

The Cosmic Joke of Easter

Sunday, April 1, 2018

Easter Day

The Episcopal Church of St. John the Baptist, Aptos, CA

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By now you might have noticed that some of your neighbors have a strange piece of paper on their backs. Anyone want to point out someone who has one? Will you come up here and show everyone what's on your back? (It's a Jesus fish with the phrase "Fool for Christ!" written in it.)

When I was looking up information about April Fool's Day and its origins, I discovered that in French-speaking parts of Europe and Canada, the day is called "*Poisson d'Avril*," or "April Fish," and a common prank is to attempt to attach a paper fish to someone's back without them noticing. This tradition is also common in parts of Italy and The Netherlands.

Since the fish is a traditional symbol of Christianity, and Easter fell on April Fool's Day this year, I just couldn't resist. It's not every day that you get such a perfect opportunity to play a joke on your congregation! Easter and April Fool's Day haven't coincided since 1956, and they'll only coincide two more times for the rest of this century. So I had to take advantage of this fun calendar coincidence while I could!

Some people might think it's sacrilegious to play jokes on the most sacred holiday of the church year, but it's

actually in keeping with one of the most ancient understandings of Easter: the idea of the Resurrection as a cosmic joke that God played on the devil.

This idea is part of the *Christus victor* theory of the atonement, one of the earliest theologies about Jesus's death on the cross. Leaders in the early church, like Irenaeus, and Gregory of Nyssa, understood Jesus's death to be a ransom paid to the devil, drawing on Jesus's words in the Gospels that he came "to give his life as a ransom for many." There were several different versions of this theory, but the sort of "cosmic joke" or "cosmic trickery" version goes something like this:

When Adam and Eve chose to disobey God in the Garden of Eden, humanity fell into bondage to Satan and could not free themselves. They were held captive and entirely under his control. But Satan would be willing to negotiate for their release, for a price. The ransom he demanded was the death of God's own son.

So God gave it to him. He sent Jesus to become one of us, to pay the ransom demanded by the devil for our freedom. But what the devil didn't see coming was that Jesus wouldn't stay dead, that death, Satan's ultimate weapon, would have no power over him.

So while Satan thought for a moment that he had won, Jesus's Resurrection was a cosmic "gotcha" moment. Satan had said he'd take Jesus in exchange for the rest of humanity, but at the end of the day he didn't have Jesus

OR the rest of humanity. He'd been tricked, fooled, cheated.

When I attended St. James Episcopal Church in Cambridge, Massachusetts during graduate school, the Easter service always started with the choir standing at the back of the church and singing a rousing rendition of *Akanamandla*, a South African freedom song whose lyrics echo this ancient theology of the Resurrection as a joke on the devil.

“Akanamandla, alleluia.” we’d sing in Zulu.

“Akanamandla, USathane.”

The rough English translation of “Akanamandla” is “He has no power.”

At first I was confused about why we’d be singing a song on Easter saying “he has no power,” until I realized that the “he” we were singing about was Satan, not God.

The English translation of the rest of the song goes like this:

He has no power, alleluia!

He has no power,

Satan’s had it!

He has been cheated, alleluia!

He has been cheated

Satan’s had it!

He flees far from us, alleluia!
He flees far from us
Satan's had it!

Setting aside the myriad intellectual problems raised by the ransom theory of the atonement, such as why Satan has more power than God in this equation, the fact remains that one of the earliest ways Jesus's followers understood his death and Resurrection was as a cosmic joke on the devil – rather appropriate on this April Fool's Day.

On Good Friday, the powers of evil seemed to have won. Jesus's life seemed to be one more example of someone being true to God and what is right and getting murdered for it. The crowds mocked Jesus, deriding him. "If you are the Son of God, save yourself!" "So you thought you could save the world, huh? You can't even save yourself." And he doesn't. He hangs there, seemingly helpless and powerless, and dies. Some of his last words were to pray for forgiveness for those who executed him. Where did this nonviolence and forgiveness get him? Stone cold dead in the tomb. Once again, we see a classic illustration of how "the good guys finish last." No good deed goes unpunished. The bullies always win.

But Easter turns that whole story on its head. What appeared to be true on Good Friday is not true at all. Death has not triumphed, death does not have the final word, violence and torture does not always win the day.

On Good Friday, the joke seemed to be on us, we who believed in this Jesus who had the power to unite us with God, we who believed in the power of love to triumph over evil. On Good Friday, we had nothing to show for our belief in the power of love and forgiveness. The forces of evil taunt us: “What fools you were to believe that! Where’s your Jesus now?”

But guess what, devil? The real joke’s on you! Because **Christ is risen!** He has “broken his three day prison,” he has escaped the trap that you set for him. The powers of evil that tell us that might makes right, that the way to address violence is more violence, the joke’s on them, because **Christ is risen!** The Resurrection shows us that nonviolence, forgiveness and love actually have the last word, no matter how things may appear. **Christ is risen,** and that changes everything.

So this Easter, embrace your identity as a “Fool for Christ.” Because, as the Apostle Paul wrote, “God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength” (1 Corinthians 1:25). The world might call us fools, but even though all around us we see suffering, violence, bigotry, illness, corruption, abuse, broken relationships and war, because of the Resurrection of Jesus, “even at the grave we make our song, ‘Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!’” (BCP 499)