

“And Peter—No Joke!”

Mark 16:1-8

April Fools!

It's been a long time since Easter last occurred on April 1st--1956 to be precise. The unusual calendar pairing led me to read more about the non-religious traditions to this date. I discovered that April Fools' Day has been going on for centuries and in cultures around the world. In modern times, there have been some elaborate hoaxes pulled on the public.

On April 1 of 1957, the BBC reported that Swiss farmers were enjoying a record spaghetti crop and aired footage of people harvesting noodles from trees. The network was swamped with calls asking where to acquire such plants. In 1985, *Sports Illustrated* had a cover story about an unknown pitcher named Sidd Finch who, while wearing boots, could throw a baseball 168 miles per hour, 60 mph faster than anyone had ever done. In 1996, the fast-food chain Taco Bell duped quite a few in announcing it had agreed to purchase that cracked icon in front of Independence Hall and rename it the *Taco Liberty Bell*. It created such a furor that by 10 a.m. the same day, they had to issue a statement announcing it was all just good fun. Two years later, after Burger King advertised that in response to an underserved part of the public it was launching a “Left-Handed Whopper,” scores of customers requested the fake sandwich in placing their order while others specifically asked for the regular one. (www.history.com)

While some are more gullible than others, this rare calendar intersection could make all of us a bit more cautious today and pay more attention than usual. That isn't such a bad thing either as in my case it led to hear something I had previously missed in our text. It wasn't an April Fools' hoax, but a message that could have led one disciple to think it was a trick even so.

In our account of that day, Mark tells of four women who bring spices to anoint Jesus' body. It will be a final act of devotion since his remains had been placed in the tomb just before sundown on Friday. As Saturday was a day of rest, Sunday brought the first opportunity to complete their task and they arrive just after sunrise. While they had wondered how they would roll back the heavy stone that covered the entrance, when they reach the site it has already been moved. They go inside the tomb and see one described as “a young man, dressed in a white robe” who says “Do not be alarmed, you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here.” He urges them to go and tell the disciples that Jesus will appear in Galilee. Mark then ends by saying “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.”

Of course, we know they eventually did tell. We would not be here had they not shared the news with others and while certainly all of his followers were stunned and grateful for the news, none of them more so than Peter. As the last time he had appeared in the gospel was after the third moment he had denied even knowing his Lord. When Mark last spoke of Peter, the disciple was distraught and in tears over what he had done. So imagine what it must have been like when four women race back from the tomb and repeat the message given to them: “go, tell his disciples *and Peter* that he is going ahead of you to Galilee.”

A pastor named Mary Luti brought the significance of those words to light in a way I had never noticed before. “*And Peter,*” she wrote “possibly the most poignant words in scripture. The disciples abandoned Jesus but only Peter swore that he didn't know him from Adam. Not

even Judas did that. After that night by the courtyard fire when Jesus gazed at him sorrowfully as the cock crowed, a weeping Peter probably half-hoped he'd never see Jesus again, hoped he'd never have to face him in shame. But the risen Jesus wants to see Peter. He singles him out. "*And Peter...*" I will meet *you* in Galilee. It's where they'd first begun. It will be there they begin anew." (Luti, Mary "And Peter," *stillspeaking Daily Devotional*, April 5, 2015)

We don't have a Biblical record of Peter's reaction to that message, but we can imagine what must have raced through his mind. Was it a joke? Was it some kind of cruel hoax? Did the fact that Jesus asked for "disciples and Peter" mean that he was no longer considered a disciple? We don't know his thinking, but cannot overstate the joy he must have felt when he realized it was true. As soon, Peter was reconciled to Christ, restored to his role as leader of the apostles, and rehabilitated for his work of establishing the church. It began with the words "And Peter."

While the earliest date I found for April Fools' Day is the 16th century, there is a tradition in the church for Easter that is older. It bears the Latin name of "risus paschalis" which means "Easter laughter" reflecting a practice in the ancient church, perhaps beginning in Bavaria, of telling jokes at this time of the year. The theological reason was that the resurrection was God's last laugh on those who had thought they had done away with Jesus as he had died on the cross. Thus to tell humorous stories on Easter was a way of celebrating God's great joke on evil.

