

THE JOKE'S ON WHOM?

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April 1, 2018: Easter Day

So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid. (Mark 16:8)

Not long ago I was enjoying lunch with a group of my rival rectors in town. During a lull in the conversation, one person observed that Easter Day and April Fools Day are one and the same this year. You don't say! I mean, who saw that one coming? Since everyone around the table would be faced with writing an Easter sermon, we imagined what a preacher might say who tried to traffic in the coinciding of these two days. We all agreed that it would be common and crude to do so. It would be obvious and cheap: "Like telling gratuitous jokes," said one. "Don't be that guy," said another. By the end of lunch, we had all pledged not to be that guy.

Friends: You are looking at "that guy!" How could I not be that guy? The last time Easter and April Fools fell on the same day was 1956. The Dodgers were in Brooklyn. Eisenhower was in the White House. I was yet unborn. It won't happen again until 2029. Who knows what eleven years may bring? Today might be the only shot I get, so let's do this. Let's begin with a purely gratuitous joke.

A man was walking home from work late one night, tired and hungry. He took a short cut through a cemetery, where he stumbled and fell into an open grave. It was a very deep grave, one from which he couldn't climb out or escape. He called for help again and again, but no one came to his rescue. Worse yet, his cell phone battery was dead, so he finally realized he would just have to wait until the morning for someone to find him. He settled into a corner of the grave and closed his eyes. Not much later another man, also taking the same short cut, tripped and fell into the very same open grave. This man was more frightened than the first, and he never noticed the other man in the corner. In a panic he tried to climb out, but was unable. He screamed for help until he could not scream anymore. The first man watched all this, and finally came up behind the second man. He put a hand on the man's shoulder and said, "You can't get out of here." Do you know what? He got out of there! *He fled from the tomb for he was afraid.*

Here's another one. A man was on his way to a Halloween party, wearing a convincing devil costume, complete with horns and a pitchfork. As he drove along a dark country road his car ran out of gas, so he began walking towards a light in the distance. He arrived at what turned out to be a Pentecostal church in the middle of a revival service. The preacher took one look at him and yelled, "It's the devil; he's come to get us!" Everyone fled from the church, for they were afraid. People jumped over pews and leaped through open windows. Within a minute only one person remained: a woman of great girth who had lodged herself in a window trying to escape. The man in the costume came up to her, hoping only to borrow some gasoline. But before he could say anything she blurted out, "*Oh, Mr. Devil, don't hurt me! I've been a member of this church for thirty years, but I've been working for you the whole time!*"

On April Fools Day we pull pranks and tell jokes. On Easter Day we celebrate the highest feast of the Christian year. For us, every other day falls in line behind this one, because the Christian faith begins not with the birth of Jesus, not with the teachings, the miracles, or the death of Jesus. The Christian faith begins with the resurrection of Jesus – Jesus, the 1st century Jew who was crucified on a Friday and buried in a rock tomb. Do you know what? He got out of there! God breathed life again into his cold, dead body. Without such a mighty miracle, none of the succeeding history makes any sense. The disciples of Jesus would have remained scattered, his teachings forgotten, his movement ended, his birth never recorded. But because of what God did

on this day everything is changed: not merely for Jesus and his followers, but for the whole created order. The creation now rests in hope that, despite all appearances to the contrary, God plans to deliver on his future promises. In the risen Jesus, we've seen it.

What actually happened on the first Easter Day? The Gospel of Mark, from which we are reading this year, provides what we think to be the earliest written witness. Three grieving women came to the tomb of Jesus to anoint his body. They had been worrying about the stone sealing the tomb. It was a very large stone, one they thought would be immovable. But once there they found that the stone already had been rolled aside. They went into the tomb, which would have been like a small cave, and discovered that the body of Jesus was gone. What is more, a young man in a white robe announced to them, "You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here." What more does Mark tell us about the signature event of Christianity? Only this: *So the women went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.* So ends the earliest witness of the resurrection, which really isn't even a witness of the resurrection because the risen Jesus never appears. That's it. It's like a joke that falls flat because the punchline is never delivered.

What the cynics would say is that the Gospel of Mark is a joke of a different sort. It's like an April Fools Day joke, and it's not that the punchline is missing. Rather, the punchline is us. The joke is on us. The joke is on the first and all the subsequent believers in Jesus who have dared to hope in his resurrection, and by virtue of his, ours. Clearly, the women at the tomb were hallucinating, that's all. It was early in the morning, they'd probably had little sleep, and they were grief stricken. Give them a few days to clear their heads and get their feet on the ground, and they'll be back to believing in the good, old materialistic world view in which death is the end.

