

You've Gotta Be Kidding Me
April 1, 2018 (Easter early)
Luke 24:1-12, Acts 26:22-31
The First U.P. Church of Crafton Heights
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*To hear this sermon as preached in worship, please visit
<https://castyournet.files.wordpress.com/2018/04/sermon04012018early.mp3>*

Think about your best April Fool joke ever. Who was involved? Who did you get? Or who got you?

The last time April Fool's fell on a Sunday, elder Simcox replaced the water in my glass with vodka. Being filled with the Spirit, I'm sure, I forgot to drink that day, and so I dodged that prank.

On this date in 1957, the good people at the British Broadcasting Corporation pulled off what is often regarded as the best April Fool joke of all time. Watch this three minute clip, and see if you agree.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tVo_wkxH9dU]



I should point out that in post-war Britain, spaghetti was uncommon, and so the fact that many people actually believed this “news story” isn't quite as ridiculous as it would be if this was aired today.

Perhaps what I love most about this story, though, is the fact that when people flooded the network with calls asking for instructions on how to grow their own spaghetti, they were told, “put a sprig of spaghetti in a tin of tomato sauce and hope for the best.”¹

It seems to me that the essence of a good April Fool joke is when you say something that you know to be untrue, and you laugh at the poor suckers who fall for it. When you've gotten someone, you feel a little proud of yourself; it's empowering, and in the best circumstances, everyone has a good laugh.

¹ https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/spaghetti-tree-hoax-april-fools_us_56fe89e7e4b083f5c6077279

But what about when things are directly opposite of that? Have you ever had an experience where you were telling the truth, and no one believed you? You may have heard me speak of the day in college when my roommate died; I remember trying to tell some classmates that he'd had a heart attack and they thought I was kidding them. I'm sure you know of victims of assault or bullying who are unable to get a hearing because nobody can believe it.

Today's scriptures each contain instances where someone's experience or testimony was disbelieved by the people who simply could not accept it as fact.



²In the reading from Luke, some of the women from Jesus' inner circle go to complete the burial rites. When they get to the tomb, they are surprised by two angelic beings...who also appear to be caught off-guard. "You?" they say, "What are you doing here? Don't you remember what he told you?"

And, as you've heard, the women *do* remember and are able to accept the emptiness of the tomb as a validation of what Jesus had told them earlier: that he would rise from the dead. Armed with the memory of what he had said along with the knowledge of the empty tomb, these women hurry back to tell the Apostles.

Except, as you know, that when they get there and tell the eleven of the wonders they've heard and seen, well, the men think that the women are simply out of their minds.

If you were following along in your bibles as the scripture was read, you may have noticed a footnote after verse 12 – the sentence that reads "Peter, however, got up and ran to the tomb. Bending over, he saw the strips of linen lying by themselves, and

² *The Empty Tomb*, He Qi (2001) from *Art in the Christian Tradition*, a project of the Vanderbilt Divinity Library, Nashville, TN.

he went away, wondering to himself what had happened.” The footnote in many bibles informs us that the earliest manuscripts of Luke’s gospel do not contain verse 12. It would appear as though some of the ancient scribes added this detail that comes from John’s account of the empty tomb. No matter where it came from, it doesn’t fundamentally alter the reality of the fact that according to Luke’s gospel, the essential truth of the first Easter morning is that some people got it, and were able to grasp what had happened, while others did not.



In the second volume of his account of Jesus’ life, ministry, and impact, Luke records another incident that happened several decades later. The Apostle Paul is on trial before Herod Agrippa, the man Rome appointed to be king of Judea, and Festus, the Roman Procurator who was a successor to Pontius Pilate. Paul tells the story of his rather surprising and deeply personal encounter with the risen Christ. Herod and Festus hear him tell the story, and they look at each other and burst out laughing. Clearly, they think that this grizzled old missionary is insane.

So, if you’re keeping score: thus far in our bible studies, we have discerned that the eleven men who were, arguably, the closest friends that Jesus had on earth heard tell of his resurrection from the dead and they just could not believe it. A generation later, the two pre-eminent powerful men in the region heard that story, and they, too, found it to be incredulous.

Which means that if you arrived at this 8:30 service of worship and heard the claim that Jesus has risen and were not quite able to wrap your head around that... well, you’re surely not alone. It would seem as though it’s not uncommon for those who hear about Jesus’ resurrection to find it difficult to swallow.

Of course, you may know that the eleven came to believe so deeply in the good news of Jesus' resurrection that they all died confessing that as the central truth of their lives. On the other hand, there is no evidence that Festus or Agrippa ever changed his mind. What's the difference in these scenarios?

