

## The Greatest Joke Ever

May 1, 2011 Easter 2 (Holy Humor Sunday)

Genesis 18:9-15 Psalm 16 1 Corinthians 1:18-31 John 20:19-29

Heard any good jokes recently? My favorite from this week goes like this: St. Peter and the Devil were busy admitting souls into heaven and hell, and St. Peter noticed that, while the Devil threw most of the ones going to him right into the Pit, a few of them he tossed off to the side. "What's with those over there?" St. Peter asked the Devil. "Oh," the Devil said (disgustedly), "they're from Northern Ohio. They're too cold and wet to burn."

Have you ever noticed how good jokes take something we know, something that's expected, and then give them a twist, something ridiculous? I love the one about the man who visited a prison and listened to the prisoners shouting numbers out from behind their cell doors. "Eighty-six!" one would shout; "A hundred and fourteen!" someone else would yell. There would be chuckles, and every once in a while someone would say, "Oh yeah, that's a good one." The man asked his guide, "What are they doing?" "Oh," the guide said, "they've been together so long they've numbered the jokes. Each number stands for a joke they all know." Just at that time someone yelled, "Ninety-seven!" and a man in the second tier of cells began laughing like crazy. "Why's he laughing so hard?" the man asked. "Oh, guess he's never heard that one before."

Or my daughter's favorite joke: "A man walked into a bar ... and he said 'ouch!'" Wasn't what you were expecting, was it?

Jokes turn our expectations upside down a bit. Sometimes more than a bit.

The Bible is full of such "jokes." And the story of Sarah that Connie read earlier is one of my favorites.

Writer Frederick Buechner has a wonderful description that goes along with that reading. “The place to start,” he writes, “is with a woman laughing. She is an old woman, and, after a lifetime in the desert, her face is cracked and rutted like a six-month drought. She hunches her shoulders around her ears and starts to shake. She squinnies her eyes shut, and her laughter is all China teeth and wheeze and tears running down as she rocks back and forth in her kitchen chair. She is laughing because she is pushing ninety-one hard and has just been told she is going to have a baby.”<sup>1</sup>

Isn't that a great description? Can't you just see her? Of course Sarah laughed. Wouldn't you?

It's not been an uneventful life for Sarah—formerly known as Sarai. She's spent years on the road with Abraham. When they were in Egypt once he passed her off as his sister instead of his wife, hoping to gain Pharaoh's favor ... and then a few years later he did it again! And all this time she's been waiting and hoping for a child, but nothing. And God has kept on promising that Abraham would be a father ... until finally she suggested that Abraham get together with her servant Hagar, and of course Hagar had little Ishmael ... but that whole relationship has been nothing but grief for Sarah.

And here comes an angel from God, once again, and he says she's going to have a baby. HA HA HA. *Say it with me, HA HA HA.* Like that's going to happen!

Why is Sarah laughing? Well it's just so ridiculous—someone saying that she's going to have a baby. She's older than any of the women in our congregation except Rene Wilson and Jeanne Black—how would you women who're over 80 (heck, over 70 ... 60 ... 50!) feel if someone told you you'd be delivering a baby in nine months? HA HA HA. Sarah knows the way the world works—and women her age—women for whom menstruation is merely a memory—those women just don't get pregnant.

But of course, the joke was on Sarah. Nine months later and here came baby Isaac. And now she was laughing for joy. “God has brought laughter for me”—and wasn't her child named *he*

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Telling the Truth*, qtd. in Don Hoffman, “F. Buechner on Sarah Laughing (Gen. 18), PRCL-L. 12 Jun 2008. 14 Jun 2008.

*laughs?*—“everyone who hears will laugh with me.” I imagine that every time Sarah looked at her little son, every time she held him in her arms, every time she saw him lying in the shade of the tent playing with his toes ... I imagine then she felt that joy come welling up inside of her, that laughter of pure joy, for hadn’t God done something completely unexpected, completely wonderful ... completely miraculous? Ninety-year-old women don’t have babies ... but God promised it, and Sarah did.

There are lots of miracles in the Bible. And when you think about them—the burning bush that wasn’t consumed by fire, Jesus walking on water, Lazarus raised from the dead—they’re all violations of natural law, of “the way the world works.” These things “just don’t happen,” the same way 90-year-old women just don’t have babies. They’re so unexpected as to be impossible ... and I wonder if laughter like Sarah’s isn’t the way people responded to a lot of the miracles in the Bible.

The sea parted—just dried up with a nice path through it—so the Israelites could come across! *What?* HA HA HA. ... Wow.

The sun stopped moving for almost a complete day! *What?* HA HA HA. ... Wow.

Jesus went to a wedding and turned water into wine! *What?* HA HA HA. ... Wow.

Christ died and rose again. *What?* HA HA HA.

Thomas had some trouble with that last one, didn’t he? He didn’t seem to be laughing when he said to the rest of the disciples, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.”

It’s as if he was saying, when first confronted with this cosmic joke, this cosmic turning the world upside down, “No! That’s foolishness! I’m not laughing, I’m not rejoicing. I’m sticking to what I can see, hear, taste and smell. I’m sticking to what I know is the way the world works, and it’s a low-down, gritty, mean world. Stuff happens and then you die. That’s it.”

Uh-huh. Except that God is alive in the world. And God turned the world upside down by raising his son from the grave. God burst the bonds of death. God looked death in the eye and said, “Nyah, nyah, nyah, nyah, nyah!” God looked at death’s power to end life completely and said, HA HA HA.

It looks like foolishness to those who don’t believe, as Paul said. But “God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength” (1 Corinthians 1:25). God’s foolishness is the greatest joke ever.

And like old Sarah, rocking herself back and forth, tears streaming down her cheeks, we can only grin and laugh, slap our hands on our knees, and shout with joy. It’s unexpected, it’s impossible, it’s miraculous, it’s grace.

HA HA HA. Wow.