

SCRIPTURE:

Luke 9:28b-32:

Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him.

Luke 9:33-35:

Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, “Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah” —not knowing what he said. While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!”

Luke 9:43-45:

And all were astounded at the greatness of God. While everyone was amazed at all that he was doing, he said to his disciples, ‘Let these words sink into your ears: The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands.’ But they did not understand this saying; its meaning was concealed from them, so that they could not perceive it. And they were afraid to ask him about this saying.

Contemporary Testimony: Stephen Colbert on Love and Laughter

“I think ultimately, us all being mortal, the faithful win out in the end! But I certainly hope when I get to heaven, Jesus has a sense of humor! But I’ll say this. Someone was asking me earlier about what I – this relates to faith, because my faith is involved, I’m a Christian and a Catholic, and that’s always connected to the idea of love and sacrifice being somehow related, and giving yourself to other people, and that death is not defeat, if you can see what I’m getting at there. Someone was asking me earlier what movie I really enjoyed this year, and I said I really like ‘Belfast,’ which is Kenneth Branagh’s story of his childhood. And one of the reasons I love it is that I’m Irish-American, and it’s such an Irish movie. And I think this is also a Catholic thing, because it’s funny and it’s sad, and it’s funny about being sad. In the same way that sadness is like a little bit of an emotional death, but it’s not a defeat if you can find a way to laugh about it, because that laughter keeps you from having fear of it. And fear is the thing that keeps you from turning to evil devices to save you from the sadness. As Robert Hayden said, we must not be frightened or controlled into accepting evil as our deliverance from evil, and we must continue to struggle to maintain our humanity, though monsters of abstraction threaten and police us.

So if there’s some relationship between my faith and my comedy, it’s that no matter what happens, you are never defeated. You must understand and see this in the light of eternity, and find some way to love and laugh with each other.

SERMON: “The Last Laugh – Facing Jerusalem” The Rev. Brent Damrow

The Gospel of Luke says it had been eight days. Eight days since Jesus had gathered the disciples. Eight days when he asked them, “Who is it that you say that I am?” It had been eight days since Peter gave the answer, “You are the Messiah.” And eight days after which Jesus had told them all that what that meant was going to Jerusalem, the holy city. What that meant was being betrayed into human hands. It had been eight days since those conversations had unfolded. And Luke doesn’t tell us one thing about what they did during those eight days. Eight days after such an important realization. Eight days after Jesus explained the fullness of what it meant. Eight days of simply being together, with no big appearances, no teaching engagements, simply Jesus and the disciples being with each other.

One of the gifts of the gospels is they don’t try to tell us everything. And so we are left to wonder: what did they do? I hope that at least part of it is they did what Stephen Colbert, who you just saw right there on the screen, might have suggested. That in the midst of everything this meant, and the bigness of it, and the sureness of the response of Rome which was not going to be good, I hope that at least in parts of those eight days they spent time laughing with each other.

For learning a way of life that brings love and laughter together takes practice. Approaching the depth and seriousness of our faith with a laughter that reminds us that things are often mysterious and so far beyond us takes practice. And one of the reasons we need to practice over and over again is because we need to learn to laugh in those moments leading up to the big events, because sometime in the midst of that conflict and stress and the world unfolding, it can seem so impossible to laugh when we really need it.

One of the things I love about that Stephen Colbert clip is that the woman talking to him could have asked him anything. But she asked him about his faith. I wonder if someone asked me about my faith if I would have as good an answer. I wonder if someone asked you about your faith would you be able to have quite so eloquent a response. Colbert claims that, for his understanding, faith is love *and* sacrifice, always in dance, always in play. And in both what Peter said about Jesus as the Messiah, and how Jesus responded, includes the implicit, the *explicit* connotation of love and sacrifice.

I think what was needed in those eight days, to keep that truth from getting too big, too overwhelming – for when we get overwhelmed by the reality of the moment, as Colbert warns us, it is easy for fear to enter in. And then once fear comes in, all bets are off. So I hope they learned to laugh. For if anyone needed it, the disciples sure would.

I also hope they did what Jane Goodall might have suggested. Jane Goodall, the environmentalist, the global changer of minds, the ambassador for hope. What she does in such a moment, well, she pours a glass of whiskey because it soothes her throat, it helps her to talk, it brings the stories to life. Maybe a cup of tea would work just as well for some of us. But I think what Goodall would have hoped happened in those times is that when you have a beverage and when you are together, there are times to tell stories, and especially stories of hope.

