

Metaphor in Preaching

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Easter Sunday Sermon

So . . . there's a man who's going to go rob a house. He's a professional, see, and so he carefully stakes out a big nice house in a quiet little town. He watches all day, until the people he has seen coming and going come out all together, dressed up for a fancy dinner. He knows they are all gone, and will be out for some time.

So the thief walks up to the house, and knocks—"Hello?"—no answer. He tries the door and, because this is a nice quiet town just like this one, he finds it unlocked. "Hello?" he calls again, from the foyer. And this time he hears a voice from far away faintly say what sounds like "Shame on you—I see you, and Jesus sees you."

He's intrigued, but not really that scared, and so the thief walks down the hallway. Again, a voice says, "I see you, and Jesus sees you." The light in the back of the kitchen is on. Maybe, he thinks, there's an invalid grandparent who's been left behind as the family goes out for a nice night. He walks to the back of the kitchen and around the corner, and there he sees . . . a parrot in a cage. The parrot looks at him and says, "I see you, and Jesus sees you."

And the thief is not afraid. In fact, he smacks the side of the bird's cage, tossing it from its perch. "You silly creature," he says, "I'm not afraid of you." The bird, ruffled, gets up, and looks the man straight in the eye—"I see you, and Jesus sees you!" And then the bird looks behind the thief. The thief turns, following the parrot's gaze, just in time to see a giant, slobbering Doberman launch itself off the bottom of the back stairwell. "Sic 'em, Jesus!" the parrot screams!

You like it? This was a joke told to me by a Roman Catholic priest in the middle of Lent. And he, along with our local Methodist pastor, have been joking about it with me in a group text since then, in part because there's nothing tired clergy need more at this point of the year than humor. But Bill, my Roman Catholic stand-up friend, *did* tell me

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that there's a tradition in the church of telling a joke on Easter Sunday—because today is the day that God plays a divine joke on all of us!

Today, God plays the ultimate joke on death and evil—you may think you've won, God chuckles to herself, but have I got a punchline for you. Today, against all the forces of darkness and evil, God has the last laugh.

At the risk of exposing myself as the pompous jackass you all suspect me to be, let me say that my favorite book for many years now has been *Moby Dick*. I've read it now quite a few times, and each time it seems like a bit of a different story—that's what great literature is, it's something we can come back to again and again. So, first time I read *Moby Dick*, it's about humanity's fight with nature. Second time maybe it's about evil versus good, a work of process theology. Third time—very boring book about whaling with way too much detail.

Now the *fourth* time I read *Moby Dick*, although I knew it was coming, the beginning of chapter 49 really captured me. Here, Melville writes in the voice of his narrator, Ishmael: "There are certain queer times and occasions in this strange mixed affair we call life when a man takes this whole universe for a vast practical joke, though the wit thereof he but dimly discerns, and more than suspects that the joke is at nobody's expense but his own." I read *Moby Dick* again this winter, and I let this quote become the lens through which I read the entire book. I read it as Melville's great big joke on me, the reader: *Moby Dick* as a parody of all the Great American Novel is supposed to be. At the very least, reading *Moby Dick* as comedy makes it much more entertaining. Reading those long digressions on whaling practices in an ironic faux-scholarly tone makes them much more tolerable.

What I want to ask you to do today is to do the same with the gospel.

Consider Easter—the very miracle of the resurrection—as a great joke. God's parody of our expectations and fears. I bet that the moment where Jesus revealed himself to Mary, she felt exactly like Melville's Ishmael—that the whole of the world, the whole of her life, was one big long joke, and herself the butt of it. And with what joy must Mary have greeted her Lord—her friend—who was lost but now was found, who was dead but now was risen, who was gone forever but suddenly there in the flesh to show her—*her*—that God would get the last laugh.

I'd like to imagine the moment right before that moment too, the moment in the garden where the Holy Trinity are giggling together behind Mary's back. They know just how shocked Mary will be when

this silly gardener turns out to be none other than the beloved teacher she thought utterly gone. God rubs her hands together because she is so tickled this all worked out so perfectly. The Holy Spirit throws an elbow into Jesus's side (maybe the Christ winces, he's still sore from that spear). "Sic 'em, Jesus," I can hear the Spirit saying, "Go show her that there are no tears to be cried, unless they are tears of joy and mirth."

