

April Fools'

Luke 24: 1-12

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Easter

Centuries ago a monk was pondering the meaning of Holy Week. "What a surprise ending," he thought. Then suddenly, like a bolt of lightning, he had a new insight. And he started laughing and kept laughing. He laughed so hard that he startled his fellow monks. I mean this was a monastery, a place of piety. So they looked at their laughing brother with that look that said, "Have you lost your mind?"

But he looked at them and said: "Don't you see? It was a joke! Easter was a joke....the best joke in all history! On Good Friday, when Jesus was crucified, the devil thought he had won! But on Easter God raised Jesus from the dead. Satan had been fooled and God had the last laugh on Easter."

So the monks called it, *The Easter Laugh*," and began a monastic tradition that on Easter Monday they would gather to tell jokes, to laugh, to remember that the joke had been played on Satan and God had the last laugh.

On this April Fools' Day, we remember God had the last laugh...Satan had been fooled....that Jesus, once dead, was alive....resurrected. Happy April Fools' Day, Satan!

I

And it was the women, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, Joanna, and other women, says the gospel writer Luke, who went to the tomb. "On the first day of the week, at early dawn, they [the women] came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared."

We remember that the women of the first century Middle East did not get much press, but Luke says earlier in his gospel that it was a group of women who also accompanied Jesus and the disciples and that they provided financial support for Jesus and his ministry. This means some of the women were of means; and it also says something about how Jesus saw people, not just their gender, and included them in his ministry.

Now we can imagine how low and depressed these women must have been on that Sunday morning. In a time, in a culture and in a religion where the prayers of Jewish men thanked God that they were not born a woman, these women had been embraced by Jesus, included in his ministry, and they had responded as loyal followers. So while the men disciples slept, these women did what you and I often do when a dear loved one of ours has died — we honor them somehow — by doing something, anything that shows our respect, love and admiration: by placing a flower or a flag on the grave. Our Moravian neighbors wash the tombstones and often write tributes, or memorialize the dead with plaques, or honor them with a placard inside a hymnal.

But for this group of women, their act of honor was bringing the perfumed oils with which they would perform the gruesome task of coating Jesus' dead and decaying body. Because Jesus had died as the Sabbath approached, the religious laws prevented this being done at the time of his death.

Then the news that would stun Jerusalem: The stone covering the tomb had been rolled away. So walking into the tomb, the women found no body. Instead, two angels stood. The women were so terrified that they looked at the ground. And then they heard these words: "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen."

The angels reminded the women of Jesus' words foretelling what would happen, and they remembered. Leaving the tomb they returned to the disciples and told them what they had discovered.

The disciples' reaction? Luke says they did not believe the women. Rather, it seemed to them preposterous, an April Fools' joke, or as Luke says, "an idle tale." I mean, can't we hear their response? "Who can believe these hysterical women and their exaggerated stories?" But Peter, spontaneous and combustible, got up and ran to the tomb to see for himself. What he saw were the linen cloths, used to wrap the dead body, lying there in the tomb. He went home stunned....amazed.

Wouldn't it be something to discover that the first Easter actually fell on the Gregorian calendar's April 1st....April Fools' Day! I mean, God does have a sense of humor, don't you think?

II

Of course, there are a lot of people in our culture who think Easter really is an April Fools' Day joke, an idea so preposterous that they smirk at Easter, and laugh at a faith built on an empty tomb and a once dead preacher being resurrected. And they think you and I are the "fools" for

being so gullible to base our life on the reality of God, or that our God was actually a God-Man, who was killed on Friday and arose on Sunday.

No, for some, Easter is a kid's fairy tale in which a bunny comes and leaves candy and eggs.

So where are you on Easter? I mean it is a wonderful day of music and alleluias! There is a spirit of joy and celebration in the air. It is a day when we dress festively, eat scrumptiously, and celebrate the arrival of spring. Even if we are not quite sure about this *religion thing*, this is a day we want to be a part of....right? So where are you on Easter?

Well, three old guys often had breakfast together at a local diner where they tried to impress each other with their school of hard knocks knowledge. One day the waitress asked them if they were ready for Easter. One of the guys baited the others by saying, "I bet you guys don't even know what Easter is."

