

Easter Sunday: Day of Resurrection  
April 1, 2018  
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Acts 10:34-43  
Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24  
1 Corinthians 15:1-11  
Mark 16:1-8

It's an odd coincidence of timing this year that April Fools' Day should fall on Easter Sunday. It hasn't happened since 1956. That was 62 years ago.

The coincidence has inspired some folk to dream up some April Fools' Day pranks specific to Easter Sunday:

the easiest trick is not to boil the Easter Eggs before dyeing them (the messiest also!);  
unwrap the foil from a chocolate egg, and then use the foil to wrap a grape;  
fill plastic eggs with useful items (paper clips or rubber bands) instead of jelly beans;  
make a sponge cake with real sponge, then cover with real frosting;  
fill a hollow chocolate bunny with mustard or mayonnaise – ketchup would be gross!

I'm only letting you in on these ideas now because the joke will be on me if I'm still here to be pranked the next time this holy day lands on the same day as this foolish holiday. It's possible I'll still be here (in 2029), because I'll still be one year shy of mandatory retirement, but ...

I *want* to tell you that April Fools' Day goes back to the earliest days of the Christian Church. I *want* to tell you that it really does have its roots in Easter. I *want* to tell you all that, but (as it turns out) I can't; as far as I can tell, April Fools' Day really has nothing to do with Easter ...

But it should.

Last night, I shared a sermon by John Chrysostom, from the late 4<sup>th</sup> century – and it got raucous here; I had Episcopalians whooping and stomping in response! Here are just a few lines from that sermon that got folks going; they're not slapstick lines, but you'll appreciate the twists:

Hell took a body, and discovered God.  
It took earth, and encountered Heaven.  
It took what it saw, and was overcome by what it did not see.

He wasn't alone. A couple of other 4<sup>th</sup> century theologians – Gregory of Nyssa, for one; St. Augustine, for another – held that God played a practical joke on the devil at Easter by raising Jesus from the dead. They called it *Risus paschalis* – the "Easter laugh."

In the Greek Orthodox tradition, clergy and laity would gather in church on Easter Monday to tell stories and jokes. In many parts of Europe where humorless Christianity was the norm, clergy were once told to tell at least one joke in their sermons throughout the Easter season. The medieval Church believed that Satan had no power over those who laughed deeply.

Calvinists and Puritans – in days of old and today – have been suspicious of laughter and pleasure. But they don't speak for us all. In the last century, Karl Barth once said, "Laughter is the closest thing to heaven." And one of my favorite quotes from the English writer G. K. Chesterton is this: "Angels can fly because they can take themselves lightly."

I'm not advocating silliness for the sake of foolishness. But I do want to make sure we hang on to this: the arc of the Bible is comedy. For all that goes so predictably wrong, it all turns right in the end. I remind you it was good news of great joy that the angels first announced at Jesus' birth. The Presbyterian preacher Frederick Buechner says this about biblical storylines: "The tragic is inevitable. The comedy is unforeseeable."

And that's the essence of the Easter story, as well. Those in power thought that once Jesus was dead, he'd be out of their way; they thought things could go back to normal. The religious leaders condemned Jesus. Pilate ordered his execution. The soldiers mocked Jesus, dressing him in purple and kneeling before him. The chief priests taunted him, telling him to come down from the cross. They were supremely confident that crucifixion would be the end of that fool.

That should have been the end of it, so far as they could imagine. But the joke, of course, was on them. They could kill Jesus, but they couldn't make him stay dead. God gets the last laugh.

Appropriately, at least so far as I'm concerned, Easter stories should amuse us. The stories all start early in the morning, with women on their way to the tomb. That's the first bitter joke of the day. In one of his sermons, our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry puts it this way:

... let's take the attendance of the apostles at the crucifixion of their Lord. Simon Peter? Absent. James? Absent. Andrew? Absent. Bartholomew? Absent. Judas? Absent. Mary Magdalene? Present and accounted for! ...

But that's not all. On that Easter morning, who gets up and goes to the tomb of Jesus. Not Peter. Not Andrew. Not James. Not John. But Mary and some of the sisters!<sup>1</sup>

As Mark tells it, Mary Magdalene and two "of the sisters" set off to complete the rites they'd been prevented from completing on Friday. The "chosen ones" were nowhere to be seen.

And it occurs to these women – but only after they set out it seems – that they're going to need help; somebody's going to have to roll the stone – "which was very large" – out of the way. They seem to be looking for a "few good men" ... but good men are in short supply. When they arrive, of course, they find the stone already moved. So it turns out these women don't need a man at all after all.

Then they go inside, expecting to find a body. But instead they find a guy, just sitting there, and apparently waiting for them. Matthew and Luke talk about angels who make a big entrance, but Mark just has this dude hangin' out. And he says, "Yeah ... Jesus isn't here."

He says more than that, of course, but note the humor first. “Yeah ... he used to be laid out right there. But he’s not there anymore. He’s been raised. You should probably go look for him somewhere else.”

The women don’t take his suggestion all that well, truth be told. Mark tells us that the women fled from the tomb ... and even though they’d been told to go and tell Peter and the others what they themselves had been told, “they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”

I’ve been scratching my head over their silence. The women had always excelled at doing what was needed – far exceeding what the men could manage – so why falter now?

And I’ve come up with two notions. On one hand, perhaps they just found it all too much. Maybe they couldn’t accept what this young man had to say.

On first blush, that actually makes a lot of sense to me. In some of the other gospel accounts of that first Easter, it doesn’t take folks very long to get pretty giddy about it all. But shock and disbelief and paralysis all seem more authentic. Which is to say maybe the women “said nothing to anyone” because they didn’t accept what they’d been told – at least not right away.

But then again, maybe “they said nothing to anyone” not because they *didn’t* accept what the “young man” told them, but because they DID. Because if it’s true, then an empty tomb is not the end of a fool’s story, it’s just the beginning. And Jesus isn’t done with them yet.

Go to Galilee, the young man said. Go back home, where this whole thing started ... and expect to see Jesus there. Even if nobody else can see him – or the difference he makes – you go back there and look for him there until you see him. And then follow where he leads next.

That’s terrifying. Because it means they cannot simply anoint Jesus’ body and then return to their homes and their quiet lives. It means they’ll have to live like Jesus, forgive like Jesus, love like Jesus ... and just maybe die like Jesus, too.

Rest assured. The women did eventually speak up and speak out, of course. Though it must have terrified them to say anything to anyone, they must have. And then they went on to live Easter lives. Two thousand years of history is proof enough of that. We’re proof of that.

Jesus was, by many accounts, a fool. And it got him killed. Except you can’t kill that!

And so, two thousand years after the old powers-that-be killed Jesus, we still hold that Jesus still matters. And we’re still talking about Jesus ... and what he taught and what he did, who he loved and how he loved them ... and what difference it still makes in our lives and our world.

And you know what this means? It means the joke’s on us really. It means that Easter will, if we let it in, make fools of us all. Not April Fools. Easter Fools.

And that is why, before this morning is over, we'll be dismissed with words that tell us, one way or another, to go forth to live like Jesus, to forgive like Jesus, to love like Jesus. Or to put it just a little differently ... In the name of Jesus, go forth and prank the world.

And because we really are Easter Fools, we'll accept the charge. We'll say, "Thanks be to God." And for extra measure, we'll even add, "Alleluia. Alleluia."

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Curry, "We Need Some Crazy Christians," in *Crazy Christians* (Morehouse Publishing, 2013), p. 4.