

## “April Fools!”

By Rev. Elizabeth D. McLean, Prince of Peace Presbyterian Church  
4-1-18 Easter Sunday  
Based upon Luke 24:1-43

“Christ is risen! Alleluia!” We say this every Easter Sunday. But the joy of this proclamation takes on a whole new kind of meaning today because in addition to it being Easter today, it is also April Fools’ Day. This is the first time in my lifetime that Easter has fallen on April 1<sup>st</sup>. The last time was 1956. When humanity adopted the Gregorian calendar in the Middle Ages, that change, combined with the fact that Easter is dated to track Passover, which is dated by the lunar calendar, made it so that Easter and April 1<sup>st</sup> rarely coincide. It has happened only eleven times since 1700. So preachers this year have a potentially once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to celebrate the joy and laughter of Easter on a day already designated for unexpected laughter, and to consider the wonderful gift of the empty tomb through the lens of the foolishness of April Fools’ Day.

I am delighted by this confluence of dates, notwithstanding the fact that I am not really an April Fools-kind of gal. Maybe I was born too serious or sensitive, but I have never enjoyed practical jokes. They usually seem to me to be more mean than funny. For example, when I was in camp as a middle-schooler, my roommates short-sheeted my bed for a prank, and then took the old standard up a notch by smashing a watermelon inside the sheets too. “So funny!” they thought. I didn’t think so when I climbed into bed that night. When I was in college, a friend of mine, I’ll call Jim, thought it would be funny if he took the old teddy bear I have had since I was three, named Pongo, and stuck him up over a smoke alarm that I couldn’t reach in my room. I didn’t notice him up there until I was awakened in the middle of the night by a voice coming from under my bed saying, “Pongo is the devil!” Jim had recorded his voice on a tape player, leaving blank time for me to fall asleep, and was cracking up in the hallway when my roommate and I leapt out of bed shrieking at the sound of the voice, and found Pongo seemingly hovering in the dark over the smoke alarm. Ha, ha, ha. Not. He thought that we were afraid Pongo had been possessed, but we were actually more worried that Jim was hiding under our bunk bed! Not long after he got us, he got in serious trouble pranking another friend by filling the entire hallway leading to his room with Styrofoam cups filled with water and then setting off the alarm so that friend ran out knocking cups of water everywhere.

I guess some people are born thinking pranks are funny and others that they are not. But when it comes to actual April Fools’ pranks, there are some doozies in history that were so good that even I have to laugh. One of my favorites was perpetrated by the very proper BBC television station of all sources. On April 1, 1957, BBC’s *Panorama* television program ran a news segment supposedly of a family in Switzerland harvesting spaghetti from trees.<sup>1</sup> **[Slide shown of image from article.]** If you’re ever bored you can still find the “mockumentary” video on YouTube. Back then pasta was a delicacy in Britain, so a surprising number of viewers fell for the hoax, calling the station asking where they could buy their own trees. Others started a

---

<sup>1</sup> Power, Ed, *April Fools' Day - the best pranks from spaghetti trees to left-handed burgers*, Independent.ie, posted April 1, 2016, retrieved Mar. 26, 2018 from <https://www.independent.ie/entertainment/April-fools-day-the-best-pranks-from-spaghetti-trees-to-lefthanded-burgers-34588326.html>

secondary joke that you could grow your own crop by planting the contents of a can of spaghetti in tomato sauce in the ground. I wish I had some footage of how the people of Italy reacted to that one.

Another great April Fools' joke, this one perpetrated on BBC radio by an astronomer named Patrick Moore, took place in 1976. Moore claimed that at 9:47 a.m. on April 1<sup>st</sup> of that year, Pluto was going to pass behind Jupiter, which would have the effect of temporarily lessening the pull of gravity on Earth. He told listeners that if they jumped in the air at that time, they would find that they could float. Soon after the report aired, the BBC received calls from people all over the world insisting that they had defied gravity. Talk about giving new meaning to the whole idea of "a leap of faith!"<sup>2</sup>

But what about the leap of faith required for us to celebrate today? Since none of us here got to see the empty tomb or to touch the wounds in the resurrected Christ's hands and feet ourselves, we cannot justify our Easter joy by citing those experiences as the first disciples did. Is the joke on us this April Fools' Day because we are celebrating something as unbelievable as the Resurrection? Is the good news of Easter the ancient equivalent of spaghetti trees?