It's in keeping with such tradition that I share a story I hope to be fictional. It recalls a young man who was shopping in a grocery store when he noticed an elderly woman who seemed to be following him. Whatever aisle he turned down, she took as well. Whenever he stopped, she stopped. He also had the distinct impression that she was staring at him. When the man reached the checkout line, the woman was right there, too, and he motioned for her to go ahead.

Turning around she said to him "I hope I haven't made you feel uncomfortable. It's just that you look so much like my late son." Touched, the young man replied "Oh no, that's OK. I'm honored." "I know it's silly," she continued, "but could I ask you do something for me? Could you call out, 'Goodbye, Mom,' as I leave the store? It would make me so happy." The man was glad to oblige so after she went through checkout and was on her way out of the store, he called out, "Goodbye, Mom!" The woman turned back, smiled and waved.

The young man's heart swelled, seeing how his small gesture had brought such joy to someone else. As he went to pay for his groceries, the clerk said, "That comes to \$121.87." "It's can be that much," the man replied, "I only bought five items." The clerk answered, "Yeah, I know that, but your mother said you'd be paying for her things, too!" ("You have got to be kidding me" www.catholicnews.com, April 27, 2011)

Even if that story is fictional, I offer it as a reminder of why the resurrection was needed in the first place. As from the beginning of time human beings have been known to take advantage of others and disappoint them. From the earliest of days, people have repeatedly demonstrated the inability to perfectly maintain their commitment to each other and God. Which is why we all need Easter and its key message that we have been restored for life.

In late February, Billy Graham breathed his last. I think it's fair to say that the number of people affected by his preaching the Good News of Jesus over 99 years on this earth is greater than anyone in our lifetime. It might even be argued that the only person who had a greater impact on the spread of Christianity was Apostle Paul. When I learned of Dr. Graham's death, I thought back to a story some of you have heard from me before, but bears sharing again. It came

from a day nineteen years ago when the evangelist was honored by leaders in his hometown of Charlotte for those many years of public ministry. All kinds of wonderful things were said about him and then Dr. Graham was given the opportunity to speak for himself.

“I am reminded today of Albert Einstein,” he began, “the great physicist honored by *Time* magazine as the Man of the Century. Einstein was once traveling from Princeton on a train when the conductor came down the aisle, punching the tickets of each passenger. When he reached the scientist, Einstein reached in his vest pocket. He couldn’t find his ticket, so he reached in his other pocket. It wasn’t there either, so he looked in his briefcase but couldn’t find it. Then he looked in the seat by him and the ticket wasn’t there either.

“The conductor said ‘Dr. Einstein, I know who you are. We all know who you are. I’m sure you bought a ticket. Don’t worry about it.’ Einstein nodded appreciatively. The conductor continued down the aisle,” Dr. Graham continued “Just before moving to the next car, he saw the physicist on his hands and knees looking under his seat. The conductor rushed back. ‘Dr. Einstein, don’t worry, I know who you are....You don’t need a ticket. I’m sure you bought one. Einstein replied, ‘Young man, I, too, know who I am. What I don’t know is where I’m going!’”

After recalling that moment from New Jersey, the evangelist from North Carolina concluded “You see the suit I’m wearing? I bought it for this luncheon and one more occasion. This is the suit in which I’ll be buried. But when you hear I’m dead, I don’t want you to immediately remember the suit I’m wearing. I want you to remember this: I not only know who I am, I also know where I’m going.” (*Leadership*, Spring 2003, p. 69)

That’s the enduring truth of Easter—even on April Fools’ Day—and not only for a preacher to millions, but for you and me, too. As the power of Jesus’ death and resurrection is that no matter what we have done or have left undone, no matter what promises we have broken or ties strained, we have been reconciled to God for eternity. It’s a gift that is ours to claim again and to share and it all began on that first Easter when a young man gave a message for a group of startled women to deliver: “Go, tell his disciples *and Peter*.” And friends, that’s no joke.