

## EASTER MEETS APRIL FOOLS' DAY ?

The Rev. Julie Stoneberg  
Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough  
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### OPENING WORDS      *The Old, Old Story*    ~ Ian W. Riddell

We gather today in the presence of the old old story of death defeated by [an empty tomb], of hope and newness triumphant over fear and separation.

We come, hearts heavy with pain and anxiety, spirits flattened by exhaustion and apathy, vision darkened by strife and violence.

[We come, hopeful and resilient, spirits emboldened by the promise of spring, as tulips and crocus push up through the frozen earth.]

We come seeking connection and love in this place of community. May the old, old Easter story of hope and rebirth lighten our hearts and make us glad in the presence of each other's love.

May our spirits be joyful as we worship together today.

### STORY FOR ALL AGES      *The Jester Has Lost His Jingle*      ~ David Saltzman (A jester is banished from the court when he is unable to make anyone laugh, and realizing it's the world, not he, who has lost its humour, he goes in search of laughter.)

### READING      *Into the City with Jesus*<sup>1</sup>      ~ Rev. David Giuliano

Easter Sunday is just one part of the story of the life of a radical man, Jesus, who lived long ago and whose life continues to resonate in our world. Our service this morning looks more at that whole story than at the one specific event usually noted on this day. These words are part of a Palm Sunday meditation written a few years ago by the United Church moderator Reverend David Giuliano, and they place a particular emphasis on the role of the subversive, perhaps 'foolish', tactics employed by the man Jesus.

Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan begin their book *The Last Week* with a reminder that in the year AD 30, in the days leading up to Passover, there was not just one but two processions entering Jerusalem. And they were on a collision course.

From the east, amid whispers of revolt, Jesus rides in on a donkey, proclaiming the empire of God. He called it the "kingdom of God." Hearts pounding with fear, his companions follow in disorderly formation. Hopeful peasants, spoiling for a fight with "the man," cheer them on.

From the west, amid rising dust and the thunder of cavalry hoofs, soldiers march in, visible and audible even from a distance. This shock and awe battalion is led by Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, who is rolling into town to assert the authority of the Roman Empire. He will answer any insurrection with an iron fist. Pilate, and by

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.ucobserver.org/faith/2009/04/moderators\\_message\\_april09/](https://www.ucobserver.org/faith/2009/04/moderators_message_april09/)

extension Caesar, is greeted by the upper crust of Jerusalem. If this were a Hollywood movie, ominous music would swell and dark clouds would rumble on the horizon.

Jesus' "triumphant" entry into the city is a planned, orchestrated political statement. It is dangerous street theatre. Code words are exchanged between disciples and clandestine followers of Jesus. A donkey is turned over to the disciples. The action begins.

Jesus rides into town on the donkey, a brazen nod to the prophet Zechariah and his well-known prediction that a king would come, humble and riding on a donkey, to liberate Jerusalem. But there is already a governor: Pilate. And there is already a "King of the Jews," a title given to Herod. And there is Caesar, known far and wide as the "Son of God." The palm parade is the counterpoint, a non-violent mockery of the Roman military parade on the other side of the city.

Rev. Giuliano concludes his meditation wondering which parade we are marching in... the status quo, or the dangerous street theatre? Who are we greeting, and for what do we put our own palms up?

**MESSAGE**                      *Easter Meets April Fools' Day*                      ~ Rev. Julie Stoneberg

I know that the story Ian shared isn't about Easter; rest assured that even though I am a Unitarian minister, I can tell the difference between Palm Sunday and Easter Sunday! I also know that as Unitarians, it is most common for our Easter services to avoid the stories of the Christian Testament and to focus instead on new life, spring, and re-birth...that tendency being captured in the hymn we just sang. If you came here for that kind of Easter today...April Fools!...we're not going there. Instead, we are going to delve into the story of the ministry of Jesus...and what some might call a fool's mission.