Well, it would appear as though the Apostles were willing to place themselves in positions where, like the women, they could have a confirming experience. That is to say that they'd heard the *claim* to resurrection, and perhaps they even remembered Jesus' conversation about the possibility some years earlier. Each of them, however, needed to have his own transforming moment when the theoretical became the actual. Later this morning, we'll consider the remainder of Luke 24, and the ways that the resurrection came to have meaning in the lives of these men.

Paul, for instance, had heard the claims of Jesus and his followers, but it wasn't until he experienced the nearness of the risen Christ that he was able to make the move from being persecutor of the church to instigator within the church.

On the other hand, from everything we can tell, Festus and Herod Agrippa wiped the tears of laughter from their eyes and went back to business as usual. They could not conceive of a way in which resurrection might be true. I have always been captivated by the language of the old King James translation at this point, wherein Agrippa quips to Paul, "Almost thou persuadest me to become a Christian..."

Paul's response is quick: "I would to God, that not only thou, but also all that hear me this day, were both almost, and altogether such as I am, except these bonds."

In other words, Paul looks at the king of his region and says, "You're not seeing things clearly, your majesty. I wish that you could see things as well as I can – and I wish that you had the

kind of joy that is available to me...” At this the king has no choice but to leave, because in his mind, Paul is clearly simply making no sense.

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with painting

Too much of today’s Christianity has a narrative that goes something like this: for years, my life was simply horrible. Then, I found Jesus, and now my life is great. I’ve gotten over that horrible thing that happened to me, or I was forgiven for those violent or disgusting things that I once did, and now it’s just smooth sailing.

That just does not make sense with the Biblical narrative. Imagine someone going up to Peter or Paul and saying, “Wow! You knew Jesus! Tell us all about the amazingly great things that have happened in your life since you accepted Jesus into your heart...” The answer would have to be, “Well, first I got struck blind, but then I survived the first assassination attempt. I got the tar beaten out of me fairly regularly, and I was stoned a few times and left for dead, and, well, one thing led to another, and now here I am on death row in Rome...”

That’s the truth, and that’s what happened... but you’re not likely to see that in Christian media much today. The reality of the Biblical story is that more often than not, people don’t “find” Jesus; they are “found out” by the love and grace and mercy of the Lord.

My own story, and I know some of yours, is that faith does not come as a result of choosing to embrace a series of theological propositions or religious theories... but rather when our hearts and minds are somehow quickened to discern that God has reached out to us and is longing for us to reach out to the world.

A friend of mine had a medical condition that very nearly ended in her death. As a result of some quick diagnostic work, an alert medical team, and amazing technology, she is alive today.

When she was reflecting on this with me, she said, “For a long time, I was unsure about who or what God was. But when I came through this experience, I saw that while science saved my life, it hasn’t given me anything to live *for*. God is the only one who can do that.”

When Paul looks at old Agrippa and says, “I wish that not only you, but everyone in earshot, were both almost, and altogether such as I am...”, he’s saying that he hopes his audience will find themselves acquainted with the power and presence of the risen Christ, not for Paul’s sake, but for their own.

Similarly, this is my 24th Easter behind this podium. For many of you, for most of your lives I’ve stood here and said, “Christ is Risen! He is risen indeed!”. I hope that over the decades, you’ve become aware of the fact that I’m not hoping to talk you into anything, and I’m not trying to sell you on anything.

That’s what makes a sermon different than an April Fool’s joke. The power of an April Fool’s prank is that I want to make you look silly, or gullible, or foolish so that I look better. The main way that happens is if I am able to somehow persuade you into believe that which is untrue. April Fool’s involves me trying to convince you of something.

Listen: I’m not trying to sell you anything. I’m only trying to do what those women did on the first Easter – to stand up here and tell you that my experience confirms the things that I heard Jesus say. I have become convinced that hope is stronger than memory, that forgiveness is stronger than bitterness, that reconciliation is stronger than hatred. I know that the empty tomb has more power than the bloody cross, and that the dead Jesus has risen to rule the world.

Has becoming convinced of this solved all my problems, kept me from screwing up, made me an incredibly productive

fisherman, or brought me wealth and fame? Hardly. Yet I would not and could not trade it for anything. And this Easter morning my wish for each of you is that you might find yourselves in places where, if you haven't seen the power of resurrection yet, you will. I'm not kidding you or anyone else: my hope is that we are each altogether bound up in the foolishness of Christ as we engage the joy and sorrow of our days. Thanks be to God, he has risen. Amen.