

Easter Fool's Day

John 20:1-18 | 4/1/2018

Today is April Fools' Day. It is also Easter Sunday. I cannot let this unusual conjunction of dates go by without comment. Since 1700, Easter has fallen on April 1 only 11 times! The last time Christians celebrated Easter April 1 was in 1956 -- more than 60 years ago when the world was so unlike the world and culture we inhabit today. For one thing, I was 3 years old, and my dear wife wasn't even born!

It is unusual, although Easter does fall on April Fools' Day again in 2029. Somehow, though, I doubt I'll be preaching. Therefore, since Easter falls on April Fools' Day this year -- today -- and since it has been 62 years since the last conjunction of April Fools' Day and Easter, this fascinating coincidence *begs* to be noticed and mentioned.

Let's begin with a brief description of this weird little holiday. We call it a holiday, although there is nowhere in the world the day is observed officially. You don't get to stay home and hang out in the "man cave" for a day or take a picnic in the park. But in the western world, April Fools' Day exists and merriment ensues. Typically, a prank is played on a hapless soul who's forgotten about the perils of April 1. When the prank is completed and the fool humiliated, the perpetrator then yells "April fool!" There's the caramelized onion prank. Dip apple-sized onions in caramel, poke a stick in them, and serve them to office workers who think they're biting into an apple. Or, cut an outline of a large bug, something that's perhaps an inch or two long, and affix it to the inside of your spouse's lampshade. When the lamp is turned on, the silhouette of the bug appears suddenly, freaking out your victim. The BBC once broadcast a short documentary in a current affairs series purporting to show Swiss farmers picking freshly grown spaghetti in what they called the Swiss Spaghetti Harvest. The BBC was later flooded with requests to purchase a spaghetti plant, forcing them to declare the film a hoax on the news the next day. April fools!

Today is also Easter. This is unarguably the highest and most holy day of the Christian calendar. As holy days go, it doesn't get holier than this. But since it is April 1, we have to ask: "Who, after all, is the April fool in the Easter story?" A whole slew of candidates come to mind.

Is the April fool Pontius Pilate, the Roman procurator? He was the one who cowered in the face of religious leaders who said that failing to deal harshly with a treasonous villain like Jesus would not be viewed favorably by Rome. He is the one who washed his hands of the whole affair. He not only permitted the execution, but he ordered it in the name of the emperor. Then, it's Easter and Jesus is risen! Sorry, Pilate! April fools!

Perhaps the disciples are the April fools. Let's be clear: There's no doubt that many of the disciples may have felt foolish as the crucifixion approached. They had given up their jobs for this Jesus. They had left their homes and families to follow this man. They had pinned their hopes and their futures to a man they believed would liberate them. And now he was being led away like a lamb to the slaughter. So, the disciples went home. They abandoned him and wanted to forget him. And now it's Easter morning and Jesus is risen! April fools!

Maybe the April fool is Annas, the high priest, or his son-in-law, Caiaphas. Annas is a dark, malevolent figure in this Holy Week drama. He has had enough. He has corrupted witnesses, falsified evidence, placed a spy inside of Jesus' inner circle, tracked the movements of this radical insurgent and bided his time. But now, with Passover approaching, he must make sure Jesus is dead and buried and quickly! He pulls the strings. He manipulates Pontius Pilate. He gets what he wants. But now, Annas, it's Easter morning and Jesus is risen! April fools!

Possibly the April fool is Peter, the commercial fisherman. Oh, Peter started out enthusiastically, no doubt. He defended his rabbi right and left. He was the one who identified Jesus as the "Christ, the Son of the living God." He swore never to abandon his Lord. But then, Peter loses faith faster than a rock sinks in water. When Jesus at last is captured and led away, he denies he ever knew the man. And the person who said he would never leave Jesus, leaves. And now, Peter, it's Easter morning and Jesus is risen! April fools!

Perhaps the greatest fools are all of us. Certainly, much of the world believes we're crackers, completely

foolish souls who need Jesus and religion as some sort of emotional crutch. It's likely that a fair percentage of the general population, who -- although identifying themselves as religious -- think that we committed followers of Jesus take things too seriously. We who love Jesus, who follow his teachings, who obey his word, are regarded by many as fools. The Easter fools.

But perhaps there's another sense in which we're the Easter fools. We're fools when we claim to believe, but then behave as though we don't. We affirm a belief in the resurrection of Christ. We declare that "He is risen!" But we sometimes live as though Jesus were still in the tomb. We affirm our belief with our lips but do not confess Jesus as Lord with our lives. We yield to despair instead of clinging to hope. Sometimes we are indeed fools. And now, friends, it's Easter morning and Jesus is risen! April fools, my fellow fools!

No, the biggest April fool is not Pontius Pilate, not the disciples, not Annas the high priest, not Peter, not Thomas and not you or any of us.

The greatest April fool is Jesus Christ himself. He is the Fool of Easter. He is the Trickster as it were. He is the one who made the devil look the fool in the greatest jest of all time.

Even during his ministry, he acted in "foolish" ways, according to most contemporary observers. He did not seek a comfortable lifestyle. For friends he had tax collectors, prostitutes, lepers, fishermen, the poor and needy. Not a CEO among his inner circle. He told the rich to give away their wealth and follow him. He chose weakness instead of strength, vulnerability instead of aggressiveness, truth instead of practicality, honesty instead of influence. He offended and rebuked the religious authorities and often seemed to deliberately bait those who had the power to kill him. And then they did. But death could not hold him. The grave could not contain him.

On Easter Fools' Day, "God made foolish the wisdom of the world" (1 Corinthians 1:20). Jesus was God's Fool, "a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks," whereby God reconciled the world to himself (1 Corinthians 1:23; 2 Corinthians 5:18).

Today, Jesus is alive! It was Jesus who "emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness, and being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death -- even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:6-8). Pretty foolish, it would seem. But this is not the end of the story.

"Therefore, God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, ... and every tongue should confess that Jesus is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:9-11).

On this Easter Fools' Sunday, perhaps this is what we have an opportunity to do. As fools for Christ, as God's fools, we might consider in humble reverence reaffirming our allegiance to the one who pulled off the greatest jest in history.

Perhaps we might reaffirm our belief that Jesus is Lord. Just a quiet reaffirmation that goes like this: "Lord Jesus, many people might not think it's the smartest thing in the world to follow you. In fact, they may think I'm crazy, and that you yourself were something of a lunatic. But I have just enough foolish faith to believe that you pulled it off, that you conquered death and brought life and light to the darkened world. So, I recommit my life to you -- to be your fool, to live for you, and to seek support in that company of fools we call the church. Amen"

Pastor Keith