

I understand that there is a tradition in the Eastern Orthodox church of dedicating the worship service on the day after Easter to joke-telling. I don't know whether to believe it, but I *have* heard of "holy hilarity" Sundays. Martin Copenhaver, a well-known UCC minister and author, tried it himself one year, with jokes like this: Why are Congregationalists such bad singers? Because they're always reading ahead in the hymnal to see if they agree with it.

Anyway...Lead me not into temptation—I can find the way myself.

What do Attila the Hun and John the Baptist have in common? The same middle name.

Recently, in the full, whole-hearted, honest pursuit of learning, I stumbled upon a Youtube channel¹ owned by a couple of brothers in Urbandale who are from Afghanistan. They've created a video for the Islamic Center website called "What NOT to Do At Masjid," with skits about taking other people's shoes, flexing at prayer so much that you knock over your neighbors, and judging other people (which you do by going, "Haraaaam, girl!"). In my insatiable quest for knowledge, I looked at their non-Islamic Center videos (motto: "this video is only for entertainment purpose. please don't take it serious"), and pretty soon I was snorting with laughter in the adjunct instructor' office and had to close my computer to sober up. They have a whole series called "American Mom . . . Afghan Mom," which is just what it sounds like. The American Mom sees her son trip over a coffee table and rushes over to comfort him and call 911. The Afghan Mom sees her son limp in with his leg in a cast and beats him up for going out to play soccer. The American mom allows her son to sass her back. The Afghan mom when sassed shows up in her son's room

with a hammer and destroys his phone. They seem to have an endless source of material, all centered on family, and the reason it's so funny is that it's so true.

Apparently although nobody can agree on *exactly* what makes something funny, there seems to be consensus that surprise is an element of it—the reversal of expectations surprises us, and we laugh. But part of the surprise, if you ask me, is the discovery that what surprises us is the truth. I don't want to be a huge bore, dissecting jokes, how tedious, but take for example Sigmund Freud's favorite joke: A husband says to his wife: "Dear, if one of us should die, I think I will live in Paris." The surprise is that the husband so transparently expresses his expectation that he'll outlive his wife; the truth is that someone like him *would* make plans to enjoy himself after being widowed. The truth in the "American Mom/Afghan Mom" videos is that our parenting styles betray our own weaknesses and our fears for our children. We are surprised when we see that truth played out nakedly.

There is actually some comedy—surprise and truth—in Matthew's resurrection story. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary go to "see" the tomb—not to anoint Jesus' body, but just to see, perhaps to understand. Suddenly the end of the world happens, with an earthquake and an angel who looks like lightning, who rolls back the stone and sits on it triumphantly. Naturally the big burly Roman guards who had been stationed there to prevent mischief fall down like dead men. But the skinny little Judean women, though startled, stay right there, stay focused, and hear the angel say, "A) good news, Jesus is alive; B) get to work, you have to spread the word." The two Marys are revealed to be stronger than the Roman guards, and charged with arguably a greater task, much as the Afghan moms turn

out to be more powerful than any doctor or scholar in whom you might foolishly vest your confidence.

If you know your sacred history, you recognize this as the way God works: the barren woman laughs and conceives a son; Goliath falls and David wins; the exhausted prophet is fed by ravens so that he can get up and go on the next errand God has for him. God is *always* undermining the powers that we think are invincible. God is *always* calling us to just one more thing, just one more step forward, just one more crazy hope by which to define ourselves. God surprises us with the truth.

Lent is an immersion in tragedy. We have recognized the grim truths that we are deeply flawed and that none of us is equal to the obstacles we face in repairing our broken world. Indeed, sometimes we *are* the obstacles. On Palm Sunday we repeated the experience of joyfully expecting the wrong thing, and being angry and vengeful when we did not get it. On Maundy Thursday we recalled Jesus' last supper with his disciples, and their failure to keep watch with him in his loneliest hours. Good Friday, the day of crucifixion, is the day that Jesus dies, as inevitably as a train crash that you saw coming but could not prevent. All of that is so real, it resonates with our experience so thoroughly, that there is no need to explain it. Tragedy happens.

But comedy turns out to have the last word, to be the most credible. Resurrection is the surprise that nobody saw coming—surprising because the story was over and we always vest tragedy with greater credibility than comedy. And resurrection is the truth, because God runs the universe. God runs the universe;

death does not. The two Marys don't have time to stand and process what they have seen because the angel is all business: "Go and spread the word, Jesus is alive!" And bless their hearts, they go, and having committed themselves to action that confirms the best rather than the worst, they meet Jesus himself, in the flesh. They acted on the truth, and then they saw the truth. And then Jesus repeated the order to get right on their task.

The great scholar of myth and religion, Joseph Campbell, said "[Humor] is a leap into the wild and careless, inexhaustible joy of life invincible."ⁱⁱ There you have it—life invincible. So surprising, that tragedy is not the winner, but also, so true.

Let us pray: Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Receive our unending love and devotion as we celebrate today the undeserved gift of your love. We pray these things in the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

ⁱ https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=srbrosentertainment

ⁱⁱ COPENHAVER, M. B. Laughter at Easter. *Journal for Preachers*, [s. l.], v. 30, n. 3, p. 15–18, 2007.