Last week I told you a little bit about one of the books we're using for our Lenten study. This week I'll give you a teaser about the other. Doug Abrams spent time with Jane Goodall over the course of a couple years. Their last visit together was supposed to be at the end of March 2020. Yeah, we all remember what happened at the end of March 2020, right? Jane Goodall is the ambassador of hope. And if you read this book, "The Book of Hope: A Survival Guide for Trying Times," or I suggest listening to it on Audible because it's Jane Goodall's own voice. She comes to life whenever she tells stories. Whenever she reflects on the stories that mattered in her life, she comes to life and she has hope and she only tells stories that are about the good things, that are about people's impossible responses to huge things. She dwells in those moments where school kids as well as presidents make differences that change the world. For you see, kind of like Colbert, Goodall believes that hope is something we need to practice, that hope is something that makes us more resilient. Hope is something that changes how we see the world. Hope is something that allows us, whether we screw up big time or the world does, to not get stuck but to keep moving forward in relationship.

Goodall would have looked at Peter standing there up on the top of the mountain and wanting to build that tent and wanting to remain there, saying dude, that's not the place, keep going. Keep going. Practice hope. Just like Colbert credits the gift of laughter, Goodall says that when we hope, our bodies come to life. When we have hope, we see possibility where there is seemingly impossibility.

Doug Abrams asked her over and over again, why do you have hope for the environment in the midst of everything going on? And you know what Goodall always does? She turns to one more story of one more child somewhere doing something to simply live into hope. She doesn't have to answer the big question. She just has to point to the little ways that hope is being kindled. The little ways that Luke would tell us that the Kingdom of God is drawing near.

Laughter and hope. I hope their eight days were full of it. For they are the ingredients for facing life and all of its big moments. And they are the very ingredients that I hope we abide in in this upcoming season of Lent. Because in Lent we do what happened on the mountaintop. We turn to walk with Jesus toward Jerusalem and all that is in store there. And friends, we will need to be practiced in love and hope. Yes, for what happens on Maundy Thursday, that Thursday of Holy Week where Judas betrays and Peter denies. We will need that laughter and hope on Good Friday when we see the depth of what human hands are capable of. But you know what? I think we're going to need that laughter just as much on Easter Sunday. And the crazy, mind boggling, mind blowing invitation that actually comes with resurrection. For you see, laughter and hope are what's needed when things are beyond us. When fear lurks around every corner. When so much seems impossible.

Many of you know that Tolkien's trilogy, The Lord of the Rings, resonates deeply with my faith, that it is a story that is faith-based. It has many places of intersection. There is a scene in Peter Jackson's movie that at first I did not care for, and since have come to treasure. If you don't know the story of The Lord of the Rings, the most unlikely of characters go to rescue the world from the biggest of villains imaginable. And despite absolutely impossible odds, somehow they do it, and at great cost. The scene that I'm talking about is where Frodo wakes up in this wonderful, sunlit bedroom with the most comfortable linens you've ever imagined, after having

been out of commission for days because of how difficult this was. And there sitting across from him is his mentor and friend, his protector and kindred spirit, the wizard Gandalf. Do you know what they say to each other when he first wakes up? Nothing. For what could you say? Instead, they simply look at each other and burst into laughter. Laughter for how ridiculous it was to ever hope they could have done it. Laughter for the fact that here they are. Laughter that somehow the light is still shining, and the world is still moving. In that scene, Frodo's other friends would come in and jump on the bed, and you could see them telling him stories of what had happened. And all that time, Gandalf and Frodo just look at each other and laugh. For laughter expresses when words fail.

Right now, the pandemic I think is easing. I think I can say it. I don't think I'm going to jinx it. But in the midst of coming out of it, I don't know about you, but I see so much lingering pain. I see that in the midst of all of us, breaking into our own individual lives, we sometimes have found in places where it's hard to reconcile with how others have fallen into their lives. Places where we've been lonely meets up with places others have been lonely. Places where we have sought safety contradict what others feel safety is. And piecing it together is hard.

This weekend was wonderful in many ways. One example of that was that yesterday we had family stay with us for the first time in a long time. Jon's wonderful sister, her husband, their two kids. And yesterday if you look in the driveway on the way home you'll see the remnants of a syruping adventure spent outside on a perfect day, smelling in the sweet fragrance. But what was clear about this day for the littlest among us and the older among us was that getting back together, even with people we deeply love, into new rhythms and routines, can be hard. And there was stress in addition to the joy. I know as I hear about your relationships, as I know about my own, that there are those moments where I wish in those moments of stress we had somehow found a way to laugh.