Or, perhaps the joke was on the Roman and Jewish authorities who put Jesus to death. The pranksters here would have been the disciples of Jesus, who must have sneaked back to the tomb in the night, rolled away the stone, and taken the body. Why? Clearly, to humiliate Pontius Pilate and Herod and Caiaphas in front of their constituents, then possibly get a little more mileage out of the Jesus movement. Thus, Easter was and has been a deception from day-one, and the joke is on the ruling powers. The problem with this theory? First of all, it's unlikely the disciples were smart enough to pull off such a high level shenanigan. Secondly, clever though the prank might have been, a fraud cannot be solid ground for hope. Like the first theory, it still means that the joke is on us, because here we are hoping in something that cannot be true: God's promise that we have a future – a future even beyond death.

Don't get me wrong: I like that Easter and April Fools Day coincide this year, so much so that I couldn't resist preaching the sermon. It's just that we need to be clear about who is being pranked by the resurrection. Yes, the forces of wickedness did to Jesus the absolute worst that can be done to a person: public shame, torture, and then a horrible, lingering death. But in raising Jesus to a new life that we could behold, God proved himself to be the prankster, and the joke is on the powers of evil and sin and death. The joke is on the devil and all his minions, and all those working for him. Two early church theologians, Origen and Gregory of Nyssa, unfettered their minds and imagined how the joke went down. It was like God went fishing. Tired of the devil's predatory ways, God decided to fish him out of the waters of creation. The bait was Jesus, whose mortality disguised the hook of his divinity. The devil bit, and has been stuck on the line ever since – thrashing about and making waves to be sure, but finished. The joke is on the devil.

Can it be true? The analogy is not meant to be taken literally, so please don't. Still we ask, how do we know that God gets the last laugh if all we have is Mark's abrupt ending? Concerning Mark, the most likely scenario is that there was indeed more to his Gospel: a Gospel which has too much forward momentum simply to stop where it does. The end of the scroll describing appearances of the risen Jesus was likely damaged and lost over time. But Mark's severed ending isn't all that we have, and perhaps it isn't even lost. Luke and John who follow, and Matthew who

precedes have plenty to say about what happened after the discovery of the empty tomb. The risen Jesus began appearing to the women, then the disciples, and then to many others.

Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared to Paul the Apostle. In today's reading from the First Letter to the Corinthians (15:1-11), Paul writes that shortly after Easter, Jesus appeared to more than 500 brothers and sisters at one time. Surprisingly, we have no other reference to Jesus' appearing to the 500. You would think one of the Gospel writers would have described such an important incident. I wonder if what we have here is one of Mark's missing pieces hiding in plain sight. Presumably, Paul and Mark would have been listening to the same oral traditions. So here's an assignment for one of you today. Go back to school to become a Biblical scholar, and get really good grades. Then, research the idea that Mark's missing ending is in fact Jesus' appearing to the 500. You'll write a book about it and make a lot of money. Then you can share some of the money with me! After all, it's my idea, and I promise to use it to fix the plaster in the south aisle over here. I'm not joking! The only joke is on the devil, and the one-two punchline of God's cosmic prank is the empty tomb plus the bodily appearances of the risen Jesus. What it means is that our future with God is assured. In the risen Jesus, God has given us a foretaste of victory.

Let me tell you about someone who experienced a glimmer of Easter in the darkest of times. One of the best movies of the past year is called *Darkest Hour*, starring Gary Oldman who won an Academy Award for his portrayal of Winston Churchill. Churchill was Prime Minister of England when Hitler's Nazi Germany was engulfing all of Europe. The film concerns England's difficult decision to stand and fight the Germans alone, or admit defeat and ask for terms of peace. Churchill argued that accommodating Hitler would be like going to work for the devil himself. Therefore, England chose to fight, bravely and alone, which is where the picture concludes in 1940.

After seeing the show I remembered something that Churchill wrote about an incident over a year after the events of the movie. England fought on, but they desperately needed allies. The lifeblood of the nation was draining away. Then on December 8, 1941, one day after Pearl Harbor, Churchill learned the United States had entered the fight on England's side. The war would grind on for nearly four more devastating years. Yet even then, even in 1941, Churchill was able to declare certain victory, and it was no April Fools Day joke. He described the moment:

So we had won after all! Yes, after Dunkirk; after the fall of France; after the threat of invasion, after the deadly struggle of the U-boat war; after seventeen months of lonely fighting we had won the war. England would live; Britain would live. How long the war would last or in what fashion it would end, no man could tell, nor did I at this moment care. No doubt it would take a long time. I expected terrible forfeits in the East; but all this would be merely a passing phase. Many disasters, immeasurable cost and tribulation lay ahead, but there was no more doubt about the end. Being saturated and satiated with emotion and sensation, I went to bed and slept the sleep of the saved and thankful.¹

Churchill knew the victory was won. He still had hardships to endure, but in his darkest hour he saw the future. Likewise, the message of Easter is that we too can exhale a great sigh of relief as God's saved and thankful people. Yes, hardship and tribulation lie ahead, but we need have no more doubts about the end. It's no joke. The victory of life is won, and our song of triumph has begun. Alleluia.

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¹ This is an abbreviated version of a longer quote found in *The Grand Alliance*, Winston S. Churchill, 1951, beginning on page 606.