I'm not much of a trickster. I can't pull off a practical joke, and I regularly screw up punchlines. It's not much in my nature to be silly. (I feel very silly wearing this hat.<sup>2</sup>)

My mom used to tell me that the reason my brothers teased me was because they loved me. That's our family culture, that teasing is love, and so I got into the habit of teasing one of my brothers in return. He was particularly fun to tease...perhaps because he didn't take it very well. Once, a friend and I spent an April Fools' Day plotting against him. First, we short-sheeted his bed. Then, knowing that he liked to help himself to a bowl of ice cream when he got home from his job, we thought of a great trick. My mom made this yummy chokecherry sauce that he loved on his ice cream, and we switched it out with beet juice. Then we sat in the rec room, and waited. We heard him come into the house...open a cupboard for a bowl...come downstairs to the freezer...back up to the kitchen to get the sauce. We were holding our breath. We started giggling...but when we heard a yell from upstairs, I got scared. I realized maybe it wasn't that funny. I raced to his bedroom, and quickly tried to re-make his bed...and that's where he found me...in a mess of bedclothes.

No, I am not much of a trickster, or a jester, and I certainly don't like to be thought of as a fool. But the merger of these two days is a rare thing...a thing to be explored. The last time Easter fell on April Fools' Day was in 1956. After today, it happens again in 2029 and 2040, but then

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<sup>2</sup> Rev. Stoneberg wore a jester's hat for the entire sermon.

not again until the twenty-second century. So, there are very few chances to wonder what April Fools Day might have to do with Easter.

Of course, there is absolutely no historical or direct connection. April Fools' Day doesn't have any known basis in Christianity or with Jesus; it doesn't seem to have a clear beginning at all. But there IS an offbeat theological tradition of comparing Jesus to a trickster, and naming him as a fool, on a foolish mission. And that's where I'll start today. We'll get to Easter in a bit.

It is Shakespeare who has left us with the clearest understanding of the centuries old role of fool. Feste in *Twelfth Night*, Touchstone in *As You Like It*, The Fool in *King Lear*, Bottom and Puck in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Trinculo in *The Tempest*...and many others...Shakespeare used the fool to play a critical role in the unfolding of the story, and in the internal journeys of the characters. Fools are more than silly teases; they are subtle teachers who explode pretensions, and turn expectations on their head. They coax and cajole their supposed 'betters' toward the truth. They have a license to think and say and do the unthinkable, the unsayable, and the undoable. They mock authority and challenge the power-holders, and with comic relief, help us all to cut through the crap. All in all, it is the jester's wisdom and subversive behaviour that make change and transformation possible.

Oh, that there were a fool at the White House...well, I mean, a different kind of fool...the wise, truth-telling kind. Wouldn't it be wonderful if there still existed THESE kinds of fools in all houses of power and authority? In truth, our modern society does have many kinds of such fools...in our comedians and our pundits and social media memes and whistle blowers...but sadly, they don't often have the ear or the respect of those in power.

One of the sources of inspiration and wisdom within this liberal faith, (and you can find the current list of our sources both on the welcome brochure and on a page in the grey hymnal just before the first hymn)...one of our sources, listed as the second one... are the words and deeds of prophetic people which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love. The words and deeds of prophetic fools(?) which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love. Are these people not the fools of our faith, of our history? Are they not those who have acted outside of the norm to point out faults that no one else would, who have had the courage to speak truth to power, who have helped us all to embark on journeys of discovery?

Jesus is one of those people...as well as, of course, central to another source of this faith... Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves.

You might be familiar with these words attributed to Jesus. "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, do not resist one who is evil. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also; and if anyone would sue you and take your coat, let him have your cloak as well; and if any one forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles."<sup>3</sup> These words are often interpreted to mean that Jesus advocated for passivity in the face of persecution. But a colleague shared with me an article by the late

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<sup>3</sup> (attributed to Jesus in Matthew 5:38-41, Revised Standard Version)

Walter Wink,<sup>4</sup> who sets the record straight...showing us that the Greek word 'artistenai' interpreted in the King James Bible as 'resist not evil' really means to 'stand against' or to 'engage in insurrection.' Not 'do not resist', but rather 'don't resist with violence.' Resist, just not with violence.

Wink then goes on to exegete the text I just read in terms of its social context. In each case... turning the cheek, or giving one's undergarments, or going an extra mile...have specific historical meaning tied to laws and realities in that time and regime...and suggest that when being teased, or bullied, or persecuted, or oppressed by those with power...one might take an action that undermines that power...to do something unexpected...something that takes the air out of their tires, so to speak. Play the fool.

