

Christ is Risen! He is Risen, Indeed, Alleluia! We are starting a new Sunday sermon series called Comedic Joy. This dovetails off of our Easter sermon last weekend. The question we asked last week was, “Is life a tragedy or a comedy?” By this we simply ask, does life have a sad or happy ending? A tragedy ends in sorrow. A comedy ends with joy.

The Easter joy of Jesus’ resurrection tells us that life is indeed a comedy, not a tragedy. Before we go any further, let’s unpack what I mean by this. I’m not saying life is a meaningless joke. I’m not saying that everything is lighthearted and funny. I’m not saying that life is a modern comedy movie characterized by profanity, nudity, and other inappropriate content.

When I talk about life as a comedy, I have in mind this idea of comedic joy. That is, because we are Easter people—people whose destinies and lives have been transformed by the empty tomb—we can be joyful even in difficult circumstances. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ that He has shown us through His birth, life, death, and resurrection gives us freedom to not take ourselves so seriously, to laugh once in a while, and to revel in the coincidental, ironic, and silly circumstances we often find ourselves in. We can do this by the power of the Holy Spirit who assures us that we know where we’re going. We have eternal joy in heaven waiting for us, and we know that no matter how dark things get in the between, every comedy has a happy ending.

This is where true freedom, joy, and comedy rests: it rests in the promise of sins forgiven through Jesus Christ who lived a perfect life for us and died to forgive our shortcomings. That’s how a Christian can laugh at his or her mistakes. It rests knowing that no matter what happens, you have a loving Father who lives in Heaven, and you are in a compassionate and caring family, the Church. That’s how a Christian can be joyful even mourning the death of a fellow believer: that every comedy ends in joy where the sad endings are turned into happy ones. We will see that loved one again.

As we go through this three-week sermon series, I want to commend to you a book written by our Synod President *A Little Book on Joy*. It’s a devotional booklet chock full of Bible stories, historical accounts, and personal anecdotes to help show us that the Scriptures are indeed filled to the brim with joy.

So let’s get into our theme for today: THE COMEDIC JOY OF THE GOSPEL BYPASSES LOCKED DOORS. First, we look at our Gospel reading, I. Jesus bypassed locked doors to give the apostles comedic joy. Every year we hear this reading from John 20. **“On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them..”** If you were in the disciples’ shoes, how would you feel that Jesus came to you?

Remember the last thing you did to Jesus. You promised you wouldn't leave Him. You promised you would defend Him, but you abandoned Him. In the case of Peter, you denied Him. What do you think your teacher would come back from the dead to do?

In the chapter, "A Just Joy" President Harrison recounts the story of a friend of whom he writes, "He was an imposing figure. He had an even more imposing reputation. But what he had been known for, well-earned to be sure, was not why I remember him. He had become an ever more devout Missouri Synod Lutheran and regularly shared the good news of Jesus with, and invited to church, people who wouldn't have given him the time of day had he not been who he had been." That's as specific as he gets, but here's where it gets interesting. For the sake of this story, let's call his name Steve.

Another man in the next town over committed a horrible sin against Steve and his family. Steve went to the front door of this man's house and knocked on it. The man was terrified and frantically pleaded, "Don't kill me! Don't kill me!" Steve replied, "I didn't come to kill you, I came to forgive you."

And so we see that the tension is relieved as our text continues. Jesus said to them, "**Peace be with you.**" **When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were [overjoyed] when they saw the Lord.**" It's almost as though Jesus came to them that evening to say, "I didn't come to kill you, I came to forgive you." The fear of retribution was replaced by the joy of reconciliation. That sudden reversal is what I would call comedic joy.

In the next verses, Jesus gave the disciples the mission of the forgiveness of sins. "**[Jesus] breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.'**" Jesus gives us the privilege of announcing the forgiveness of sins to others, and that flows from the comedic joy of the Gospel.

We see another set of locked doors in our readings for today. II. The apostles bypassed locked doors to share comedic joy with Jerusalem. The next illustration I have is not from *A Little Book on Joy*, but it is a true story that my campus pastor shared with me when I was in college.

Back when my campus pastor was in college, he had a friend named Ralph. After he earned his PhD, Ralph went on to become an agricultural missionary in Ghana, West Africa. He was helping the people dig wells and plant crops that would provide food for them. He was sharing the love of Jesus with the people.

