

The message given by Rev. Dr. Tom Zoelzer on Good Friday, April 2, 2010 based on Luke 23:13-25

April Fools!

Hey, did you hear that the health care bill was repealed today? Yeh, it just came over the news right before our service that Nancy Pelosi and Harry Reid called Congress back in session this morning and said that they had had a change of heart and that health reform needed more work. So, they had both houses of congress vote to rescind the bill that were passed and that they were going to start over next week....

April Fools! We do have a new health care bill as the law of the land. Congress is in recess, and I am sure there will be more debate. And people have strong feelings about our new reality. But I believe I had you going for a moment?

Yesterday was April first, and it is a day set aside for hoaxes and practical jokes. Anyone have a practical joke or hoax played on them yesterday? On April 1, 1976, astronomer Patrick Moore told BBC Radio that the alignment of the planets Pluto and Jupiter would cause a temporary decrease in Earth's gravity at 9:47 a.m. Dr. Moore said that if people jumped in the air at that time, they would float for a short while. Indeed many listeners called the station to say they had floated.

The purpose of April fools day is to embarrass people and to make people look foolish. Nobody likes to look foolish. So it can be a very uncomfortable day. April Fools Day is not really a very positive day.

Well, the first Good Friday was not a very positive day either. It was the day a man from Galilee was made to look foolish because he dared to

talk about how things could be different. It was on a Friday long ago that Jesus was nailed to a cross to show the world how foolish he was.

Crucifixion was and is a cruel and humiliating way to die. Crucifixion was used by the Romans in those days to keep the peace through a threat. The Romans were not the only empire in history to use crucifixion as a method of control, but they took it to a level that got their message across: "Don't mess with us!"

Rome was the world power in Palestine during the time of Jesus. Rome had built an empire that demanded money and resources from conquered territories, and they had garrisons of soldiers in place around the empire to exert their will. But in addition to soldiers, outside of populated areas and along hillsides and heavily traveled roads, there were polls erected that stood there as billboards about what could happen if you interfered with the power of Rome. When the need arose, a crossbar could be attached to those poles to crucify a person. Crucifixion was reserved for runaway slaves and insurrectionist (terrorist in the eyes of the Romans.)

Those sentenced to crucifixion were forced to carry a crossbar through the city to that very public place of execution. There they were stripped of all their clothes, nailed arms and legs to the wood, and left there to die. Sometimes it took days for death to happen. In Jesus' case, he had been whipped so severely that day that he was in a weakened condition so that death came sooner for him. Most of the time, the crucified were left hanging on the cross until there was nothing left to bury. The crucified hung there as a human billboard that said – "Don't be

a fool. Don't let this happen to you!" Jesus was the April fool that Friday long ago.

At this hour that first Good Friday, Jesus had been on the cross for 3 hours already. As we sit under that ancient symbol of death, it causes me to ponder. It makes me realize that this day is about everything that is wrong with humanity. This day is about fear, abuse of power, hatred, anxiety, cowardice, collusion, oppression, and short-sightedness.

Let's start with the scripture I read this afternoon. In it, we see the fear of the religious authorities. Jesus had come to town at the head of a peasant procession, and he had gone into the temple full of Passover pilgrims and excited the pilgrims about the ancient teachings of justice and fairness in Israel. The chief priests and leaders were afraid of this kind of talk. They were afraid of the crowds Jesus was attracting during Passover. They were afraid the crowds would get the attention of the Romans. They were afraid of Jesus' message that was calling for more fairness in the marketplace. They were afraid of how his message might change their position in society. They had worked out a collaboration with the Romans that kept them in positions of privilege and authority but allowed more and more people to lose their land and be thrown into poverty. They were part of a system of domination, privilege, and injustice. Jesus threatened their status quo, and they were afraid.

So they brought all kinds of charges against Jesus to Pilate that day – charges that would convince Pilate that this guy was a terrorist and deserved to die. They claimed that Jesus had forbid them from paying taxes to the emperor and that he claimed to be a king. They told Pilate

that he had stirred up the people from Galilee to Jerusalem - It is interesting what we are willing to say when we are afraid.

