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3 Letters That Changed the World

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Scripture Reference: Luke 24:1-12

Will you pray with me, please? Let's bow. Gracious and eternal God, as a gift of your Spirit and through this word of yours, grant unto each of us the message that only you know we need. Amen

So, a researcher named Richard Wiseman asked more than a million people to rate their favorite jokes of all time, all part of a research project that was in search of the funniest joke in the world. Some of the jokes that came out of it were sort of silly, like: What's brown and sticky? - A stick. Some of the jokes were a little smarter, like: Two fish are swimming in a tank when one asks the other, "Do you know how to drive this thing?" And some were meant to just down-right offend somebody, like: What's the difference between yogurt and the St. Louis Blues? - Yogurt has an active culture. Yes, I just took a shot at the St. Louis Blues on Easter Sunday.

Well, here's the thing. Wiseman, after analyzing thousands of jokes, found that the best jokes included some measure of shock and surprise and some measure of reversal, but shock, surprise and reversal, it turns out, were not enough either – that the jokes had to have some destination. They had to go somewhere beyond just the set up and the punch line. That wouldn't be enough. They needed what he calls "the kick of discovery." The kick of discovery is to be thinking one way and then to suddenly have that thinking turned around in the opposite and other direction.

Jimmy went to Sunday school one Easter Sunday morning, and on his way home his parents asked him in the car, "What did you learn to today? What did you talk about in Sunday School?"

"So, we talked about Jesus, of course, and the Easter Story."

They said, "Well, tell us. What did you hear? What did they tell you?"

He said, "Well, Jesus was being pursued by soldiers, and they came in with guns blazing, and tanks rolling in. So, they hid out in a garden somewhere, and then they disguised Jesus, and they took him up to a mountain top where a helicopter came in, swooped in, and took him up to heaven."

And his parents said, "Jimmy, that's not how it happened at all," and he said, "Well, yeah, but it I told you the way they did, you'd never believe it."

Shock, surprise, reversal, the "kick" of discovery. Sounds a lot like Easter to me. It sounds like Easter to other pastors as well, like my friend Martin Copenhaver, who said this, Martin said that "Easter is the ultimate surprise. It is the punch line of God's story, turning creation on its head with the most surprising reversal of all."

This divine kick of discovery, and Luke then, Luke, as our author for this year and this morning, is like Louis C.K. or Jerry Seinfeld or George Carlin or Don Rickles, depending on your vintage, of the Gospels

because he employs the science of humor in his accounting of the resurrection. More so than Matthew, Mark or John, Luke delivers the “kick” of discovery, specifically by using one small, three letter word that changes everything. The word is “but” – B-U-T. Did you hear it as Kristen read out the passage this morning? Jesus is crucified, dead and buried, BUT on the first day of the week they came to the tomb. They found the stone rolled away, BUT when they went inside, they did not find his body. The women were terrified, BUT the men said to them, “He is not here, BUT he is risen.”

Six times in twelve verses, Luke shocks and surprises and reverses and kicks us with discovery, so much so, that if I told it the way Luke told it, you’d never believe me. Luke uses that three letter wrecking ball of a word BUT to change the world and to change us. In the first instance, Luke uses it to remind us to not take ourselves too seriously, especially in this grand adventure of faith. It says the women went to the tomb, BUT they did not find his body. It becomes clear throughout scripture, and it becomes clear in our own experience as well, that God’s ways are not our ways. So, we do well not to take ourselves too seriously, ‘cause if it were up to us, we’d probably do it like Jimmy did, right? We’d be coming in with guns blazing and tanks rolling and helicopters flying. It’d be earthly power all over the place. It’s a good thing, thankfully, that it’s not up to us because God had a different plan and a good reminder to us not to take ourselves too seriously.

Now, Reinhold Niebuhr was a serious theologian in the last century, brilliant theologian, tons of books. It was Niebuhr who said to take our selves too seriously is the very essence of sin, and it creates separation from God. Conversely, the essence of grace is laughter and humor. The joy of Easter, then, draws us closer to God with every Alleluia.

