

**EASTER DAY – April 1, 2018**  
*April Fools!*

We had been married not-quite eight months when I came home from work one afternoon and, as soon as I entered the house, I was met with the unmistakable and oh-so enticing aroma of fresh baked cookies! Now we were still technically newlyweds at the time, I guess, so naturally I just *assumed* that this was the reason for such a pleasant surprise from my thoughtful bride who had already learned by this point that I had a bigtime sweet tooth.

I mean, I could barely hide my excitement that day. And to make it even *better* (if that was possible), they were chocolate chip cookies – my absolute favorite!

Walking into the kitchen, my eyes were immediately drawn to the table where several dozen freshly baked chocolate chip cookies, straight from the oven, were spread out on sheets of wax paper cooling. The very *next* thing I noticed... was that in the center of the table was the largest, most perfectly formed, most beautiful, most succulent chocolate chip cookie I had ever laid my eyes on! I swear it was just calling my name.

So, striding across the room, I reached for that big, warm, gorgeous cookie and I quickly took a huge bite out of it – my salivary glands working overtime in anticipation of a sweet, glorious, chocolatey reward...

And then I began to gag... It wasn't sweet and sugary at all! It was... It was... It was *salty*! And my immediate reaction was to spit out that warm, gooey, but *salty* mouthful. I looked over to Jeanette, and there

my precious, thoughtful bride of nearly eight months who had baked my favorite chocolate chip cookies that day just for me, her husband, was... well she was *laughing*; laughing so hard she could barely get out the words: “April fools!”

And that’s when I first learned the sobering truth that I had married into a *family* of April fools pranksters. The tradition had started, you see, with my mother-in-law who patiently waited, and ingeniously plotted, and intricately planned her April fools jokes each year.

Needless to say, Jeanette had learned from the best. And I was at a loss. I mean, our pre-marital counseling with the pastor had never prepared me for anything like *this*. What have I gotten myself into, I wondered!

And that first year was just the beginning. You see, each and every year thereafter, despite my impassioned and repeated pleas for mercy, the April fools pranks continued unabated. One year, Jeanette substituted food-colored water for my orange juice. On another occasion, she baked me brownies filled with cotton balls. Another year, after I had become fairly adept at anticipating and sniffing out her April fools traps and pranks, and I actually thought I had made it through the day unscathed, I went to brush my teeth before bed and, the moment I placed the toothbrush in my mouth, I realized that I had been “had” again. Instead of tasting my sweet minty toothpaste, all I could taste was – her favorite – *salt*! She had soaked or covered my toothbrush in salt. And there it sat in the toothbrush rack all day long just waiting... just waiting for an unsuspecting me to reach for it at the end of a long day; a day in which I actually thought I had somehow avoided being pranked.

And it didn't end there either. No sir. I soon realized that I had helped bring into this world *another* generation of April fools pranksters with the birth of my three daughters. The first year they got me on their own, as I recall, I went to the kitchen sink to wash my hands. And the moment I turned on the faucet I was completely drenched with water. You see, my darling little daughters had wrapped a rubber band around the sprayer at the kitchen sink and positioned the nozzle so it was directly facing the person who turned on the water. Which, of course – as planned – turned out to be me! “April fools!” they cried out in unison, before bursting into uncontrollable laughter...

Now to be fair, I am not the *only* victim of April fools jokes and pranks, of course. There have been some notable ones over the years. For instance...

In 1996, Taco Bell announced that they had bought the naming rights of the Liberty Bell. Henceforth, they said, it would be known as the *Taco Liberty Bell*. Outraged citizens jammed the phone lines in protest.

Then-White House press secretary Mike McCurry quickly responded with a joke of his own, saying, “The Ford Motor Company is joining us today in an effort to refurbish the Lincoln Memorial. It will now be known as the *Lincoln Mercury Memorial*.”

In 1976, the BBC, over in England, aired an interview with an astronomer. He told listeners that at precisely 9:47 a.m. the planets Jupiter and Pluto would be in a rare alignment that would briefly diminish the earth's gravity. He further said that, if you leaped into the air at that exact moment, you would experience a fantastic floating sensation. And hundreds of people actually called in to say they felt it.

One woman even reported that she and her eleven friends had risen from their chairs and floated around the room!

And keeping with that space-theme, in 2005 it was reported that NASA had discovered water on Mars, and had actually posted pictures on the official NASA website. Those who went to the NASA website to check it out, however, found a picture of a glass of water sitting on a Mars candy bar.

Finally, in 1998, the folks at Burger King came up with the idea of the “Left-handed Whopper.” The 30 million plus left-handed people in the U.S. would now be able to buy a whopper, they said, with all the ingredients rotated 180 degrees just for them. A full page ad in USA Today resulted in stores being *inundated* with customers wanting this new burger. And, according to Burger King, thousands *more* ordered the “right-handed” version as well. (Not to be outdone, in 2015 Cottonelle tweeted that it was introducing left-handed toilet paper!)

April Fools... It’s become something of a tradition, hasn’t it? A time to “trip up” or “trick” unsuspecting people... Which brings us, in a way, to this morning’s gospel reading from Mark.

