

Judas is our friend.

Fooled us – with betrayal.

Simon Peter will stand strong, like a rock.

Fooled us – with denial.

The priests answer to a higher power.

Fooled us – they are more interested in worldly power.

Pilate can handle the truth.

Fooled us – by washing his hands of responsibility.

The crowds wave palms and shout “Hosanna.”

Fooled us – what they really meant was “Crucify him.”

The women come to the place of his execution – hoping against hope.

Fooled us – it is finished.

Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus prepare his broken body for burial.

Fooled us – in the garden a seed will be planted instead of a corpse.

Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb to mourn the loss of her friend.

Fooled us – he is not here.

She runs to get the disciples.

Fooled us – they race back to the tomb in disbelief.

Mary weeps, and weeps, and weeps.

Fooled us – must be the gardener.

“Mary,” Jesus says.

Fooled us – He is ALIVE.

Mary announces the best news of all, “I have seen the Lord. He lives. He lives.”

Fools still tell this good news.

He fooled death.

He fooled the darkness.

Christ is risen. April Fool indeed.

1 Corinthians 1: 18-21

The Message that points to Christ on the Cross seems like sheer silliness to those hellbent on destruction, but for those on the way of salvation it makes perfect sense. This is the way God works, and most powerfully as it turns out. It's written, I'll turn conventional wisdom on its head, I'll expose so-called experts as crackpots. So where can you find someone truly wise, truly educated, truly intelligent in this day and age? Hasn't God exposed it all as pretentious nonsense? Since the world in all its fancy wisdom never had a clue when it came to knowing God, God in his wisdom took delight in using what the world considered dumb—*preaching*, of all things!—to bring those who trust him into the way of salvation.

¹⁸For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ¹⁹For it is written,

"I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart."

²⁰Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe.

April 1, 2018 (Easter)

1 Corinthians 1:18-21; John 20:1-18

“Fools for Christ”

Kerra Becker English

My friend David Allred, who is the pastor of High Places Church in Oak Ridge, Tennessee is ridiculously passionate about Easter. He’s not what you would call a giddy person, but on Easter, I have seen him positively radiant with delight for his favorite holiday. And his church community is an interesting one, one that has always made room for the marginalized and downtrodden. The Easter that I spent with them when I was between pastorates, I was generously and graciously welcomed even though I was in my own place of darkness and doubt about “the church.” While many other churches in that particular community boasted about the who’s who of their congregations or the number of PhD’s sitting out there in the pews, David was positively humbled by serving those who self-identified as the least, the last, and the lost.

Communities like High Places, like this church, where you can be real and not have to have it all together to be part of the fold, remind me that the resurrection story that we celebrate today is felt perhaps most powerfully among those who know what it’s like to be the walking dead. Those who have come to rely on their own sense of reason, or intellect, or success can have a hard time seeing that the story is about them. They might call it foolishness, or silliness, or simply untrue. To those who know the extent of their need for help, who are longing for wholeness, who are desperate for salvation, this story makes perfect sense. It is wisdom beyond wisdom. It is life-giving. It is hope that has lasted through the some of the darkest times, and through the mires of doubt and despair.

One of the Holy Week celebrations, if you can call it that, that David leads at High Places is incredibly intriguing to me. He hosted it last night, and he calls it the “Night of Doubt.” He invites participants to come and “share with one another their doubts and concerns regarding religiosity without worry of apologetics or debate. This time [he says] is set aside as an evening for disbelief in religious tradition. It will be welcomed, as the value of religious disbelief in our culture is often marginalized.” (David’s Facebook page)

It’s brilliant in its foolishness, even though he told me that last year he only had one participant, himself. Take a look again at the gospel stories about the resurrection, the one we read from John, or really, any of the others. The doubt is not diminished in scripture; it’s highlighted. Mary couldn’t believe what was happening. The disciples couldn’t believe what was happening. To dismiss doubt or cast the doubtful as somehow lacking in the ability to know or love Jesus is to not be very familiar with the stories. To embrace the doubt, to not shy away from the pain and suffering, is to take the real stories about Jesus to heart.

