubts the promise, laughs *a mocking laugh* and appeals to the son already at hand. Abraham, the faith of the faith, is presented as the unfaithful one, unable to trust God when times got tough.

And just as Abraham fails to discern in God's promise the capacity for new life, so do the disciples fail to discern the live-giving power of the promise in Jesus. Abraham wasn't the only one to doubt that God could bring life out of death, hope out of hopelessness. In our passage from Luke today, when the woman told the disciples about the scene at the tomb, "these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them." (24:11) "Ha!" they said, laughing in disbelief. The Easter laugh starts here.

So this story of Abraham and Sarah shows what a scandal and what a difficulty faith is. Faith is not a reasonable act that fits into the normal scheme of life. The promise of the gospel is not a conventional piece of wisdom that is easily reconciled with everything else. It is beyond comprehension. "Faith," said the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews, "is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." (11:1)

Paul said in his letter to the Galatians (3.8) that in Abraham's story we have the "gospel beforehand," which is good news to those who despair; it is new life to those whose time has run out. It says that what the world thinks is an impossible situation isn't, what is hopeless holds promise. The birth comes to the tired and aged bodies of Abraham and Sarah.

And it says in Hebrews that "from one man, who was as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven." (11:12) There was in them no reason to hope, yet somehow, somehow it happened.

So you see, the promise of God is scandalous; it is absurd. It is never fulfilled the way we expect it. Some conclude that it has failed, and so are driven to despair.

And so, it is through a promise that God has broken the grip of death and hopelessness. They experienced God's impossible possibility. The old couple laughs, and it becomes *a joyous laughter* for the end of sorrow and weeping, no longer a mocking laugh. "Laughter is a biblical

way of receiving a newness which cannot be explained,” wrote Walter Brueggemann. Barrenness can now be laughed at because there is full joy.

An image that comes to my mind is of a Cambodian family, separated by the war. Then over 20 years later, the day comes they thought would never come. In front of television cameras they are reunited. And then I heard it, the Easter laugh.

The people of Israel were surprised by the impossible and laughed:

*When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dream.
Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
and our tongues with shouts of joy. (Psalm 126:1)*

There are many kinds of laughter. We laugh over good times, and we laugh in spite of sadness and disappointment. In September 1862 President Lincoln called a special session of his closest advisers. When they arrived, he was reading a book. At first he paid little attention to their entrance, then started to read aloud to them a piece by a humorist which Lincoln found very funny. At the end he laughed heartily but no one joined in; the cabinet members sat in stony disapproval of the President’s frivolity. Lincoln rebuked them: “Why don’t you laugh? With the fearful strain that is upon me night and day, if I did not laugh I should die, and you need this medicine as much as I do.” Then turning to business, he told them that he had privately prepared “a little paper of much significance.” It was a draft of the Emancipation Proclamation. Lincoln knew, as the writer of Proverbs knew, that “a cheerful heart is good medicine.” (17:22) “Laughter,” Harvey Cox once said, “is our way of crossing ourselves.” It is a mark of our faith, and it enables us to face uncertainty. There is often a wisdom in our laughter.

In the early Greek Orthodox tradition, there developed an unusual custom along these lines. On the day after Easter, clergy and laity would gather together in the sanctuary to tell stories, jokes and anecdotes. The reason given was that this was the most fitting way of celebrating the big joke which God pulled in the resurrection. What could be more appropriate to the day after Easter than laughter?

The disciples of Jesus laughed with joy because they continued to experience Jesus as a living reality after his death.

Madeline L’Engle once wrote:

My great-great grandmother, great grandmother, grandmother and mother are alive for me because they are part of my story. My children and grandchildren and I tell stories about Hugh, my husband. We laugh and we remember—re-member.

No doubt, Jesus’ followers re-member and re-constitute him in this way. But there is more. For God also re-members and re-constitutes. I like what Dominic Crossan said, Easter happened “as soon as anyone saw God in Jesus.” As Christians, we say that this person, Jesus, helps us see

God. Crossan said, “Jesus was who God looked like in sandals.” We see a God who is alive in the midst of utter destruction.

There’s a story of a little girl standing with her grandfather by an old-fashioned open well. They had just lowered the bucket to draw some water to drink. “Grandfather,” asked the little girl, “where does God live?” The old man picked up the little girl and held her over the open well. “Look down into the water,” he said, “and tell me what you see.” “I see myself,” said the little girl. “That’s where God lives,” said the old man. “God lives in you.”

God, who was so alive in Jesus, is alive in us, calling us to be raised up. What we people of faith mean by God is the power to overcome nothingness, not to do away with nothingness, not do away with destructive powers, but to overcome them. The very first words of scripture speak of God’s creativity, the power to call forth something out of nothing, *ex nihilo*, out of the formless void, to bring life out of death. Ours is a faith that confesses that death, destruction and nothingness are not the last word.

There’s a true story about a baby—there’s even a song about it—an unwanted baby named Leslie. Leslie was born with cerebral palsy, blind, and possibly with brain damage. And nobody wanted him. All he would do would stare into space in his own world. You wouldn’t know if you were getting through to him or not.

Finally when Leslie was six months old the hospital called on a woman who had been a nanny most of her life to take him. He wasn’t expected to live very long. And after holding him, she decided to care for him. People said, “You’re crazy. You don’t know what you’re doing.” And every day she would hold him close to her, rock him back and forth, sing to him and talk to him as if he could really understand. But Leslie would just stare into the distance, in his own world. People said, “You’re crazy. You’re wasting your time. He can’t hear you or feel you.” But she did it anyway. Years went by.

One day she heard something coming from the other room. It sounded like music, but she could have sworn that she left the radio and television off. When she followed the sound, she found to her utter amazement Leslie, playing a piano concerto by Rachmaninoff, flawlessly, the notes just pouring out of him. And she held him, rocked him, sang to him, talked to him—and laughed with joy. An Easter laugh.

God is alive and continues to call forth love, life and all that is tender and good. Theologian Juan Luis Segundo said that the difference between optimism and pessimism is punctuation. Pessimists are always placing periods after things giving them a sense of finality. Optimists, on the other hand, place commas after events realizing there is more to come. Abraham and Sarah started with periods, but learned to use commas.

When they realized that God’s promise was true the old couple fell off their chairs and laughed themselves silly. They laughed first in disbelief, then in amazement and then in joy. The new life will overcome despair. They understood that the final word is not death and sorrow, but life and joy. They understood that God will have the last laugh. And that is, of course what Easter is—it’s *the last laugh*.