That's not a good joke—that is a *great* joke! A great joke that God is playing on us—and on all the powers, principalities, and pharaohs of this world. A joke played on death—and everything else—that pretends that it is greater than God's love for us. A joke played on doubt, and hurt, and sin—and all those thieving fears that make us wonder if God's promises ever really will be fulfilled, or if anyone is ever coming back to save us. A joke played on everything—even our very worst selves—that would set itself up as if it could come between us and God. Joke's on us! April Fools!

Now you know a good joke takes time to develop. Maybe even three days in a tomb. A good joke holds us in suspense . . . we know that something is coming, but we don't know when to expect it, or what form it will take. A good joke makes us chuckle—but a great joke . . . a great joke makes us reframe everything. We have to rethink the whole story that we just heard. We might even have to rethink the whole of our world!

A great joke makes us see everything differently, reconsider what we know. And that's exactly what Easter should do. That's what Easter can do, if we are willing to get in on the joke with Jesus.

There are so many times when this old world seems bleak and hopeless. Times when a knowing, dark humor is the very thing called for, the very thing that will save us from the pit of despair. I'm talking about a good, clean, liberating laugh—a laugh that is tinged with relief. Not a laugh from a dirty pun or at someone else's hurt. A laugh that comes from the world being exposed for just as silly, just as paper thin, as we have always suspected it to be. I think that's how Mary might have laughed—with joy, delight, relief—when she realized who she was speaking to in the garden that day.

That's a laugh God wills for us today—yes, even in church! Today you get to giggle, chortle, chuckle, even snort a little in church. Because today we celebrate that God chose what seems weak and foolish to us to be our source of strength, and the salvation of us all! Joke's on us—we are the fools! May we all be fools for Christ. For being fools for Christ means we recognize that the same sad story this old world tells us is merely the setup to God's most famous punchline:

Oh death, where is thy sting?
Oh tomb, where is your victory?

Those powers of death and sin—those thieves of joy and hope—are vanity of vanities, nothing more than God’s cosmic setup.

Being fools for Christ may make us act in ways the world deems foolish: Loving more radically, more freely than any rational person would. Raising kids to value themselves for who they are and not what they do. Giving away our wealth instead of hoarding it. Turning the other cheek and being peacemakers in our homes and in our streets.

Fools for Christ will share, care, preach, and teach in ways this old world is not ready for. And when they tell us “You can’t do that!” or, “That’s not how that works!,” we fools will just laugh to ourselves, and pray they someday get in on the joke too. This day we should all be foolish—not just for April, but for Christ! For the resurrection is a brilliant, wonderful joke! A masterpiece of timing and upheaval that forces us to read the rest of the story differently.

So many thieves *do* sneak in in the night. They wait until it is dark—when our defenses are down, when our best selves have gone out to dinner or taken the night off. So many thieves break in to steal what hope we have tried to shore up for ourselves. We have no power in ourselves to save ourselves, which means that we are entirely reliant on God’s grace and power—things that seem foolish entirely at first reading. At times like that, it is as if we find ourselves alone in that dark tomb, not sure of how or whether we will make it out—and if so, what the point could even be. Beset by thieving doubt . . . by temptation . . . by evil . . . by fear—it would seem we are trapped in the same old story.

But suddenly there comes a voice—“I see you, and Jesus sees you.” And then the light bursts forth, with the luminosity of a thousand suns, and a voice seeming as if from heaven proclaims the words that will roll the stone away and set us free—“Sic ’em, Jesus!”

Commentary

My perspective on sermon writing was changed forever by a writing seminar, Words That Sing II, with Professor Mary Nielsen at the Collegeville Institute. My greatest learning from Mary was a lesson in simplicity. How many metaphors could we use per work? Mary is a gentle Midwestern Lutheran soul, but her insistence on this topic was rock solid and the fervor of her conviction makes her pound the table emphatically in my memory. *One* metaphor. You get *one* metaphor in

a piece of writing,¹ even in a book-length work. For the purposes of this piece, I will use Mary's definition of a metaphor as nearly any use of figurative language.