If you had asked the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem, the Romans, and even the disciples themselves on the day of Jesus' crucifixion, they would have said that the joke was on all who had thought on Palm Sunday that Jesus was God's chosen king. The disciples had believed that Jesus was God's son and had divine powers. They believed that he was the Messiah whom God had sent to save them. Then the crowds chose Barabbas instead of Jesus to be released, and Jesus died a painful, humiliating death on the cross like a common criminal. Where was God then? Who did that make Jesus then? "April Fools Disciples!" you can almost hear in the tone, if not the actual words of some of the comments scattered throughout the Passion narrative. The soldiers dress Jesus up and mock him saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" People in the crowds watching him die cry out, "He saved others, let him save himself," and "Ooo look, he's calling Elijah." Even the Centurion's remark after Jesus died, "Surely this man was the Son of God!" was just as likely a joking, sarcastic remark as it was a faithful, inspired one. "What kind of a God dies on a cross? What kind of a Savior can't even save himself? 'April Fools!' followers of Jesus. Ha, ha, ha!"

The disciples did not think that Jesus' death was funny, however, nor did they think it was funny when the women who first discovered the empty tomb came to tell them Jesus was raised. "What a mean and stupid joke," they thought. "People don't just come back from the dead." To show just how disillusioned and embittered the disciples were feeling by then, Luke used the only swear word in the Bible to describe their reaction to the women's news. He says the disciples thought their story was "BS." So when the risen Christ joined a pair of his followers, Cleopas and someone else, probably his wife, as they left Jerusalem and headed for the nearby town of Emmaus, no one was laughing or bursting with Easter joy. "Why the long faces?" Jesus asked the two, who did not recognize him either because he was keeping them from doing so, or more likely because grief was. "What?! Have you been hiding under a rock?" they replied. "We had been following Jesus of Nazareth, a mighty prophet in deed and word, but

---

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

the authorities handed him over to be crucified. We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel, but clearly the joke was on us.” April Fools!

“You guys are pretty foolish,” Jesus basically agreed, but not for the reason they were expecting. They were not foolish for believing in Jesus, he told them; they were foolish for *not* believing the good news that the women had shared with them. “Don’t you know by now that everything that has happened the prophets foretold?” Jesus said. Then he walked them step-by-step through the history of God’s involvement with humankind and God’s plan for humanity’s redemption in Scripture so that they would understand that everything that had happened had happened for a reason. The disciples listened carefully, and felt their hearts burning within them, but it wasn’t until dinnertime, when Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it that their eyes were opened and they recognized him. After that, they realized that the joke was never really on them in the first place. The joke was on the authorities who had thought they could control God’s grace, and on the Romans who had thought they had the power to kill God’s plan by killing Jesus. The joke was on everybody who believed that violence and hatred were more powerful than mercy and love, and on a world which believed that death always gets the last word. “April Fools!” God said. “Love actually wins!” Notwithstanding the evidence to the contrary, the April Fools of Easter is that God is more powerful than evil and even more powerful than death. There is always reason to hope because God is not done with us yet. God is only just getting started, and nothing is impossible for God. Nothing.

Not everyone got the joke back then, even though Paul tried very hard to explain it. “For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God,” he explained to the Corinthians. “Where is the one who is wise?... Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. (*1 Cor.* 1:20-21). Not everyone gets the joke now either. There will always be people who say, “It couldn’t happen. People do not come back from the dead.” There will always be people who say, “Look around. Love has not won, evil has.” There will always be people who see vulnerability and mercy as weakness, and loving everyone including sinners, strangers, and enemies as utter foolishness. But none of that changes the truth of the Good News of Easter.