In the eyes of the world, there’s a good chance that people will see us as fools for putting our confidence in the resurrection of Christ as our formative story. It’s downright foolish to believe in a crucified Messiah. No one wanted such a weak and powerless hero, neither the Greeks, nor the Jews. Who still tells stories of God on earth facing human death? We would call that silly mythology if it were written about Zeus or became the plot of a Disney movie about the demi-God Maui – even though it is well worth your time to go see the movie “Moana.” What makes us think that it was possible for Jesus or promised to us that love would triumph over the grave? Graves are permanent. Death is final. You can begin to see how the world might discredit our faith, or even see religion as no longer necessary in a thinking, rational world.

And yet, in the eyes of many Christian purists, sometimes even in our tribe of Presbyterians, to sniff out the doubting disciples has become a game of who has the corner on the market of holiness. If we acknowledge our doubt and claim that there are things we don't know or cannot prove about the resurrection, if there is a place for the mysterious and room for wonder, there are some in the Christian world who would cast a disparaging look at us for being weak in our faith. I don't think that's true, and I don't think that the gospel writers thought any less of Mary, or Peter, or any of the other disciples for being human and having their fair share of human skepticism.

This middle way, the one that foolishly believes, and faithfully has doubts seems to come up for me every single Easter. There's a thin line, as Jimmy Buffet would say, between Saturday night and Sunday morning, and the line is never thinner at any other time of the year as it is in this tension between the Saturday night when Jesus is completely dead, gone, and wrapped in his burial garments, and early Sunday morning when the tomb is empty and he calls out to Mary in the garden.

So, are we still fools for believing in the resurrection? Yes, probably. It makes sense to us who are steeped in the Christian worldview, but not so much elsewhere. And if someone wants to call me a fool for casting my lot in with Christianity, so be it. But, I would say, that we earn the title "wise" when we can give up believing in it making perfect logical sense, and instead start living as though it were a reality. I shared this quote last week, but it's so good, I want to say it again. Lutheran pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber writes: *The Christian faith, while wildly misrepresented in so much of American culture, is really about death and resurrection. It's about how God continues to reach into the graves we dig for ourselves and pull us out, giving us new life, in ways both dramatic and small.* I will gladly be called a "fool" for teaching that theology,

because it is so very, very true. I'm not the first to use this phrase either, but God uses "ordinary resurrections" to reach us and teach us, to make new lives out of our tattered old ones. That is miraculous too – but not in the ways we are sometimes taught that we are "supposed" to believe. Imagine that – God caring so much about life to give it to us not just once, but over and over again. Amen.

As the apostle Paul has said, Anyone who finds themselves in Christ – a new creation! The old life has gone, a new life has begun. Go – and start living your new life – today.

Communion

Easter us – written by Walter Bruggemann

You God who terrified the waters,
who crashed your thunder,
who shook the earth, and
scared the wits out of chaos.

You God who with strong arm saved your people
by miracle and wonder and majestic act.
You are the same God to whom we turn,
we turn in our days of trouble,
and in our weary nights;
we look for steadfast love and are dismayed,
we wait for your promises, but wait in fatigue,
we ponder your forgetfulness and lack of compassion,
and we grow silent.

Our lives, addressed to you,
have this bitter-sweet taste of
loud-clashing miracles and weak-kneed doubt.
So we come in our bewilderment and wonderment,
deeply trusting, almost afraid to trust much,
passionately insisting, too timid to insist much,
fervently hoping, exhausted for hoping too much.

Look upon us in our deep need,
mark the wounds of our brothers and sisters just here,
notice the turmoil in our lives, and the lives of our families,
credit the incongruity of the rich and the poor in our very city,
and the staggering injustices abroad in our land,
tend to the rage out of control, rage justified by displacement,
rage gone crazy by absence, silence, and deprivation,
measure the suffering,
count the sufferers,
number the wounds.

You tamer of chaos and mender of all tears in the canvas of creation,
we ponder your suffering,

your crown of thorns,
your garment taken in lottery,
your mocked life,
and now we throw upon your suffering humiliation,
the suffering of the world.
You defeater of death, whose power could not hold you,
come in your Easter,
come in your sweeping victory,
come in your glorious new life.

Holy Spirit of the Living God....

Easter us,
salve wounds,
break injustice,
bring peace,
guarantee neighbor,
Easter us in joy and strength.
Be our God, be your true self, lord of life,
massively turn our life toward your life
and away from our anti-neighbor, anti-self deathliness.
Hear our thankful, grateful, unashamed Hallelujah!
Amen.