One night as Ralph and his family were sleeping, robbers came into his compound. They came looking for money. The night watchman found them and was shot and killed. Hearing the gunshot, Ralph went out to investigate. The men shot Ralph. His wife put him in their jeep and drove the 40 miles to the nearest hospital.

Things looked bad for Ralph. He had been shot in the abdomen. Another inch closer to major organs and the wound would have been fatal. At the clinic, Ralph was stabilized. The doctor knew that he needed more help than he could receive in Ghana. An emergency flight was necessary. Ralph was taken to the U.S. where doctors in Chicago did the surgery that he needed. Many people prayed for Ralph. The doctors who saw the extent of the injury recognized that God was at work and had miraculously preserved Ralph's life.

The story might have ended there except for one thing. Satan wasn't content with removing Ralph from his position as a missionary. He tempted the religious leaders of the tribes around the village to begin to spread the word that Ralph had died. They told everyone in the village that Ralph's death proved that the tribal gods were stronger than Ralph's God. If Ralph's God really was powerful, they reasoned, Ralph would not have died.

So you can imagine the statement and the scene that was made when less than a year later, Ralph walked back into the village. He demonstrated the power of his God. More than that he demonstrated Christ's love for people by returning to the scene of the tragedy to resume his work for the people of the village. God used Ralph to bring light into darkness. To work good out of evil.

This was a very serious and tear-jerking story that I just shared with you, but can you feel the sense of comedic joy? Ralph was fueled by hope in the happy ending of the Gospel. He trusted that even if the robber would come to kill him, he had heaven waiting for him. The resurrection turns tragedies to comedies!

In our second reading from Acts, we see comedic joy spring forth. The apostles also had a successful ministry going on at the temple grounds—Solomon's Portico to be exact. The sick were healed, the demon oppressed were helped, and many joined their numbers.

Guess who couldn't stand it? The same crowd of people who literally killed Jesus. The high priest and his cronies who sentenced Jesus to death likewise put the apostles in prison. The Lord sends an angel to break out the apostles, and what does the angel tell them to do? To keep on preaching in the temple.

As Christians, we take the Bible seriously in that it is the holy inspired and inerrant word of God. However, can we not take a moment to reflect on the humor of the surprised looks on the Jewish leaders' faces as they realize the apostles went missing? Could we even chuckle at the reaction they must have had when they discovered the apostles preaching right where they were taken? What about the laughable assertion of the high priest, "**You intend to bring [Jesus'] blood upon us.**" What else did the high priest expect to happen? He himself sentenced Jesus to death!

And so we see the comedic joy of the apostles who have been forgiven by the resurrected Christ Himself. The apostles joyfully reply to the high priest, "**We**

must obey God rather than men.” Just like the missionary in the previous story, the apostles defy the death attempts of Satan’s servants. The apostles receive a beating and then rejoice “...**that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name [of Jesus].**” That comedic joy that the disciples had gave them a positive outlook and good spirits even when they were persecuted for the faith.

Finally, III. We bypass locked doors to share comedic joy with friends and family. Christ is Risen! He is risen indeed, alleluia! God has proven through His actions in history that through Christ, life is a comedy, not a tragedy. It has a happy ending, not a sad one. We have been talking about the comedic joy bypassing closed doors. The joy of forgiveness opened a whole new world to the apostles, and they in turn shared that joy with others, and not even prison could keep them from sharing this message.

We saw that with our friend to whom I gave the pseudonym Steve whose famous line was, “I’m not here to kill you. I’m here to forgive you.” We saw that with the missionary family who went back to the place where they were attacked to prove that life wins over death.

Dear Christian friends, this life is too short for you to keep a grudge against someone. Life is too short to be upset when someone makes fun of you or to sweat when you can’t balance the checkbook. Life is too short to be worried about the latest doctor’s visit. Christ is risen! He is risen indeed, Alleluia! That means that your life is one of comedic joy because you have heaven, both in the here and now and waiting for you.

The peace knowing that life is a comedy—that is has a happy ending, not a sad one—shapes how you live life. You can take risks knowing that this life is not the end. You can laugh at yourself knowing that the company of heaven is laughing with you and not at you. You can have comedic joy because you know, above all else, that you are loved by the creator of the universe and nothing can change that.

And that comedic joy bypasses locked doors. Someone might not be ready for you to make “a defense... for a reason for the hope that is in you.” However, I think everyone’s always ready for a little joy. Join us these upcoming weeks as we unpack what the Bible has to say about comedic joy.