Micah 6:8 is a passage in scripture that we take very seriously as a church together, and it’s a good thing to take seriously: What does the Lord require of us but to do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with God. We say it each week at the close of our worship services. Well, last night we gathered for more than an hour and a half in the chapel around a vigil service that Rustin led us in, the Easter Vigil on Saturday night that walked us through scripture from Genesis all the way through the Resurrection account in Luke, and Rustin chose Eugene Peterson’s translation of the Bible to be our guide last night. Peterson has taken scripture and put it into vernacular - into more every day, common, accessible language for us.

Listen to what Peterson does with Micah 6:8: What God is looking for (What does God require of us?) What God is looking for is quite simple. Do what is fair and to your neighbor. (Do Justice.) Be compassionate and loyal in your love. (Love kindness.) And don’t take yourself too seriously. Take God seriously. (Walk Humbly with God.)

So, taking God seriously brings us, then, to another “kick” of discovery for today, another BUT from Luke’s Gospel. It says, “The women were terrified, BUT the men in dazzling clothes said, ‘Why do you look for the living among the dead?’” The question of the two men in dazzling white is as poignant and important for us today as it was for the women in the empty tomb back then, because we, like the women, spend too much of our time in fear, and fear is the very antithesis of faith. We’re afraid we won’t have enough; so, we buy more of what we already have too much of. We’re afraid of losing status; so, we do more when doing less would be better. We are afraid of losing power; so, knowingly

and unknowingly, we hold others down. And when the one source of a right-size life is standing right in front of us, miraculously, inviting us to life and not just life but abundant life, even then, we turn our attention elsewhere, confusing quantity with quality, wealth with security, applause with popularity and abundance with scarcity. People of God, when will we finally and forever trade the deadness of judgment for the freedom of grace, the dead end of keeping score for the never ending joy of forgiveness freely given and the death trap of thinking that it's about right beliefs when it's truly all about the living word of God that promises us that nothing can separate us from God's love. Nothing.

It's been said that Easter is God's protest all death. Perhaps the stone wasn't rolled away only for Jesus to get out but to let us in and to see with our own eyes so that we might stop being afraid to live new life among the living, which brings me to a final "kick" of discovery. If the first is to not take ourselves too seriously, and the second is to not look for the living among the dead, the third is going to have something to do with the choice that we have to make. This third BUT of Luke's grand reversal comes when he tells us that the women immediately remember what Jesus had told them about what was going to happen, and they remember, and the light goes on, and they go back to the disciples to testify, to give their testimony of what they've seen, BUT to some it seems an idle tale, and they did not believe, BUT Peter jumped and ran to the tomb.

The invitation and the choice is implied, but it's clear. You are in this story somewhere. You have to decide where. Luke would seem to want us to think that there are but two choices for our place in this story and invites us to choose, to receive it either as an idle tale, perhaps even hear it as a really good joke and not believe, OR in joy and amazement jump up and run breathless to see for yourself the shock, the surprise, the reversal, the "kick" of discovery of Resurrection and then go home amazed at what has happened. To be sure there is a place for you in this story and for all of us, and like the women who hear first from the men in white, the dazzling clothes - the women, who then go and tell the disciples, who then go and tell others, who then go and tell millions more across the centuries, including all of us in this room.

We, too, have a response-ability. We have a call to respond to this day and to this risen Christ, a responsibility to that ultimate surprise, the punchline of God's story that turns creation on its head with the most surprising reversal of all. We have a response-ability to the Good News that the worst thing is never the last thing, and God's final word will always be love. So, go home today, gather at a table and say some prayers. Give thanks for food and blessings and friends, but don't take yourselves too seriously. Tell a joke or two. Make sure you're still among the living, and feel free to use any of mine if you'd like because, after all, like the Gospel, I heard it first from someone else. So, keep the faith, but don't forget to give it away.

And the last laugh? The last laugh will belong to God, and it will be a belly laugh of love and grace and freedom for all people of all times and all places. All creatures, in fact, all creatures will stand and sing Alleluia. Let us do that now. Let us stand, and let's sing together our closing song, *All Creatures of our God and King*.