

St. Paul's, Concord
Easter Day, April 1, 2018
Isaiah 25:6-9; Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24;
Acts 10:34-43; Mark 16:1-8

As we celebrate this peculiar mash-up of Easter and April Fools Day, I am absolutely certain that preachers all over the world are making jokes about the women arriving at the tomb on that first Easter morning, and Jesus jumping out shouting, "April Fool!" And I guess I just became one of them! But I hope you'll humor us – because it's not often we get an opportunity like this. In the last 50 years, Easter day hasn't once coincided with April Fools' Day. In fact today is the first time since 1956!

So, it's great to be able to laugh about the image of Jesus pulling an April Fool stunt – but the irony is that there really *is* a connection between April Fools' Day and Easter, whatever date Easter falls on.

In one of St. Paul's letters to the Corinthian Church, he described how, from the perspective of the secular world, "the message of the cross is foolishness." (1 Corinthians 1:18) The 1st century world was full of people who knew that execution by crucifixion was the ultimate humiliation, a punishment reserved for criminals. For the Messiah, the Son of God and Savior of the world, to undergo such a punishment is, Paul suggests, utter foolishness in the eyes of non-believers.

And, if you consider our 21st century world, that perspective hasn't changed much. The practice of crucifixion has all but disappeared, but the idea of worshiping a Savior who disappeared from this earth nearly 2,000 years ago – that simply doesn't make sense to many people. And it's often the case that, if something doesn't make sense, anyone associated with it is judged to be a fool.

Last Tuesday the clergy of our Diocese gathered for the annual renewal of our ordination vows. And the Epistle read at our service of Holy Eucharist was that very passage from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians – the one where he talks about foolishness.

In my opinion you can't come up with a better example of Christian fools than a room full of bishops, priests, and deacons! (I'm speaking, of course, in terms of *Paul's* definition of foolishness – although I'm sure you have plenty of observations of your own about clergy!)

Here are some of the apparently foolish things I'm talking about:

As we well know, our society places a strong emphasis on ambition, and defines success in terms of wealth, power, and prestige. But most clergy I know, certainly here in the Diocese of New Hampshire, are involved in ministries to people with *no* wealth, *no* power, and *no* prestige.

The foolishness of clergy is evident in an attitude that may be at odds with much of the secular world – but it's very much in line with God's special bond with people who are poor, weak, and marginalized.

Another characteristic of present times is the desire for instant gratification. And I know, from my own experience, and from my brother and sister clergy, that instant gratification is not a typical feature of a journey of faith! If I have the privilege of baptizing an adult, or putting someone forward for Confirmation, I'm well aware that I've had only a limited involvement in the spiritual growth of that person. It's a journey that they embarked upon long before I came on the scene; it involved many people other than me – and it will continue with or without my presence and input.

The foolishness of clergy is that we treasure the opportunity to be a companion on a spiritual journey – even if we missed that journey's beginning and may not be there at its end. We understand that there *are* sudden bursts of insight in a life of faith; there are revelations, epiphanies, and discoveries of all kinds – but there are no quick fixes.

Let me give you one more example of clergy foolishness. We live in an age of classification, labeling, and matching like with like. It applies to hobbies and interests and it applies to relationships too. For example, most of the marriages I've presided at in recent years have been for couples who completed personality profiles and met online. And everywhere you look, there's an organization you can join or a program you can watch or a vendor you can buy from that's designed to suit your particular preferences and personality.

Well, guess what, there's no computer matching between a priest and their congregation! And yet one of the most striking examples of clergy foolishness – as far as the world outside is concerned – is how much we love our congregations. Why is that seen as foolish? For all kinds of reasons. For a start there's a huge range of personalities in these pews; there's no way they all match mine! Not only that, but there are people here I've never met before, there are people I haven't spent much time with, and there are people who've shared moments of anger and bitterness with me.

But none of that makes any difference. When I look out at your faces, or place a communion wafer in your hand, or greet you at the door, I feel genuine, unconditional love – and I know my clergy colleagues have the same experience. The world may think this is foolish but *we* know it's a gift from God. After all, as Peter said to Cornelius and the other Gentiles, in our reading from the Acts of the Apostles, "...God shows no partiality." (Acts 10:34)

So clergy are a great example of what the world deems foolish. But Paul wasn't only talking about clergy when he wrote his letter. And Peter wasn't addressing clergy when he preached to the Gentiles. In fact, both Peter and Paul devoted their entire years of ministry and mission to inviting anyone who would listen to become, as Paul described it, "fools for the sake of Christ." (1 Corinthians 4:10) And your presence here today is evidence of their success. Because, even though you may prefer not to describe yourselves that way, you are just as much an example of Christian foolishness as I am!

Every time you make a financial contribution to St. Paul's, you do so knowing you're supporting our ministries to people who struggle with poverty, homelessness, and health challenges. What's more, many of you are directly involved in those ministries: distributing food and clothing; providing hospitality to homeless families or serving in cold weather shelters; mentoring youth;

taking part in Jamaica missions. By these acts of compassion and generosity you reject the *world's* definition of success in favor of *God's*.

You turn your backs on the quick fix mentality too, when you commit yourselves to this community of faith – seeking support for your spiritual journey to be sure, and also discovering what it means to be an integral, functional part of the body of Christ. The world has a tendency to say, “I don’t need God.” But what the world fails to understand is that it’s not so much *our* need for *God* that brings us together week by week – but rather our recognition that *God* needs *us*. God uses us, with all our gifts and passions, all our flaws and failings, all our beauty and diversity, to accomplish great things in a world that’s losing its way because it *just isn’t foolish enough*.

And what about that genuine, unconditional, God-given love for one another? That’s evident too. Our society has a tendency to avoid unpleasantness. There’s a reluctance to be open about the very real struggles people go through every day of their lives – problems with relationships, parenting challenges, illness, addiction, loss, isolation, and pain of all kinds. But here, in this community of faith, we walk those paths together. We’re not afraid of each other’s tears; we listen to each other’s stories; we don’t pretend death doesn’t happen – or that it doesn’t leave its mark – and we find comfort together in the Resurrection promise.

That brings us to the greatest and wisest foolishness of all: our understanding that there is a power *greater* than death, greater than suffering, greater than any instant gratification or material success we might experience in our secular lives. Like the two Marys and their friend Salome, on that long-ago Easter morning, we’ve discovered that Jesus made a fool of death, once and for all.

We *are* April fools! We are *Easter* fools! We are *fools* for the sake of Christ! And that foolishness is what allows God’s kingdom to take root, and grow, and spread – until the day when the world finally realizes that we really were the wise ones all along!

ALLELUIA!