

“Jesus, the Fool”

Sermon by Renata Eustis

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Easter 2018

Mark 16: 1-8

This is the first time in 62 years that Easter Sunday has fallen on April Fools’ Day. As soon as I realized it, I knew there was a sermon there—and I just needed to figure out what it was.

Is Jesus the best April Fool prankster ever? When the three women get to the tomb nothing is the way it’s supposed to be. They watched from a distance when Joseph got permission from Pilate to take Jesus’s body and put it in the tomb. They were on that hill across from the tomb—and they saw Joseph—undoubtedly with some other men helping him-- put that huge, heavy stone in front of it. But when they get there that heavy stone is inexplicably rolled out of the way. So, they go in, expecting to find Jesus’s body and instead there is a man—very much alive—talking to them and telling them they are going to see Jesus again when they get back home.

A prank is all about pulling one over on someone. It’s about telling someone something that is believable but not true. What’s going on here at the tomb is beyond too good to be true. What’s going on here at the tomb is in a whole other category. It doesn’t fit in their picture of how the world is. It’s so far out of the box, that you can’t even see the box any more.

An April Fools’ prank depends on gullibility. If you’re the one being pranked, you have to get taken in. You have to believe it’s true. But it doesn’t look like that’s happening for these women. Granted it doesn’t outright say that they don’t believe the young man in the tomb. But they don’t take him at his word either. Instead of going to the disciples and telling them they’re going to see Jesus back home in Galilee, they run away in terror—and their fear silences them.

So, maybe Jesus *isn’t* playing the best April Fools prank of all time on these unsuspecting women.

Maybe—instead—he’s the Fool.

Not a fool the way we use that word now—as in someone who is foolish—someone who thinks they know when really they don’t have a clue.

When I say maybe Jesus is the Fool, it’s in the classic sense of that word. The Fool—often called the Court Jester—has been around since ancient Egypt. And the Fool has been found throughout history on every inhabited continent. If you have a picture in your minds, it’s probably of a man with a floppy three-pronged hat, maybe even with clown make-up. Today we have clowns and comedians who take on the role of the Fool.

The role of the Fool, in the court, is to tell the truth in a sideways kind of way. The Fool uses humor and laughter to say what is really going on. As one king said, “other advisors give me truth that has been cooked several times, the fool gives it to me raw.”

To make people laugh, as great comedians and clowns do—you have to be really in touch with life. I’ve listened to so many interviews with comedians because I find them fascinating—and to a person—with the exception of Jimmy Fallon who had an unusually happy childhood—all the rest have suffered significantly. They are all really sensitive and they each have a deep understanding of just how hard it is to be human. For someone to be really funny, they have to be able to connect with the real stuff of life.

When I think about Jesus as the Fool—as the Divine Fool—the first thing that comes to my mind are the parables. We are so serious about them—I am so serious about them—but I’m pretty sure Jesus had a smile on his face when he was telling a lot of them—and I also imagine that he and the disciples laughed a lot together.

I would not downplay how terribly hard life was or the burden of living under the brutal military rule of the Romans. But I think Jesus used humor and laughter—not just to teach and reveal the truth of God’s kingdom—but also to give the people who were with him an experience of what it’s like to live in that kingdom now.

When a Roman soldier compels you to carry his pack a mile—which was the law, just keep right on going and take it a second mile. I hear Jesus saying this with a belly laugh that comes from the freedom of stepping outside of Roman control. Laughing at the picture of a Roman soldier trying to figure out what is going on—and maybe even chasing after his pack and begging to have it set down.

There’s something about laughing in the face of pain and trouble that pricks a hole in its power. I visited this week with Bob Tuttle and got a picture of what this can look like. Bob has dealt with constant pain for most of the time I have been here. It’s so bad he can’t get to church because sitting is so painful.

