**A Pilgrimage of Hope: No Foolin’**

**Mark 16:1-8**

Rev. J. Douglas Paterson

Easter Sunday, April 1, 2018

Hey Nancy!

Yes, Doug.

Did you hear about the argument St. Paul had with his contractor over what kind of tiles to put in his home?

No! What happened?

Well, there was a big to-do because Paul wanted to put in some Gen-tiles.

Hey Nancy!

Yes, Doug.

Do you know why Jesus gave all the sick women Stilettos?

No.

Well, they all said they wanted to be “heeled.”

Hey Nancy!

Yes.

Do you know what the Pentecostal car salesman shouted in church?

Can’t say that I do.

“Shoulda-boughta-Honda”

Speaking of which, if Jesus were still on earth, do know what kind of car he would drive?

No. What kind of car would Jesus drive?

A “Christler” of course

Hey Nancy!

Yes, Doug.

Do you know why God created man before woman?

I don’t think you want to go there, Doug.

Yes! Right! Good plan!

Friends, welcome to Easter, which happens to fall on April Fool’s Day, which I think is the most divine confluence of days ever. I know not everybody agrees with me. I know that, because when this happened before, I got a piece of hate mail that went straight to the bishop that was so vitriolic that I could see spit stains on the paper. But friends, if your faith is not rejoicing today, I am not sure when it will. And if we look foolish for being so giddy, then so be it. Paul was very clear in 1st Corinthians 4 - we will look like fools to the world when we follow Jesus. Well then, this is our day.

This is our day, not only because this is “Fools Day,” but because this day of all days in the Christian calendar is the one that gives meaning and hope to every other day that we live. This is the day that creates joy in our hearts and gives laughter to our spirit. Today we celebrate that whatever evils might lurk, God is bigger than them all and will never let them have the last word. Today is Easter. Christ is risen.

So let me try to convince you why we should rejoice and joke and have fun today. Not just because it is April Fool’s Day, but because it is Easter. There is an old, old tradition in Christianity called Risus Paschalis. We’ve actually talked about this before. Risus Paschalis means "Easter Laugh." It was a custom that started in Bavaria in the 15th century when a priest inserted in his sermon funny stories, which would cause his hearers to laugh. The custom was rooted in the understanding of early church theologians who claimed that God played a practical joke on the devil by letting him think that he had won a victory by killing the Christ, only for God to raise Jesus from the dead. It is perhaps the oldest understanding of atonement in Christian theology.

It was a spiritual warfare that God was involved in with Satan. Eventually, they struck a bargain. You may have and kill my son, but you must spare humanity. It was settled and it was done. Only God had a little trick up his sleeve, and raised Jesus from the dead. It’s sort of fun to think of God as a practical joker. Although, I think that is what got under the skin of my former admirer. I’m guessing this person didn’t want to think of God as the butt of a joke.

I have to give room for that. It is not very fun to be the butt of a joke. I don’t care that Satan was. But there probably isn’t one of us who has not occupied that position, and it is not very fun.

I remember one April Fool’s Day when Kara and Heather took a rubber band and wrapped it around the handle of the sink sprayer, so when you turned on the water, it would come shooting through the sprayer. We were all waiting for Karla that morning, and sure enough she turned on the faucet and was immediately dowsed in a spray of water. Three of us were laughing our heads off. One was not.

Not all jokes are funny. In fact, sometimes they seem a bit cruel. And, while in retrospect, we with the disciples, can laugh, it was a horrendous three days they had to suffer.

William Willimon, retired United Methodist Bishop and former Dean of the chapel at Duke University is quoted as saying, "Among all of God's creatures, human beings are the only animals who both laugh and weep—for we are the only animals who are struck with the difference between the way things are and the way things ought to be."