Of all the accounts of Easter morning in the gospels (and remember there’s four of them), Mark’s is *easily* the most intriguing as well as the most puzzling. It’s also the shortest. Just a few moments ago, I read for you Mark 16:1-8. Scholars tell us that it’s highly likely that Mark’s gospel originally ended *right there*. Let me read verse eight for you again:

*So they went out and fled from the tomb,  
for terror and amazement had seized them;*

*and they said nothing to anyone,  
for they were afraid*

That's it! The three women who had gone to anoint Jesus' body and to prepare it properly for burial (since it had been placed in the tomb, as you know, with some haste because of the approaching Sabbath on Good Friday), have just discovered – not only that the large stone to the tomb's entrance has already been rolled away, but *also* – that the tomb is now empty! And not only *that*, but they also encounter a young man, dressed in a white robe, who proceeds to tell them that Jesus has been raised and has gone on ahead of them to Galilee. “Go, tell his disciples and Peter,” says the young man, and “there you will see him, just as he told you.”

And it's here that Mark says that the women turned around and just took off running. Why? Because they were utterly terrified and amazed, he tells us. At first, says Mark, they didn't even say anything to *anybody* about what they had just witnessed – they were *that* frightened. *Stunned* might be an even better way of describing their initial reaction...

But here's where it gets *really* interesting. As we just heard, “they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” But that's not exactly how the end of verse eight actually reads in Greek. In the Greek, it literally reads, “to no one anything they said; afraid they were *for*...” And it just stops there, mysteriously, seemingly in mid-sentence.

Now outside of Yoda, that venerable Jedi master in the “Star Wars” movies who was always saying things like, “Evil you are,” or “Size matters not,” who ever talks or writes like that? In other words, who

ends a sentence, and in this case an entire gospel, with a preposition: “to no one anything they said; afraid they were for....”?

Some scholars have noted that the word could also be translated as “because,” as in “to no one anything they said; afraid they were *because...*”

Because what? Because they were startled and stunned? Because they couldn't fathom or understand what had just taken place? Or could it *be...* because they possibly thought that they had been “had,” that they thought they had been tricked, or pranked, or worse yet, duped?

In John's Gospel, of course, that's *exactly* what Mary Magdalene thinks. Perhaps you may recall that her first response was: “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.”

The implication is clear. Someone has played a trick on them; a *nasty* trick, in fact. Someone has taken, *stolen*, Jesus' body and his followers have absolutely no idea what this person or persons have done with it.

Frightened and amazed, the women – as we heard – then fled the tomb. And that's precisely where Mark chose to end his story. I truly believe that Mark wanted his readers to experience the very same feelings those women had – confusion, disbelief, uncertainty – and then to also *pause...* and to let the implications of that empty tomb *slowly* become clear to them.

Because it was only *slowly*, and only *after* the fact, that the disciples finally began to understand and to appreciate what had just taken place. And to realize that the trick was not on *them*. But the trick was *really* on

Satan, the devil, the power of evil in the world; whatever you want to call it or however you want to refer to it. The *evil one* had been tricked. The evil one had been pranked. Unbelievably... as they slowly began to realize, the evil one had been duped. *April fools!*

Jesus had risen from the grave! Death no longer had any power over him. Neither did sin have any power over him. And evil? Here's the deal. The tomb is empty! Christ is risen! The contest between God and Satan, between God and the evil in this world has been decided once and for all, and in one... fell... swoop!

*Gotcha! April fools, devil!*

And just like it dawned on me many years ago, this idea that I had somehow become part of a *family* of April fools pranksters, you and I – as Christians – are also members of a family of April fools pranksters. In fact, the idea that God in Jesus had pranked the devil goes all the way back to the early church fathers – theologians of the early church – like Irenaeus, who was a second century Greek cleric, and St. Augustine of Hippo, some 200 years later. And even Gregory of Nyssa who reveled in the idea – the *audacious* idea – that the resurrection was a practical joke on the devil. April fools!

In the latest edition of “Living Lutheran,” Kathryn Kleinhans, the Dean of Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Columbus, Ohio, tells the story of two young children who are playing together while a movie about Jesus’ life was playing on television. One of the children was Christian. The other was not.

As the film reached the point of Jesus crucifixion, the second child became more and more interested in what was happening on the TV screen. As he did, he began to neglect his friend and the game they were playing. Frustrated, the first child – the Christian child – finally blurted out, “Never mind about that! He gets out of it in the end!”

Are we sometimes guilty of the same thing? Of losing our own sense of wonder and surprise and awe because we also know the end of the story; we know that Jesus has risen from the grave and gets out of it in the end?

You see, each and every year – whether Easter falls on April 1 or not (and it hasn’t happened since 1956; the years that I was born, by the way) – each and every year that amazing, unprecedented, prank is repeated and remembered and retold over and over again.

The tomb is empty. The one who was dead is alive once again. And, therefore, death no longer has any power over him or, more importantly, over this world. And even over us. Christ has triumphed over the grace.

Gotcha, devil. April fools!

Amen.