If the empty tomb had been just a prank, then the disciples’ insistence that it changes everything would have been written off as a bad joke in short order or been quashed when a body was found. If Jesus weren’t raised, millions would not have been willing to die throughout the ages rather than deny the truth that they had encountered the risen Lord. If God’s grace did not truly carry the day, it would not still have the ability to transform so many lives. Yet it does. The Easter proclamation about the amazing, transforming power of God’s grace continues to be alive and well because Christ *was* raised. Even now he is at work, lifting us up out of our despair, out of our narrow-minded negative, fear-driven thinking. Even now he is at work, trying to get us to trust and believe that despite all of our brokenness we are loved. Even now Christ’s grace is at work enabling us to overcome suffering, and to move step-by-step closer to experiencing the kingdom of God on earth. This why today is a day filled with joy and laughter. That is why there is no shame in being thought of as an Easter April Fool by the world on this day or any day.

We know that “God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.” (*1 Cor.* 1:25).

Now I’m not saying that evil and suffering are not real, or that it’s all in our imaginations that the world seems so messed up. Presbyterians are not like Christian Scientists in believing that our pain is all in our minds. We take the problems of our world very seriously. But as Easter people, we approach those problems differently from how others do because we know thanks to the risen Christ, that nothing in ourselves or the world is beyond God’s power to redeem. So, we always have hope. When hardships befall us, we know that our God has the power and the desire to help us begin again. When evil seems to carry the day, we know that God can work good out of anything. Easter changes how we see the world

Easter also changes how we see ourselves if we allow it to take hold of our hearts and minds. Richard Rohr put it this way. He said, “When you are a ‘holy fool’ you’ve stopped trying to look like something more than you really are. That’s when you know, as you eventually have to know, that we are all naked underneath our clothes, and we don’t need to pretend to be better than we are. I am who I am, who I am, who I am; and that creation, for some unbelievable reason, is who God loves, precisely in its uniqueness. My true identity and my deepest freedom come from God’s infinite love for me, not from what people think of me or say about me.”<sup>3</sup> Think you’re unlovable because you are broken or because the world has told you that you are wrong in some way? “Now that’s a spaghetti tree if I ever heard one,” the empty tomb proclaims. Christ died and rose again *for you*. You can’t get a stronger proclamation that you are loved.

As all the BBC pranks demonstrate, April Fools’ Day is not simply an American tradition. It has been celebrated for centuries all around the world. But in France, when someone is the victim of an April Fools’ prank, he or she is not called a fool, but rather a “Poisson d’Avril,” that is an “April fish.”<sup>4</sup> Apparently the expression comes from the fact that fish which can be caught in April are clearly young fish and therefore foolish fish because they haven’t yet learned to be wary. Anyway, the French delight in shouting “Poisson D’Avril!” at people every April 1<sup>st</sup>, as well as doing pranks which involve fish in some way. Now by mentioning this, I am not suggesting that we follow their example, so please do not try to prank me with a fish because the odds are good that I will not find it funny. But given that Jesus himself has long been symbolized by a fish, I do like the idea of shouting “Poisson D’Avril!” instead of “April Fools!”, especially on Easter Sunday. On this Easter Sunday, this April Fools’ Day, may we rejoice in the fact that we are “Poisson D’Avril” fools for the Fish who died and rose again for us, and may the way we see ourselves and our world forever be transformed by the infinitely wise foolishness of God. Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Thanks be to God!

---

<sup>3</sup> Adapted from “*Franciscan Mysticism*,” an unpublished talk, excerpted in *Richard Rohr’s Daily Meditation* email for December 17, 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Mikkelsen, Barbara, *April Fools’ Day Origins*, Snopes, last updated Apr. 1, 2015, retrieved Mar. 26, 2018 from <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/April-fools39-day-origins/>