One guy said, "Easter is a holiday where there is a big feast and people give thanks and eat turkey." The second guy said, "No, Easter is when we celebrate Jesus' birth and exchange gifts."

"No," said the third guy who had asked the question. "Easter is a Christian holiday that coincides with the Jewish festival of Passover. Jesus was having the Passover feast with his disciples when he was betrayed by Judas, and the Romans arrested him. The Romans hung him on a cross and eventually he died. Then they buried Him in a tomb that was a cave."

The waitress said, "Very impressive!"

Then the guy continued, "Now every year the Jews roll away the stone and Jesus comes out. If he sees his shadow, there is six more weeks of winter."

So where are you on Easter?

If you are a skeptic and believe intellectually that you can't find enough proof to substantiate the resurrection, then you probably never will. Because even if *CNN* had been there on Easter morning, and had filmed the women walking up to the tomb, discovering it empty, then talking to what they believed were angels, what would it prove? That Jesus' body was missing, that the tomb was empty?

And all those stories of people encountering a resurrected, living Jesus...I mean, how can you prove those stories are true and not some hallucination?

I mean, today in 2018, we are raised and educated in a culture that relies on the scientific method of data gathering, and proving and disproving theories with supporting evidence....How can you square the Jesus story of death and resurrection within that criteria?

Though I am convinced that Jesus was authentic through and through, that the story of Holy Week, of crucifixion, death and resurrection are true, I can't prove it....any more than I can prove God is real or God is love by using the scientific method.

Are you with me? Even if I could prove the things surrounding Jesus were historical and factual, I could not use those facts to prove what Easter means.

Because the meaning of Easter is about a resurrecting God; a God who defeats death with resurrection; a God who shows us that our lives will not end with death but that we will be resurrected into a life about which we don't have the imagination or vocabulary to articulate. And just as important, maybe more important, is Easter's meaning that God is a resurrecting God who resurrects our lives with God's purposes.

So when I ask "Where are you on Easter?" it's a lot more than asking what you believe about the facts surrounding the death and resurrection of Jesus. I am asking if you are ready to let this resurrecting God resurrect your life. Or if you are ready to let God use your life for the resurrecting purposes that God is all about.

- Such as taking old values that are "all about me" and letting God's values of being our brother and sister's keeper be resurrected in us.
- Such as dying to things that cripple us emotionally, and letting God resurrect a new spirit in us.
- Such as dying to resentment and letting God resurrect in us a heart of forgiveness.
- Such as letting go of a past of hurts, or mistakes, or failures and being resurrected into a Jesus life that is much more focused on the future than the past.

Where are you on Easter? Wherever you are on your spiritual journey, are you ready to take the next step of resurrection?

III

Now I wondered this week about the origin of April Fools' Day. Some historians say that April Fools' Day dates back to 1582, when France switched to the Gregorian calendar. But communication, being what it was in those days, meant people were slow to get the news that the start of a new year had moved from April 1 to January 1. So somehow the celebration of the New Year on April 1 evolved into a day of jokes, and hoaxes, and pranks.

It became popular and April Fools' Day spread throughout Britain during the 18th century. In Scotland, for instance, the tradition became *hunting the gowk*, in which people were sent on phony errands (*gowk* being a word for the cuckoo bird, a symbol for a fool).

In modern times, people have gone to great lengths to create elaborate April Fools' Day hoaxes.

In 1957, the *BBC* reported that Swiss farmers were experiencing a record spaghetti crop and showed footage of people harvesting noodles from trees! In 1985, *Sports Illustrated* tricked many of its readers when it ran a made-up story about a rookie pitcher named Sidd Finch, who, because he had studied Eastern philosophy, could throw a fastball over one hundred sixty-eight miles per hour.

In 1996, *Taco Bell*, the fast-food restaurant chain, duped people when it announced it had agreed to purchase our country's Liberty Bell and intended to rename it the *Taco Liberty Bell*.

And the *Jerusalem Times* had a headline in 33AD that read: Dead Jewish Prophet Comes Alive! It must have been April 1st .

God has the last laugh!