

There is a custom among some preachers to start every sermon with a joke, to tell a joke that provides a lighthearted introduction to the sermon for that Sunday. I found out this week just how common this practice is: on Wednesday, one colleague described how growing up, her pastor was quite the accomplished jokester, *always* telling a joke before preaching, and then at our joint Holy Thursday service, Pastor Lisa started her sermon with a groaner about washing a frog.

Well, the preachers for whom cracking jokes is a weekly practice must be having a field day today, because Easter Sunday is on April Fool's Day this year. What better day for a hearty Easter joke?

But not from me. Your preacher won't be telling any jokes today. But I will wonder . . . about jokes and Mary. I do wonder if Mary Magdalene thought *her* preacher was playing the biggest practical joke ever that first Easter morning when she came to the tomb.

Because what a funny scene she found there: It was strange and bizarre and out of place. The stone had been removed from the tomb. The entrance was open. This was so weird and unexpected that she ran to get two disciples to investigate with her. What they found was also peculiar and puzzling: the linen wrappings were lying there, the one for Jesus' head even having been carefully rolled up and placed by itself. But no body.

Was this the remnant of some practical joke? Was this the set-up for a humorous, final reveal? The disciples don't wait around to find out. If it was a joke, they didn't get it. They returned to their homes.

But Mary stayed, perhaps to wait for the punchline. Two angels said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" as if they, *the angels*, didn't know. "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him!" Here begins a comedic tension—a dose of dramatic irony—wherein we, as readers, see and know more than Mary does. We see Jesus enter from off screen—the gospel writer even identifies him for us—and *we* recognize him, but Mary turns around and sees him standing there *and does not know it is Jesus. She supposes him to be the gardener.*

Mary's preacher seems like he's the one playing a bad joke, a poorly timed prank, on one of his faithful. Like a sketch on Christ's own Candid Camera, Mary's arrival at a tomb does not, at first, present an inherently funny scene. But as Mary falls victim to the divine disguise, an awkward and tense and ironic moment follows.

Supposing him to be the gardener, Mary unleashes her frustrated request: "If you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away!"

Fortunately, the confusion is soon over. The situation readily resolves.

Jesus says to her, “Mary!” She turns and says to him, “Teacher!” Now she sees what we see: Christ is there. Alive. Close enough that Mary clings to him. Present in the flesh so that she grasps hold of him.

Perhaps like people on Candid Camera, Mary is able to laugh about it later when she thinks back to the comedy of her mistaking her savior’s identity, the irrelevance of her plea to take him away. Because at the end of the scene, Mary can laugh, because the joke is not on her.

The joke, you see, is on Death. It’s Death that we end up laughing at. It’s Death that becomes the rouse of the Resurrection.

The power of Christ’s resurrection: that even something as serious and final as Death on a cross will seem, in light of Christ’s resurrection, as flimsy as the scenario for a practical joke. On the other side of the Resurrection, all the things that we take so seriously, all the things that we fear, all the things that are normally no laughing matters, become as unreal as a candid camera in the garden.

In light of the Resurrection, the punchline lands on DEATH, because Death loses all power and potency when Mary and we discover and proclaim that Christ is alive.

The Resurrection of Jesus Christ may be strange and bizarre and unbelievable and even, as John tells us, full of funny, dramatic irony. But the Resurrection of Jesus Christ is no joke.

Easter Sunday is on April Fool's Day this year, but the Resurrection goes well into Monday, April 2nd and beyond. Because Jesus goes to bring us to his Father, who is our Father; to his God, who is our God.

And like Mary Magdalene, our eyes have seen the Lord. So, we now have a resurrection perspective, able to see God's resurrection power loose and at work in the world.

Resurrection is God's practice. And so, it is our practice, the way we live *in faith*. The risen Christ is our hope . . . for all that needs renewal. The risen Christ is our trust . . . that God alone will resurrect us and overturn our failures. The risen Christ is our most serious charge . . . to lift high the cross, to proclaim how we have seen the empty tomb, to serve the God who creates and re-creates us and our world.

Not a punchline, but a proclamation. Not a prank, but a perspective. Not a practical joke, but a practice: "Alleluia, Christ is risen!" "Christ is risen, indeed! Alleluia."

All joking aside. No April Fool's jokes from the preacher today. Only, "Alleluia, Christ is risen!" "Christ is risen, indeed! Alleluia." Amen.