3 times during Jesus' trial, Pilate wanted to let Jesus go after a whipping. He did not see the need for the sentence of death. To his discredit, he gave in to the cries of the crowd who yelled, "Crucify him, Crucify him, Crucify him, and sent a dangerous man in their eyes to a horrible death. But that is what fear does. These were not evil men. They were people who had bought into a system of oppression that demanded the status quo, and they were afraid they might lose it if they didn't shut Jesus up. Fear drives people to awful things. I can think of some awful things that have happened lately because of fear.

So we sit at the foot of the cross this hour, and we watch a man die and contemplate how fear and oppression was part of life's reality then and how fear and oppression are part of life's reality now, and we look into our heart and see the same fear that lurks in us and the same blind eye to someone else's misery and the same willingness to allow injustice and oppression be part of our reality and we realize why Jesus ended up on a cross, looking foolish, dying all over again because we are afraid - Afraid to trust in love, afraid to trust in grace, afraid to trust justice, afraid to trust in fairness, afraid to trust that there might be a different way, we just need to try. With all the fear, hatred, and blindness we see all around us still today, perhaps we still need to hear those words Jesus spoke: *"Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing"* as he was lifted up above the crowd. There is so much to forgive when we sit at the foot

of the cross and contemplate all the things that put Jesus there. Good Friday is about everything that is wrong with humanity.

Sixty-five years ago next Friday, a Protestant minister was hung by the Nazis for treason. The minister's name was Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was born in 1906 in Germany and educated at the University of Berlin. He opposed from the start Nazism and Hitler's anti-Semitic laws. In 1935, he administered the seminary of the German Confessing Church which opposed the pro-Nazi "German Christian movement. In 1939, Bonhoeffer cut short a lecture series at Union Seminary in New York City to return to Germany. He explained his decision, made over the protest of his American friends, in these words, "I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trial of this time with my people."

That decision might have seemed foolish 6 years later as he stood naked on the gallows of Flossenberg concentration camp. Although Bonhoeffer was by no means the only Christian clergyman killed by the Nazis, the dramatic example of his life and his writings from prison make him an excellent example of what this foolishness is about when it comes to proclaiming truth to power and faith to oppression. Jesus came to show us a better way, and he was willing to die for us so we could have it.

The apostle Paul puts it this way in 1 Corinthians – ¹⁸*For 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.* ¹⁹*For 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. ²²For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, ²³but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.

When I was about 7 years old, my family went to see a movie at the local theater about the life of Jesus. It was on of those 1950s grandiose productions made in the Cecil B. DeMille’s style. There was plenty of action, gorgeous costumes, and volumes of dramatic music. I remember that I enjoyed the film very much and was fascinated by it until it came to the crucifixion scene. Here the drama of the story swelled as the choral music brought the movie to a moving climax as Jesus died on the cross – And I cried, which was embarrassing for a 7 year old who was trying to be so grown up about things.

But there is much to cry about today. Today is about everything that is wrong with humanity – the fear, the anger, the cruelty, the short-sightedness, and oppression of people and cultures. The only thing that makes this day good is that thanks to the transforming power of God this symbol (a cross) is not a symbol of death but a symbol of life and hope.

That's the power of God's transformation for those who are foolish enough to trust and follow. Amen.

Jesus Sentenced to Death

¹³Pilate then called together the chief priests, the leaders, and the people, ¹⁴and said to them, "You brought me this man as one who was perverting the people; and here I have examined him in your presence and have not found this man guilty of any of your charges against him. ¹⁵Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us. Indeed, he has done nothing to deserve death. ¹⁶I will therefore have him flogged and release him."□

¹⁸Then they all shouted out together, "Away with this fellow! Release Barabbas for us!" ¹⁹(This was a man who had been put in prison for an insurrection that had taken place in the city, and for murder.) ²⁰Pilate, wanting to release Jesus, addressed them again; ²¹but they kept shouting, "Crucify, crucify him!" ²²A third time he said to them, "Why, what evil has he done? I have found in him no ground for the sentence of death; I will therefore have him flogged and then release him." ²³But they kept urgently demanding with loud shouts that he should be crucified; and their voices prevailed. ²⁴So Pilate gave his verdict that their demand should be granted. ²⁵He released the man they asked for, the one who had been put in prison for insurrection and murder, and he handed Jesus over as they wished.