

“The Foolishness of the Gospel”

Mark 16:1-8 and 1 Corinthians 4:10a

Easter Sunday, April 1, 2018

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Madison WI

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Happy Easter!

Today is the day that Christians celebrate Jesus being raised from the dead, which we understand as forgiveness of sin and abundant, eternal life.

In other words, Easter is about God bringing new life and new hope to the world.

We’ve made this proclamation in our songs, in our prayers, and in the scripture reading that you heard as worship began.

Well, you kind of heard it in the scripture reading, Mark 16:1-8.

In the other gospel accounts, we have accounts of the resurrected Jesus talking with the disciples, teaching them, even sharing meals with them. But in Mark, the gospel ends quickly in a rather subdued way. Yes, in the footnotes of the Bible there are other suggested endings; but, the most authentic manuscripts have Mark 16:8, the final verse, with the women leaving the empty tomb, not having seen Jesus, and being afraid and silent.

That final sentence in the gospel could be translated:

“The women went out from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; they said nothing to anyone, they were afraid for...”

So the gospel ends with fear, silence, and a dangling preposition...!

In a literal sense, yes, this is how the gospel ends. But over the years, this abrupt ending has been seen as an invitation—an invitation to readers and disciples from that time onward, to enter into the story, to move the story of God forward.

That first Easter was scary and surprising and confusing to the early disciples. They had doubts and fears. It took them time to realize that Jesus really was risen, that sin really is forgiven, that death isn't the final word.

It took time before their lives were changed by the love of God, and before they became well-known for their sacrificial love, their kindness, their passion for justice.

It took them time to believe and act out what we could call the foolishness of the gospel.

Today is a good day to talk about the foolishness, given that it is not only Easter but it's also April Fool's Day, a rare convergence.

The last time this happened was 1956. And Easter will be on April Fool's Day again in 2029, 2040, and not again until 2108.

Regardless of when Easter happens, there is something foolish about our faith, our calling.

The apostle Paul, in his letter to the church at Corinth, wrote:

“We are fools for the sake of Christ...” (NRSV)

Another way of saying it is:

“We are fools for Christ...” (NIV)

I suppose Christian faith does look foolish to some people.

We are the ones who are foolish enough to believe that forgiveness, compassion, and love are powerful enough to change the world.

We are the ones who are foolish enough to not give up, to keep working to make the world a better place, hoping in the vision of the Kingdom of God, that Jesus proclaimed.

We are the ones who are foolish enough to believe in a peace that passes understanding, a peace we can have in all circumstances, even death.

The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus invites us into foolish living.

Recently I've been reading about a woman in New York City whose bike was stolen in early March. Amanda Needham was distraught and angry after the theft, so she made a big sign—8 feet wide and put it in front of her apartment, with her landlord's permission.

“To the person who stole my bicycle I hope you need it more than I do. It was \$200 used, and I need it to get to work. I can't afford another one. Next time, steal a hipster's Peugeot. Or not steal! PS: Bring it back.”



Soon after, funny, or you might say foolish, things started happening. Two young men came to her building, buzzing her apartment.

“Are you the one who got your bike stolen?” asked the older of the two, probably in his mid-twenties. “I had that happen to me as well, and I had this bike lying around, so I figured you might be able to use it.” She hesitated at their offer, thinking that they might be more in need than she was, but they insisted. So she became the owner of a blue mountain bike, fit for a teen.

Later, a middle-aged woman came, saying she had her husband drive around the block twice, so she could see the sign. She didn't have a bike, but she offered Amanda a hug.

Then the door buzzed again. Her husband suggested that maybe it was time to take down the sign.

There was an energetic man, with salt and pepper hair at the door.

“Is this your sign?” he asked. “I passed it on the way to my studio, and took a picture, but the more I thought about it, the more I thought I should do something.”

“That’s very kind of you,” she said, explaining how she’d also received a kid’s bike and a hug, and what mattered most was that people cared.

“Well, I posted a picture on Instagram, and a few of us started talking, and I was wondering if I could buy the sign off of you for ...\$200?” as he pointed to the sign.

It turns out he was an art dealer, with an apparent interest in very modern art. So Amanda sold the sign and bought another used bike. Then she took the blue mountain bike to a bike shop, where it was dubbed the Karma-cycle and scheduled to be given away yesterday to a needy teenager.

Source: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/inspired-life/wp/2018/03/16/i-posted-a-huge-note-for-the-thief-who-stole-my-bike-then-my-doorbell-rang>

When I hear about that kind of good, that kind of foolishness, I think that the love of God is inspiring, nudging people to reach out and make a difference, with kindness and compassion.

I see foolishness in the work of the church as well.

Our church, the Presbyterian Church USA, is doing mission work around the country and around the world, in many places that are otherwise ignored or forgotten.

One such place is La Oroya Peru, where two Presbyterian mission co-workers are working with a community that has been decimated by toxic chemicals.

La Oroya has been classified as one of the ten most polluted places on the earth, with 99% of the children dealing with lead poisoning. A large mining plant, based in the USA, is the source.

But Presbyterian Mission Co-workers Jed and Jenny Koball are there in Peru, helping the community get access to health care and education, while helping them to organize and work for enforcement environmental laws.



<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/missionconnections/the-rev-jed-and-jenny-koball/>

In a video on the Presbyterian Church USA website, Jed talks about standing against the power of death, proclaiming resurrection and new life, working together for a better world, here and now.

I'm proud to be part of a church that is foolish enough to join hands with and care about the lost, the least, and the last, who too often get ignored or forgotten.

And by the way, our One Great Hour of Sharing Offering supports this and many other "foolish" projects around the country and the world. There are envelopes on the prayer table as you leave the sanctuary and at the Welcome Center.

I'm also glad to be part of a church where we can be foolish enough to stand together and be unafraid as death draws near. I'm glad to be part of a tradition that proclaims resurrection hope, that somehow, death is not the final word.

I've been in touch over the past few weeks with a church family who is journeying with an elderly loved one in their final days. It's a sad time for the family, but there is a sense of peace and gratitude, as they share memories and faith. The church member emailed me this week saying:

“There are angels at every turn. It’s a beautiful world and we are blessed. There are Easter joys all around.”

Some people consider Christianity to be foolish.

But if proclaiming resurrection leads us

to kindness and compassion,

to risk-taking for justice,

and to being hopeful in times of despair, and even death,

then I’m glad to be part of the foolishness.

Let us pray.