

When Easter Sunday falls on April Fools' Day

## **A good joke can reveal the distance between what is and what should be.**

by [Miles Townes](#) in the [February 28, 2018](#) issue



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Preachers, as you might know, often begin their sermons with a joke. These jokes are ornaments, brightening up a somber sermon. They don't generally serve a deeper purpose.

What will preachers do this Easter—April 1, 2018? Will they make a joke in passing, before digging into the serious stuff? Or will they embrace the opportunity to do something more?

It's a rare opportunity. The last time Easter fell on April Fools' Day was in 1956. Due to the quirks involved in dating Easter against the Gregorian calendar, the two coincide only intermittently. After 2018, the next one is 2029, and then again in 2040—but after that, not again in this century. April Fools' Day is not significant in Christianity, but it is the perfect excuse to talk about jokes in the Bible.

For a long time I believed otherwise, that the Bible was all heavy stuff. I based my ideal of Christian discipleship on a very serious Jesus, and I tried to be a very serious Christian. But in college, I happened to read Kurt Vonnegut's essay "Palm Sunday." Vonnegut was not a Christian, yet he was invited to preach at an Episcopal church on Palm Sunday, 1980 (alas, March 30). Vonnegut takes on Matthew 26, in which Jesus says, "For you always have the poor with you"—a text that is notoriously problematic for all sorts of Christians.

Vonnegut argues that Jesus is not dismissing Judas's concern for the poor, but rather making a joke at Judas's expense. To make the joke clearer, Vonnegut paraphrases it: "Judas, don't worry about it. There will be plenty of poor people left long after I'm gone."

This, Vonnegut says, is a "divine black joke, well suited to the occasion. It says everything about hypocrisy and nothing about the poor. It is a Christian joke, which allows Jesus to remain civil, but to chide [Judas] about his hypocrisy just the same."

I found this idea revelatory; it changed how I read the Bible. And not just this passage—when you know what to look for, Jesus jokes all the time. The Bible is full of jokes.

In Matthew 22, when Jesus is confronted with a question about taxes and tithes, his response—"Give therefore to the emperor"—is a joke. This does not mean Jesus is not serious. A joke need not be frivolous or false, and in fact the best jokes are neither.

In Luke, Jesus promises, "Blessed are those who weep now, for you will laugh," which is not a joke but an endorsement thereof. In John 8, when Jesus tells the crowd seeking to stone the adulterous woman, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her," he is both deadly serious and also making a joke.

Perhaps the first joke in the Bible is in Genesis, chapter 4, when Cain replies, "Am I my brother's keeper?" His impudence is both astounding and hilarious. Many prophets use jokes to good effect: I will point to Ezekiel 23:20, which contains so graphic a joke that I prefer not to repeat it here. And of course, Paul often used self-effacing jokes in his letters.

One reason we miss jokes in the Bible is our Puritan tradition of disdain for levity, which tends to frame the things Jesus says as pithy ripostes or clever aphorisms—but not jokes. There is a logic to this: we have no problem being fully human but struggle to be godly, so we should focus on what is godly about Jesus.

Yet as I get older, I find I do not trust anyone who lacks a sense of humor. A sense of humor isn't a substitute for moral direction, of course—there are lots of vicious, abusive, and violent jokes, after all. But the ability to tell good jokes (and get them) is deeply tied to our moral imagination.

Explaining jokes ruins them, but let me point out that jokes have structure, usually a premise and a conclusion held in tension. A good joke in the functional sense depends on our ability to see the difference between the world as it is and as it could be. A good joke in the moral sense, then, depends on our ability to see the difference between *is* and *should*. A good joke can light up the dark between the two, can help us see one from the other. Not everything that is funny is a joke, and not every funny joke is a good joke, but a good joke helps us see the distance between who we are and who we should be.

Who but Jesus ever saw so clearly the distance between is and should? Who else had the imagination to grasp fully the gulf between heaven and earth?

The jokes Jesus tells show us our predicament: made in the image of God but separated by sin from God's grace. The idea that the Christ who bridged this divide might lack a sense of humor seems to me a stony-faced denial of Jesus' humanity. Laughter is both human and humane, an essential tool to help us cross the distance to God.

Eugene F. Rogers, introducing Rowan Williams's essay in *Theology and Sexuality*, says that "you have understood it when you get the jokes." I believe this applies to the Bible as well.

The lectionary for April 1—for Easter Sunday—is heavy on the heavy stuff, but it does contain one good joke. In the Gospel reading from John, Jesus finds Mary Magdalene weeping over the tomb. Mary, "supposing him to be a gardener," does not recognize him. That seems like exceptional insight into Mary's interior life, but it is in any case a joke. It is a joke about Mary's failure to recognize Jesus, but also a joke about the reader's ability to do so. The joke is at Mary's expense and also ours.

It is neither stretch nor slight to say that the resurrection was a joke—and a good one. What more could Jesus have done to mock the world that killed him than rise from the dead? When we say we are Easter people, we say we live in the light Jesus brought to the darkness between what is and what should be.

“Jokes can be noble,” says Vonnegut. “Laughs are exactly as honorable as tears.” We have no problem with the Jesus who wept. This Easter, let’s grapple with the Jesus who laughed.

*A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “The Jesus who laughed.”*