

Sunday, April 1, 2018

Easter Sunday (Year B)

Acts 10.34-43; 1 Corinthians 15.1-11; John 20.1-18

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For the past year, there has been excited conversations among clergy, both in real life and on-line, about the fact that, this year, Easter falls on April 1st – on April Fools’ Day. Obviously, Easter does not come on April 1st every year. It is just a chance convergence of our solar-based secular calendar and the intricate formula for calculating the date of Easter using the ancient lunar-based Jewish calendar. But clergy have been giddy with anticipation of the opportunity to preach about this confluence of Easter and April Fools’ Day. Because, from a theological perspective, nothing could be more appropriate.

One commentary notes that, functionally speaking, a good joke depends on our ability to see the difference between the world as it is and as it could be. A good joke helps us to see the difference, and the distance, between who we are and who we should be. Or in light of the Easter message, maybe a good joke helps us to see the distance between who we see ourselves to be and who God sees us to be.

All our scripture readings for today – proclaiming the reality of the Resurrection and the implications for humanity – reveal the depths of God’s sense of humor. And in that, the depths of God’s love for us in providing for Jesus’ Resurrection in the first place. Which, as we shall see, is the ultimate joke.

Of course, we with the Gospel, which recounts the first discovery of the Resurrection and Jesus’ first post-Resurrection appearance. Upon arriving at the tomb, Mary Magdalene finds the stone removed from the entrance to the tomb and that the tomb is empty. Despite Jesus having foretold on numerous occasions that he would be resurrected, Mary assumes Jesus’ body had been stolen. April Fools’!

Mary goes and informs the other disciples what appears to have happened. Peter and John go to investigate and find no body. Just the burial linens lying in the tomb. The presence of the burial linens lying on the floor indicate that all the signs of death had been overcome. April Fools’!

When Peter and John return home, Mary is left alone at the tomb. It is only then that Jesus makes his first post-Resurrection appearance. Not recognizing him, Mary assumes Jesus to be the gardener, who must have taken Jesus’ body away. April Fools’!

But the real punchline, at least of this part of the joke, comes when Jesus calls Mary by name. Only then does she recognize him. “Rabbouni!” Only then does she come to know that the Resurrection is true. April Fools’!

Jesus then tells Mary to go tell the other disciples that he has indeed been raised. Mary Magdalene, a woman who lived in a time and a culture that devalued the testimony of women,

was specifically called by Jesus to be the first apostle – the first witness – to announce the news of his Resurrection. April Fools'!

But the joke doesn't end there. The Book of Acts is the witness of the early Church to the life, death, and Resurrection of Jesus. In the portion we heard read today as our first reading, Peter, the one who three times denied even knowing Jesus for fear of both the Jewish and Roman authorities, dares to cross a cultural, religious, and political boundary that separates Jews and Gentiles so that he might proclaim the good news of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, with the express purpose that God's forgiveness would extend beyond the Jews to all people. April Fools'!

While not directly part of the Resurrection story but a Resurrection appearance nonetheless, Paul references that Christ appeared to him – one “unfit to be an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God” (1 Cor 15.9). That Christ would appear to and convert to his own purposes a zealous Pharisaic Jew who was hell-bent on persecuting and seeing put to death anyone who so much as uttered the “blasphemy” that Jesus had been raised from the dead. Paul, who would become one of the most vocal followers of Jesus and the apostle to the Gentiles. April Fools'!

All of these scriptural accounts speak to the witness of the Resurrection, both on that first Easter Day, and in the ongoing life of the early Church. In many ways, the Resurrection was a good joke. Who would believe that anyone could die, be buried, and then come alive again after three days? Even more so when you look at Jesus' life and ministry, at what led up to his death. He was executed under what Presiding Bishop Curry in his Easter message termed “an unholy alliance of religion, politics, and economic self-interest” – the temple authorities, the Roman Empire, and King Herod, conspiring “to crucify the one who taught love the Lord your God, love your neighbor, and actually live that way.” But here, on the third day after the crucifixion, “by the power of the love of God, Jesus was raised from the dead. God sent a message and declared that death does not have the last word. Hatred does not have the last word. Violence does not have the last word. Bigotry does not have the last word. Sin, evil do not have the last word. The last word is God, and God is love.” That is the real April Fools' joke.

The theological truth is that the Resurrection was God's April Fools' joke. Certainly the Resurrection itself, but even more so in what it accomplished. That the powers of evil had seemingly won in that Jesus, Son of God, had been killed. An action that would have seemed to be the defeat of all that is good on the part of all that is evil. In Jesus' death, it looked like sin had won. Death certainly seemed to have won. But in his Resurrection, in rising to new life, Jesus succeeded in not only defeating death, but also succeeded in defeating the bonds of sin that lead to death. What a fitting way for Jesus to mock the hate-filled world that had killed him for proclaiming a message of love than for him to rise from the dead? To come back and carry on the message without possibility of it being squelched? April Fools' indeed.

But there is more to this April Fools' joke. For in defeating sin and death, God, in his unbounded love for us, extended those benefits, freedom from sin, and in that, forgiveness; freedom from death, and in that the promise of new and eternal life; to all God's people.

The April Fools' joke continues even in our own day. Again, as Presiding Bishop Curry states, "The truth is the message of Jesus was unsettling to the world then as it is unsettling to the world now. And yet that very message is the only source of hope in life for the way of the cross, the way of unselfish living, the way of sacrificial living, seeking the good, the welfare of the other before one's own unenlightened self-interest. That way of the cross is the way of love. That is the nature of love. And that way is the only hope for the entire human family." God invites each of us into this Resurrection hope. God invites each of us into this Resurrection promise.

The first Easter probably was not on April Fools' Day. Nevertheless, especially on this April Fools' Day, on this Easter Day, we are reminded that our God has a sense of humor. That our God is full of surprises. That he pulled off the greatest joke in history. But the joke is not on us. The joke is on evil. The joke is on sin. The joke is on death. The joke is that in Jesus dying for the forgiveness of our sins, sin and death no longer have hold over us. That no matter who we are, no matter what we have done or failed to do, God did all of this for us. For you. For me. That sin and death do not have the last word. As our Presiding Bishop so aptly reminds us, "the last word is God, and God is love." He has shown that by defeating death. For you. By defeating sin. For you. By ensuring forgiveness. For you. By promising new and eternal life. For you. With sin and death out of the picture, with forgiveness, salvation, and new life assured, what other surprises might he pull off in your life?

Alleluia! Christ is Risen!

(The Lord is Risen indeed! Alleluia!)