And then of course, we cannot avoid the impossible nightmare of what's unfolding in Europe. The impossible nightmare of something with so many ramifications that we can't even figure it out. With huge questions about the future of democracy, about what power means and where it should go, about do sanctions even matter, about what makes for power. It is so easy to get stuck in those overwhelming big things, and forget about the very real lives that are being ended. The very real lives that are being lost. The very real pain that is unfolding moment by moment.

I hope, as we go into this, where no good outcome seems on the horizon, that we remember the laughter. The laughter of those moments in our lives and in the world where things somehow worked out when they never should have. I hope we remember that laughter so it can kindle hope.

And the second thing I hope in the midst of the Ukraine war is that we remember the stories. When we go through Lent, we're going to be reading the Hebrew Scriptures stories every week. The reason is that each and every one of them in the lectionary points to the hope of the people in times when it seemed impossible that anything good could come out of the moment. So we will read those stories, as Goodall did, so that we can rekindle our own hope.

And then we're going to do what we talked about doing last week: praying for our enemies. Praying for everyone. We will pray for the Ukrainians, and pray for their enemies, too. We will pray to keep from turning to hate or despair. We will pray to preserve our humanity and to remember theirs. We pray because we hope. We pray because we know God is with anyone who is suffering. We hold onto hope because we know that in and through Christ all things are possible.

Those last words are echoes of the words I will use if you come to let ashes be imposed on your forehead on Ash Wednesday. Jesus says, remember, I will be with you even to the end of all ages. And so as we enter Lent, we smear ashes on our head to remember our mortality, but also to remember where our hope truly lies. We do it so that we don't turn to evil devices to save us from sadness or despair. But instead we turn to glory, which is what they saw on the mountaintop. The glory of love and giving. Not just on display in these old stories, but that are available to us, if we welcome them, every day.

When I am down, when I struggle, I sometimes look at the cross. It is through a lens that someone once taught me that has served me well, and I hope it does you too. It is that on the cross it was God who had the last laugh. That on this cross it wasn't just humanity who put Jesus to be sacrificed, but instead that God drew all the evil forces of the world – jealousy, greed, and power – and those things were crucified on this cross. It was the last laugh. That those forces of death and diminishment -- God perished them on the cross. And that when Jesus was raised, as Paul says, they lose their sting.

Friends, it will not be easy. The road that Jesus took then, and the one he asks us to take now, is demanding. In today's reading, everyone was amazed. They were amazed at Jesus raising somebody up. And yet what breaks my heart is that when they left, the disciples were so afraid that they dared not ask Jesus what he meant by what he said. That is why we have to laugh, so we don't get so afraid that we refuse to ask each other, or our faith, the hard questions of how do we hang in there in the times that are tough.

And so, if you are afraid right now of what's coming on any scale, that is okay, because the disciples were terrified. It is okay if you're afraid of what the world is going to look like once the pandemic ends, or the war in Ukraine is over. But just don't get bogged down like Peter wanted to. Don't just stay in a place that's comfortable. Instead, practice laughing every chance you get to build your laughing skills, because we're going to need them. Gather with loved ones and pour a beverage, whatever it is, and tell stories. Good stories. Stories about when hope has blossomed in your life. And as people of faith, tell stories of the Bible. It is okay to tell stories of the Bible over dinner, no matter what anybody told you. For when we connect to stories and hope, we will make it.

Finally, remember what God told the kids this morning: Listen to Jesus. Meditate on his example. Ground yourself in his way of love. For that is what the all-knowing God commanded from the top of the heavens.

In Luke's gospel in today's story, there is a wonderful notion that the disciples were falling asleep but they struggled and they stayed awake to see what was happening. And because they

stayed awake, they saw the glory, even in the midst of this impossible situation. And that is what we might do too, that we stay awake. That on Easter morning, like Frodo and Gandalf, when you come into the sanctuary, when Easter lilies are back and that smell is intoxicating, when we tell stories about how He is risen, I hope you look me in the eye, I hope you look each other in the eye, and that you just laugh at the amazing absurdity of it all, and yet the absolute depth of truth of it all.

And I hope that when somebody asks you a question about your faith, I hope and pray for you and me that we have an answer as good as Stephen Colbert did. For that is why we tell the stories, so that we might have that answer when somebody needs it.

Frodo and Gandalf. Makes perfect sense why they laughed at the end. Because if you look back at their whole story in the movies, that's all they ever did. They laughed when they saw each other. They trusted in the hard times. They held fast even when one of them let the other down. And they simply kept moving until the impossible possibility happened.

Friends, God is about to do the impossible possibility. The only thing we need to do is laugh, and hope, and go along for the ride.

Amen.