

Easter Day
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The Rev. Mark B. Pendleton
Christ Church, Exeter

The Work of Easter Foolishness

We began the season of Lent – this journey towards Easter -- on a cold mid-Winter February 14th Wednesday when we nudged aside Valentine’s Day chocolates and flowers for ashes and promises of dust and death. Not the best date night scenario! We arrive at Easter Day on April 1st known also to the world as “April Fool’s Day.”

People debate about when and how the tradition of practical tricks of this day began. Newspapers and websites go to great lengths to try to fool their readers. Back in 1957, the BBC reported that Swiss farmers were experiencing a record spaghetti crop and showed footage of people harvesting noodles from trees – people were fooled. In 1996, Taco Bell duped people when it announced it had agreed to purchase Philadelphia’s Liberty Bell and intended to rename it the “Taco Liberty Bell.” In 1998, after Burger King advertised a “Left-Handed Whopper,” scores of customers lined up to buy the fake sandwich. (stories come from the History Channel website).

Maybe the pairing of Easter with April Fool’s Day this year points us to something that rings true. The cross, the empty tomb, the Resurrection form the heart of an improbable beginning of an ancient faith that lives on in and through us today.

Consider a phrase we hear these days: the “Red Line.” A red line is a stated outcome that will trigger a consequential action. It is point of no return – the proverbial line in the sand, i.e. if this person does something, that would be a red line.

The Apostle Paul, who came to faith only a year or so after the first Easter, knew that a crucified messiah who rose again from the dead was a red line for many. A bridge too far for some. One could believe in his teachings, admire his compassion, even be in awe of his healings and miracles – but the Empty Tomb? Too far -- too much. The same could be said for many today. Jesus is a commendable moral figure whose life should be an example of how to live and love, but the Resurrection?

The Apostle Paul stated the challenge this way: (1 Corinthians 1:18) For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. (1 Corinthians 1:22) We proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles. It was and is a kind of religious red line that many will never cross – a line in the sand of belief. Some just cannot go there.

Yet on Easter Day we have arrived there. Casting our lot and our lives with the Mary Magdalene’s of this world – who look into an empty tomb and become filled with hope and new life. It is perspective that is much more than being optimistic, seeing the glass half full, paying it forward, or showing random acts of kindness to the strangers we meet. We join

those who find in the remote, most distant, lonely and emptiest of life's situations the recognition that God is real, present and alive – and because of this we can start again and build a culture of hope. We need to rediscover the foolishness of what this might mean for us.

So, this Easter let's try on foolishness. Perhaps that's what our world needs more of today. Not becoming fools – we probably have enough of those already – but a kind of foolishness with hints of innocence and openness that invite new ways of believing and living in today's ever-changing and chaotic world. A kind of foolishness that continues to believe in hope and love when what we hear about all around can be downright hope-less and discouraging.

In our gospel account from John, there may have been a part of Mary who felt a little foolish. She came to the tomb expecting to find the body of the one she followed and loved. While the other disciples were running around back and forth, Mary stood weeping. The angels asked her why she was weeping. Even the risen Jesus said to her, “why are you weeping.”

“Why are you crying?” How many times have we said and heard these words? Many reasons: sadness, fear, loss, frustration, pain, relief. Tears can come pouring out when it sinks in we may lose someone at the center of our lives. Tears can come when we feel out of control, crushed and lost.

The late Henri Nouwen wrote that “Every time we make the decision to love someone, we open ourselves to great suffering, because those we most love cause us not only great joy but also great pain. The greatest pain comes from leaving. Still, if we want to avoid the suffering of leaving, we will never experience the joy of loving. And love is stronger than fear, life stronger than death, hope stronger than despair. We have to trust that the risk of loving is always worth taking.”

Mary took the risk of loving the One who has no longer present in the way he was before. What stopped Mary's weeping was a recognition – her recognizing that the gardener was not a gardener but the same Jesus she had known, followed and loved. The risen Christ called her out of her grief and carried her into a future yet unknown. “Do not hold on to me... but go.”

That is how we often move on from emptiness and despair. God points us forward -- away from the Empty Tomb -- into a future that is still unfolding. Sometimes it takes a shove or a good push. A good friend who doesn't give up on us – who keeps calling and asks us out to lunch. Or an opportunity to give of our ourselves. A community trying to be the church that invites us to come and worship, sing and pray, and eat and drink of that which gives us eternal life. When we are brought to a place where we can live again, trust again, grow, doubt, love again, believe again. A space where we don't have to be forever cynical, defensive and tired – where hardness of heart and thick skin will never give us what we most need and desire.

Let's try on foolishness.

To be foolish enough so that if and when our lives unravel and fall apart, when our mistakes and regrets pile up, that through forgiveness we receive a promise of a new beginning and a clean slate.

That moments that look and feel like dead-ends can become opportunities to pause, back up, refocus, consider our priorities and rediscover what is most important. When world tells us it's too late to change or give of ourselves, we can say that it's never too soon.

Let us try on foolishness to believe that a small group of high school students can turn their trauma, fear and grief into a massive movement that reaches around the world and holds a mirror up to a nation that has lost its way in keeping its children and young people safe in their classrooms.

Foolishness, as it turns out, isn't as easy as it may seem. It will take some work.

(1 Corinthians 1: 25) From Paul again: For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

Easter sermons often rely heavily on springtime to point out what it means to watch the world around us wake up after a long winter and come back to life.

The poet May Sarton relates to her time in her garden and describes what it feels like to keep moving forward despite not knowing what the future brings. She writes, "I long for the bulbs to arrive, for early autumn chores are melancholy, but the planting of the bulbs is the work of hope and always thrilling."

The work of hope. Hope is work. Holy work. Foolish work. Work that we are called to as we leave this Easter service today.

Life and faith can be like pushing bulbs into the hard ground before winter comes not knowing what will happen – throwing seeds into the air not knowing if any will hold and grow. But that is what we do and who we are.

Let us cast our futures and fortunes with the gardeners of this world. The workers and the dreamers. Those of us walk up to this line of Resurrection, close our eyes and step forward into a life that has only now begun.