This reminds me of the story told in the film, *Life is Beautiful*. You know the one? It's about a Jewish librarian and his son, victims of the Holocaust, in a concentration camp. The father does everything possible, using wit and laughter and creativity, to protect his son from what's actually happening. He deflates the huge machine of persecution, by making a joke, a game, of it. He uses one of the only powers he has, the power of choice, to discomfit the oppressive regime by not taking it seriously, or at least to appear not be taking it seriously.

And just so, the ministry of Jesus offered an alternative to the usual two choices... the choice to either fight the powers that be or resign oneself to them and hide in a cave. Jesus' alternative is to refuse to be awed by that power. To unmask its pretensions. To call it out. To open up the possibility of transformation by revealing a new way.

And that's the kind of 'clowning' being done by Jesus as he and his followers entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. "See that ridiculous show of power coming in the other gate? See their pompous ways? See their false sense of privilege?" Jesus comes in riding on a donkey, mocking Pilate, and lifting up the possibility of a different kind of kingdom altogether. It was a dangerous act of non-violence, which unfortunately led to his death. But not before making an impression and sharing a message that would change the course of history.

And for those of you who might see this as an antiquated or irrelevant story, let's not miss the fact that Trump has lobbied for, and been approved, to have a huge military parade in November...to show his power and might, puffed up though it is...And, at the same time, that thousands of school children and teenagers are walking into the political arena...out of their classrooms and into the fray...carrying a message to end gun violence. Out of the mouths of babes, as it were.<sup>5</sup> In through the eastern gate. Completely unexpected. Beautifully undermining the façade that those in power have constructed.

Be a fool for what you believe in. Well-known pundit and comedian Stephen Colbert defines his own foolishness for Christ as the willingness "to be wrong in society, or wrong according to our time, but right according to our conscience."<sup>6</sup> Be a fool for what matters to you.

A few weeks ago, I attended an event at Trent called "It's Okay to Be Against Whiteness,"<sup>7</sup> 'Whiteness', as the speaker defined it, is the ideological underpinning of white supremacy.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.tapataalk.com/groups/wmc/walter-wink-jesus-and-alinsky-2004-t807.html>

<sup>5</sup> <https://medium.com/@danclend/parade-or-protest-3df2ec911349>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/stephen-colbert-on-being-a-fool-for-christ/>

<sup>7</sup> Michael Cappello: <https://soundcloud.com/lindsay-yates-270427600/march-12-2018-its-ok-to-be-against-whiteness>

'Whiteness' is a term to capture the all-encompassing dimensions of white privilege, dominance, and assumed superiority. Talk about 'powers and structures of evil'!

The event was criticized by loud voices using threat tactics and violent messaging. But I witnessed the speaker, Michael Cappello's, unflappable calm in the face of all of that 'hot air,' deflating much of its power. And in a message resembling that of Jesus' 'kingdom of god', he said essentially this: "If you are being threatened because of your actions against 'whiteness'...know this: It is okay to be FOR indigenous revitalization...of language, of laws, of land. It is okay to be FOR the fullness of humanity of marginalized people. It is okay to be FOR the liberation of all people, realizing that 'whiteness' is not good for white people either. Know that we are not stuck living out the dreams of our ancestors."

We are not stuck continuing the status quo. We are not stuck in resigning ourselves to the way it's always been. We don't have to believe ourselves powerless in the face of the political machine. We do not have to, in fact, we must not, resign ourselves to cynicism, despair and hopelessness. We have options...Wink offered a list of them in his article...for example: Seize the moral initiative, find a creative alternative to violence, assert your own humanity and dignity as a person, meet force with ridicule or humor, expose the injustice of the system, recognize your own power. Be a fool for what you hold dear.

At Barb Beck's Celebration of Life on Friday, I made the case that holy week's story does not end on Good Friday. It does not end with tucking what we love away in a cave and rolling a big stone in front of it. In order for the story of love and justice to go on, we have to get that story...a vision of 'heaven on earth'...and all of what we are FOR...out into the world.