You get a sense of that as you read the Easter stories in each of the Gospels. Those who first meet up with the risen Christ on that first Easter morning do not have the capacity to understand. They are told of the best news ever – Christ is alive. But their life experience does not have the vocabulary to interpret what that really means. Had there been an April Fool’s Day back then, they would have been waiting for someone to jump out and shout “April Fools.”

In Mark, the Gospel from which we read today, the women – Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome – who went to the tomb early on Sunday morning, as soon as the Sabbath was over apply the spices to the body, found that the stone had been rolled away from the tomb. In the tomb they did not find Jesus. Instead they found a young man dressed in a white robe who simply told them, “Don’t look so amazed. Jesus isn’t here. He is risen. Now go and tell his disciples. Jesus will meet them in Galilee like he told them.” You heard what they did. They ran straight from the tomb and told no one.

That is the original ending of the Gospel. Now if you go back in your Bibles, you will see that there is more to the chapter than where we ended with Mark 16:8. There are verses 9-20, which were added later and it does pick up to say that Mary Magdalene went and told the disciples that Jesus is risen and alive. No foolin’! But they, too, couldn’t believe it and thought it a cruel joke until Jesus started showing himself to them.

Each of the Gospels, although different in their particulars, has this theme of disbelief until Jesus starts showing himself. The Gospel of John perhaps strings this out better than the rest which may be why it is the one usually used on Easter.

In John’s Gospel, Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb alone and sees that the stone had been rolled away. She ran back and got Peter and presumably John. They go into the tomb and find that it is empty except for the linens that were used for the shroud.

Then the two disciples leave, but Mary stays and she weeps. The way things are working out is not how it was supposed to be. Mary did not have an easy life. But then she met Jesus. It isn't that life all of a sudden became easy for her. But perhaps for the first time, someone treated her as a human being. Jesus welcomed her and accepted her for just who she was. Nothing more, nothing less. Just Mary. But he also could see all the untapped potential that was in her. Jesus could see the Mary yet to be. The Mary, that if she could wake to the promises of God, would become the Mary God intended, animated by God's spirit. That's what Jesus could see that others couldn't - the Mary animated by the Spirit of God. It's the same thing that Jesus sees you and in me.

But for Mary, that was gone. Hope died for Mary when the only one that would receive her for who she is and could see in her God's promise, died on the cross. And now there isn't even the vestige of a body to cling to. She stays, and she weeps. This isn't how it is supposed to be. It’s a cruel joke, don’t you think?

Except Jesus shows up and makes the joke even crueler for a moment longer by talking with her without identifying himself. But when he finally says her name, the joke is over and the joy begins.

This is what I love about the Easter story in the Gospel of John. The Church has its centuries of understanding about the efficacy of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We have part and parceled our way through eschatology, and soteriology. We have humored our hermeneutics, and danced with historical criticism. And I am trying to use all the big words that I learned in seminary to make my point.

In spite of the centuries of debate and theology, we wake to the promise of God when we have the ears to hear Christ calling our name. When Jesus spoke Mary's name, it was unmistakable to her. In that instant, she knew the promise of God was still alive. At that moment she didn't have any clearer understanding of the purpose of Jesus death. She had no concept of God's mystery of resurrection. All she new is the one who loved her without reservation was calling her name and that changed everything.

Do you hear Jesus calling your name on Easter? Because he is. About that I am not foolin’. He sees you and me the way God has created us to be, animated by his Spirit and loved for just who we are.

So, Paul the apostle goes into a synagogue in the Diaspora. He’s been asked to speak to the congregation. He steps up and says, “I have some good news and I have some bad news. Which would you like to hear first?”

The head rabbi replies, “Good news and bad news? Tell us the bad news first. The good news will console us.” Paul says, “Okay, here’s the bad news. The Messiah has come, but he’s been killed.”

“What?!” exclaims the rabbi. “That’s terrible news! What could possibly be good news?”

Paul replies, “The good news? That’s good news!”

Hey Nancy!

Yes, Doug.

Knock, knock

Who’s there?

No one. The tomb is empty. Christ is risen!