Stripping down to one metaphor is hard. This stripping down also means eliminating "dead metaphors" from the sermon's language. Dead metaphors are the patterns of speech that began as figurative language but are now so commonly used we rarely think of them as nonliteral: "He really warmed up to her." "It all went swimmingly." "This sermon is total crap." Mary showed me how each of these could be replaced with a single, more direct word, saving precious time and word count in a homily.

We've been using metaphors for generations and calling them sermon illustrations, because from the time of Augustine and his peers, preachers have recognized that the stories of a first-century Jewish man work within a very different material world than we inhabit. Jesus never told a parable about a smart phone, or revealed the best way to be Christian in a dispute over the use of reply all on an email chain. Chorazin might be full of jerks, but if you can't tell me what exit it is off the turnpike, why would I care about their woe? In a way, every act of interpretation, and certainly every application of biblical narrative to everyday life is a figurative use of language: a translation of sorts.

More urgently, in a postmodern, postbiblical literacy, post-Christendom world, even words that were thought to be well understood need some figurative explication. I read that same book you did about an actual shepherd interpreting Psalm 23, but more of my congregation is familiar with Cesar Milan's version of animal husbandry. What even do we mean by "grace" or "repentance"? What does it actually mean to forgive someone's trespasses as they have forgiven ours?

Jesus used plenty of metaphors in his own preaching. The parables are metaphors, as lengthy as some are. Indeed in their span, they demonstrate what I treasure most about figurative language—it can be spacious, generous in a way that invites listeners or readers to do some of their own work of interpretation and translation. A seemingly simple story creates an entire world of meaning—or really, worlds of meaning. All preachers have had the experience of having someone thank them wholeheartedly for something they are very sure they did

¹ Of course, all rules are meant to be broken—or flouted, to borrow a term from linguistics—but only in order to make a greater point.

not say. Perhaps none of us have been greeted by an estranged father with the promise of a fatted calf, but we can all reflect on what it would mean for the most fraught of our familial relationships to be resolved not only in reconciliation but in joy. So in a way, I did say that you should call your sister during that sermon about Ezekiel. (More accurately, the Spirit whispered it to you while my lips were moving.)

This sermon printed above is mine from this past Easter Sunday, which fell on April Fools' Day. In it I make a very silly joke into a metaphor for the pinnacle of salvation history. This may be pushing the one-metaphor rule, but I think it works on two levels—first, the understanding (which turns out to have quite a long history of orthodox theology behind it!) of the resurrection as God's great joke on us all, and second, the joke itself functioning as a parable, a large-scale metaphor for what it can feel like to walk through Holy Week. As faithful as we want to be to Christ, and as secure as our lives may be, it should and does feel like a dangerous thing to participate in the Maundy Thursday and Good Friday liturgies. Have we left open doors that ought to be locked tight? Does the crucifixion challenge our faith in ways that Sunday cannot recover? Is our greatest treasure left vulnerable to the thieves who see Holy Saturday as a prime opportunity? And who—or what—are those thieves, then? Suggesting some ideas, without pinning the audience down to one villain, invites people to fill in their own details. Like a well-rehearsed joke, we learn to tolerate, even enjoy the setup because we know the arc of the story and remember the relief of the punchline.

This is by no means a perfect sermon. (I'm sure there are typos galore; that Melville bit doesn't work too well and makes me sound like the pompous jackass you know me to be.) But it is one that brought me great joy in the preaching and the writing of it. Somewhere in some preaching textbook I have on my shelf, a better preacher than me encourages us to preach sermons we are excited about. You should wake up on Sunday eager to share with the congregation what you have learned from or coaxed out of a text. And this is, finally, why I'll continue to preach in metaphor all the days I have left in the pulpit: figurative language has the ability to push us to new and exciting places in interpretation and application. A comparison that has never been made can make a millennia-old text suddenly new again. A story that has never been preached from can make a weird-sounding prophecy suddenly compelling. And a sermon that is as fun to preach as this one is can make a believer out of even the most jaded of pastors, come Easter Sunday.