And that's where April Fools' Day meets Easter. The followers of Jesus were not willing to let the message of a kingdom of love and justice die with him. Any of us may well doubt that Jesus rose from the grave...or was resurrected...but we cannot deny that his story and his vision did rise from the grave. The people who were responsible for Jesus' death were trying to kill his message, but instead, their violent treatment of him catapulted him into a world-wide movement with millions of followers.

Fools rushed in. Fools rushed in with a story of a miracle that spoke to the hearts of the oppressed. Fools rushed in and refused to let their vision of a new world die with the man. The call is to join the parade of justice with clown-like vulnerability. Wink reminds us that this call is admittedly not for the faint of heart. But "if you are dispirited by the enormity of the injustices that crush us and the intractability of those in positions of power, [there is hope.]", he says. "We can lay claim to the creative possibilities that are still ours, [mock] the injustice of unfair laws, and force evil out of hiding from behind the facade of legitimacy."

Though my relationship with my brother is one insignificant bit part on the world's stage, each relationship in our lives matters. But, you see, the fool in that story is not the girl who played childish tricks on her brother. (Nor is it the adult who continued teasing him with butt-head birthday cards for countless years.) The 'fool' was the voice that kept poking me to realize it simply wasn't funny... that it wasn't bringing about the kind of relationship I wanted to have...that there had to be a different way. The 'fool' finally showed up in me when I dared to throw family culture to the wind, to stop teasing, and to do the unexpected by expressing kindness and respect instead. A new story can be told. When 'the way things are' is unjust or

even evil, we need not be stuck in it. We can show a new way. (Of course, now, my family just thinks I've lost my sense of humour...maybe I should start wearing this hat to family gatherings?)

I close with a Franciscan blessing:<sup>8</sup>

“May we be blessed with discomfort – discomfort at easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships, so that we may live deep within our hearts.

May we be blessed with anger – anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people, so that we may work for justice, freedom, and peace.

May we be blessed with tears – tears to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, hunger, and war, so that we may reach out our hands to comfort them and turn their pain into joy.

And may we be blessed with foolishness – enough foolishness to believe that we can make a difference in this world, so that we can do what others claim cannot be done.”

Indeed, with the strength of fools, the stone can be, will be, rolled away. Happy Easter, my friends. Amen.

**READING**                      *After "He Is Risen!" ~ Joshua Mason Pawelek*  
*a post-Easter litany modeled after Howard Thurman's "Now the Work of Christmas Begins"*

After the Hosannahs have all been shouted,  
After anguished moments in the garden have been spent,  
After “take this bread and eat, take this wine and drink,”  
After betrayal with a kiss,  
After hands washed and 39 lashes,  
After seven last words and “he breathed his last,”  
After crucifixion and death,  
After laying the body in the tomb,  
After rolling away the stone,  
After proclamations of “He is risen!”

Now let us rise.

Now let us awaken to a new dawn, a new day.  
Let us remake the world with the hope of Easter.  
Let us set free the prisoners,  
House the homeless,  
Educate the children,  
Offer gainful work to all who are willing and able to work,  
Protect soil, water, air, and food,  
End all forms of state-sanctioned violence.  
Now may we awaken and stay woke.  
Now may we rise and stay risen.

**CLOSING WORDS**

*Closing Words for Easter*

*~ Alex Holt*

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<sup>8</sup> <https://medium.com/@danclend/parade-or-protest-3df2ec911349>

For all those who celebrate the resurrection of Jesus, may this day be another affirmation of divine love and promise;

[For all those who celebrate Passover and continue to carry the story of liberation;]

For all those who see the eternal story of new spring and life beginning anew, may you breathe deeply of a season of promise and hope.

For all who are experiencing despair or hopelessness this Easter, may you find in the darkness or depression a doorway to light and warmth that offers you freedom.

For all of us: together we can do what no one isolated person can do; rolling the heavy stone aside reminds us we are far more powerful than we ever could be on our own.

Our offering of strong hands to help are prayers made real;

Let us begin again to love.

Let us rush in as fools...riding our donkeys...into the work of love.

Go in Peace. Amen.