He was talking to me about a procedure his pain doctor performs. I had a hard time listening to because it sounds so painful. Bob has to be awake and without anesthesia, while the doctor sticks a long needle in so that he can know which nerves he needs to try to calm. I asked Bob how he copes with that pain in that moment. And I was expecting something like praying, meditating, focusing on his breath. But what he said was that he carries on a steady stream of jokes with his doctor—throughout the whole procedure. And that it always catches the residents who are there for the first time off guard.

Laughter in the face of pain reveals that the pain is not all there is.

The kingdom that Jesus was always talking about isn’t here completely but it *is* here—among us—in bits and pieces. Jesus spent so much time talking about it because it doesn’t look much like our picture of power and glory. It’s upside down and all mixed up with foolish organizational principles like “the first shall be last and the last shall be first.”

And if you look at who is following Jesus, they look pretty foolish, too. His inner circle is mostly a rag-tag bunch of fisherman who leave it all behind to follow this Fool who is revealing a truth they just can’t resist.

But the foolishness of Jesus doesn’t stop there. Jesus lived in a time and a place where otherizing seemed to define the way the world is. People were either in or out.

Often the Fool or the clown speaks without words—by silly tricks like 12 people coming out of a tiny car—actions that challenge what looks to be real and true. Jesus eats with anybody—including people like tax collectors who were colluding with the Romans. Jesus even invites them into the inner circle—and some of them say yes.

Just a week ago, we celebrated Palm Sunday—and we remembered how Jesus came into Jerusalem on a donkey and people were so joyful and thrilled to see him that they grabbed branches off of trees and threw them down—along with their cloaks—to make a royal path for him—to honor him.

But on the other side of the city, Pilate was coming in with his powerful procession of chariots and horses and soldiers. The contrast could not have been more stark. It’s almost like Jesus and his march are like kids pretending to be powerful. When the Roman spies reported on it, they must have been laughing. Such foolishness—who do they think they are?

And then. . . on the cross the Roman powers that be said Jesus is a joke. This is where people who think someone other than Caesar is king wind up. And to make sure no one misses the message, they put up a sign, “The King of the Jews”. The Fool dies a foolish death.

*“For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us. . . it is the power of God.”* That’s from the first chapter of First Corinthians. It’s a profound piece of scripture that is all about the

wisdom of God and the wisdom of the world—and what’s what. And it ends with, “*For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.*”

That’s a confusing paradox that only God’s Fool can help us see the truth of.

On Easter. When we see, in the midst of our own pain and confusion—some of us have a lot right now and some of us not as much—but all of us have some—because that is just what it means to be human.

But today—on this Easter April Fools’ Day--God is the greatest prankster the world has ever known. The prank is not on the women who come to the tomb. The prank is not on us. The prank is on all the forces of death that oppose God’s way of life that is shown to us in Jesus. Jesus is alive and that is God’s unequivocal statement that true power and real life are found in him and his way. The kingdom Jesus proclaimed is real and it’s here.

It can be so hard for us to see it—and so very hard for us to believe it is true—especially if we are living in the valley of the shadow of death. When we are in the agony of missing someone we love—the power of death is real. When we see unarmed people shot in their own backyards or in their schools—the power of death is real. When we see so many people who are jobless or homeless or healthinsuranceless—the power of death is real.

But today—when God raises Jesus, the Fool—God tells us that the truth of who Jesus is—of how he lived and what he taught—is not dead—and it is not foolishness. And just like the young man at the tomb promised the women, Jesus will find us—not just on Easter at church but in the middle of our ordinary lives. He will be there.

I’ll close with some words from Michael Card’s song, “God’s Own Fool.”

*So surrender the hunger to say you must know  
Have the courage to say I believe  
For the power of paradox opens your eyes  
And blinds those who say they can see*

*So we follow God's own Fool  
For only the foolish can tell  
Believe the unbelievable,  
And come be a fool as well*

Happy April Fools’ Day.

Thanks be to God. Amen.